

**K**nowledge

**P**olitics

**Q**uarterly

Volume 1 Issue 1 (Oct 2007)  
edited by Craig Berry

**Robert Hassan PhD**  
**Temporalized Democracy and a Future Politics**

[www.knowledgepolitics.org.uk](http://www.knowledgepolitics.org.uk)

# Temporalized Democracy and a Future Politics

**Robert Hassan PhD**

*The University of Melbourne*

**Abstract:**

*The article argues that through a systematic foregrounding of temporality as a framework of analysis, the dynamics of neoliberal globalization and the information and communications technologies (ICTs) revolution constitutes a new epistemological referent or context. From this perspective the world as an economic, social and cultural post-modernity becomes readily apparent. Equally apparent is the 'postmodern condition' of liberal democratic politics. The article argues that liberal democracy was created and evolved in a specific context. It was a context or environment created by the interactions of Enlightenment thought and capitalist action—and these were both suffused by the temporality of the clock. In essence clock time became a central metanarrative of modernity. Accordingly, over two hundred years we have taken clock time (an abstract form of time) as representing what time is. We have taken for granted its meter as the measure of reality. And we have similarly taken for granted that liberal democracy functions on the same temporal basis. What this has blinded us to, the article argues, is that speed and 'social acceleration' have developed through the convergence of neoliberal economics and ICTs to the point where liberal democracy and its clock time functioning simply cannot synchronise with the times of the network society. Classical liberal democracy has been rendered ineffectual as a means of democratic action, and neoliberal globalization offers nothing to replace it.*

**Introduction: modernity and postmodernity (briefly) revisited**

The sometimes shrill and angry debates over whether we were still 'modern' or had become 'postmodern' that began in the 1970s—and dragged on through the 1980s and early 1990s—have been silent for some time now. We live today in a truly postmodern world. People respond to its *geist* in different

ways. Some accept it, others resist it, many are unaware of it (having been born into it), and still others try to analyse its dynamics. The latter group consists of academics, artists, theorists, critics, analysts and others. They try to figure out what makes the current postmodern epoch different from the preceding modernity, and through specific frameworks of analysis attempt to identify patterns of change and modes of understanding that can help us orient ourselves within the new circumstances.

This article, through the foregrounding of *temporality* and more particularly, *speed* as a framework of analysis, will look at a major effect of the transition to a postmodernity: which is the profound marginalization of the institutions of democratic politics. In short it will argue that through the technological and economic processes of social acceleration, democracy is no longer able to deliver upon its *modernist* promise based upon the procedures, traditions, philosophies and epistemologies that were ‘discovered’ and set-in-stone as ‘self-evident’ truths during the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Enlightenment. It will argue that:

Speed has become one of the paramount values and requirements in our modern societies. Yet democracy needs time, as a major pre-condition for political debate and decision-making; it cannot surrender blindly to speed. Nor does speed favour the dialogue between present, past and future, which is fundamental for the proper exercise of democracy (Chesneaux 2000:407).

To establish the context we first need to be clear what we mean by the shift from modernity to a postmodernity, and what the foregrounding of temporality and speed as a framework of analysis refers to.

It is no coincidence that the debates over modernity and postmodernity occurred at a time of profound economic, social, political and technological change. David Harvey, in his *The Condition of Postmodernity* argued that the processes of change were a transition ‘from Fordism to flexible accumulation’ (1989:141-172). His was a pragmatic, neo-Marxist political economy perspective that was extrapolated to every register of economy, culture and

society: from the shifting dynamics of the class struggle and technological change, to transformations in art, literature and architecture. Harvey didn't use the actual noun, but what he described so presciently in that book was what we now call *globalization*. More particularly, a *neoliberal globalization* made possible through the mutually enhancing effects neoliberal economics and the revolution in information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Hassan 2003).

As Harvey, Anthony Giddens and others have made clear, globalization brought in its wake a deep and ongoing transformation in our *relationship* with space and time. Harvey theorized it as a process of 'time-space compression' and Giddens as one of 'time-space distantiation'. These theories have been thoroughly discussed in the relevant literature and there is no need to go over them here. Suffice to say that these time-space transformations were made possible by an ICT revolution allowed free rein to develop through the ideological force of neoliberalism. The post-war consensus politics that had created what Harvey termed 'Fordism as a whole way of life' began rapidly to break down under the combined pressures of a newly-emboldened capitalist strata and highly ideological politicians who saw 'free-markets' and 'competition' as the only way out of the economic and social crises of the period (Harvey 1989; Giddens 1990, 1997). We are still living through a historical period of profound structural change. Neoliberalism spreads deeper and wider, and the revolution in ICTs continues apace. It is the powerful interaction of these processes that has created an accelerating and networked postmodern society. But why '*postmodern*' in particular?

### **Postmodernity and the 'epistemological turn'**

Ulrich Beck offers an intellectual periodisation of the first twenty-five years of this globalizing and accelerating dynamic that allows for a framing of the process, and a means to investigate more deeply its patterns and consequences. Beck argues that 'globalization' has undergone three distinct phases since the 1970s. First was the phase of *dismissal* where many argued

the process to be nothing inherently new, and it was in this phase that the most vociferous modernity-postmodernity arguments raged; second was a phase of conceptual clarification and empirical-operational *definition* that occurred once a general consensus on the reality of economic globalization (and of a postmodernity) emerged; and third is what Beck terms the *epistemological turn* (2004:131). The ‘epistemological turn’, he argues, came as economic globalization and the new realities it creates began to break down the ‘premises and boundaries’ upon which the social sciences have been constructed. He goes on to argue that in this tertiary phase, the epistemological turn has created the space for new conceptual advances to be made in the social sciences. Speed, time and politics are deeply complicit in the dynamics of economic globalization and the ICT revolution, and so the temporal perspective that the following arguments will utilise, is constructed within this new conceptual space.

During the late-1970s the Enlightenment-derived ‘metanarratives’ that Jean-François Lyotard (1979) famously raged against were fast unravelling. These were the overarching discourses that oriented society: such as the idea that humanity, through the efforts of science and technology, was progressing towards an ever-better future for all; or that freedom, rationality and democracy were innate and immutable Truths that Enlightenment thought was simply ‘discovering’ and implementing. Such metanarratives constituted the dependable sureties of modernity. However, with the maturation and crises of modernity of the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the ‘perceptual habits’ that they formed were getting out of synchrony with the dynamics that pulsed from the conjunction of new economic, ideological and technological forces (Jameson 1995: 38-39). In this emerging postmodernity the speed of change that the twin forces of neoliberal economics and the revolution in ICTs brought, in no small part contributed to the forms of ‘disorientation’, ‘chance’ and ‘play’ that became the classic schematic markers for what came to be known as ‘condition of postmodernity’ or the ‘postmodern condition’ (Lyotard 1979; Harvey 1989:43; Jameson 1995).

## **The end of History or just the end of liberal democracy?**

The metanarratives of modernist politics similarly began to break up at that time and they come apart still today. Francis Fukuyama (1992) argued, famously, that this was a good thing. What we were witnessing, he insisted, was that modernity and the Enlightenment were in fact *delivering* upon their historical promise. Liberal democracy and its ‘self evident’ truths had outlasted other forms of political and social organization to the point where the ‘History’ generated by these conflicts had come to an end. The triumph of liberal democracy finally revealed the Truth in terms of the reality of the world and how it should be organized politically and economically. This perspective is now hegemonic, powerfully refracted as it currently is, through the inexorable movement of the ‘centre’ of politics to the ‘right’ and bordering on its more extreme fringes (Arrighi 2005:62-63; Harvey 2005).

Jean Baudrillard also saw postmodernism (one supercharged by information technologies in particular) as the end to politics as we knew it—but not as a confident and relatively unmolested march into a happy future as Fukuyama and his ilk would have it. Postmodern politics, for Baudrillard, signalled the ‘edge of the end of History’, it was a form of nihilism where nothing is real, where there are no truths, political or metaphysical, upon which to anchor a set of guiding principles or ethics. This is an information technology-based nihilism, where, as Ben Agger puts it:

...texts commanding experience are not found between covers but in the imagery, infrastructure, and discourse of a postmodernized everyday life—what Baudrillard calls hyperreality—in which people believe that we live at the edge of the end of History, in the eternal present posited by Nietzsche as the fated destination of the Enlightenment gone wrong (1992:80).

Baudrillard’s ‘hyperreality’ is also an ICT-based ‘postmodern condition’, one where a ‘politics of signs’ dominates. Here, too, politics in the traditional sense are no longer possible. Democratic processes have been replaced by the manipulation of the signs and symbols that pulsate and flow, ever faster,

through our networked domain. As Baudrillard notes, these signs and symbols are empty of content, and through their ineffectuality 'Our all-too-beautiful strategies of history, knowledge, and power are erasing themselves' (Baudrillard 1983:86). The 'beautiful strategies' of Enlightenment-formed liberal democratic politics, we can safely infer from Baudrillard's thesis, are similarly being erased.

Both perspectives are ultimately unconvincing. Fukuyama's postmodern confidence in the triumph of liberal democracy looks increasingly absurd in the contexts of the conspicuous political traumas that rock the western system—from alleged vote-fraud in the 2000 USA presidential elections, to the prosecution of a war in Iraq on the basis of half-truths, untruths and lies. And Baudrillard's political pessimism that stems from the blinding effects of blizzard of signs and symbols in the accelerating network society is belied by the reality of millions of people who every day continue to resist—individually and collectively—using the speed-producing tools of the network to create their own spaces and times where an alternative politics may be possible. I shall discuss these in more detail below.

It was necessary to briefly go over these semi-dormant debates because they still have much to tell us about the reality of everyday life—not least in the political domain. They show where gaps in the debates still yawn and where new areas of research may be explored.

Lack of an explicit focus upon time constitutes such a gap. As late as the 1990s the foregrounding of temporality as a mode of analysis—for political processes or anything else—was virtually non-existent. Indeed as Jon May and Nigel Thrift note in their *Timespace* (2001), the emphasis in the globalization debates (as a sub-division of the more abstract arguments of modernity and postmodernity) tended to be upon the geographic, the spatial, or the 'spatial turn' as this new method of analysis became known (Soja 1989; Massey 1994; Thrift & May 2001). A deeper engagement with temporal diversity as a facet of analysis tended to be absent. This gap in our thinking stemmed from the taken-for-granted assumptions that two-hundred years of

clock time domination inculcated into the social sciences and into Western, modernizing culture and society more generally (Adam 2004).

### **The time gap**

Modernist clock time, as an uncomplicated, abstract and unerringly mathematical way to ‘experience’ temporality has proved extremely powerful. And through modernity the basic category of human temporal experience had become something that we took for granted. Since the beginnings of the 18<sup>th</sup> century general spread of industrial time, we increasingly didn’t need to think about time; it simply *was*—in the form of seconds, passing through minutes, hours and days. As generations were born into this form of time, we rarely focussed upon what it is because it increasingly seemed so self-evidential.

However, temporality is much more complex and diverse, and social scientists are now beginning to explore these ‘lost’ dimensions. Barbara Adam, for example, has pioneered an explicit focus on time in social science methodology. She argues that humans construct temporal experience and move through what she calls ‘timescapes’ (Adam 1998; 2004). These are interpenetrations of temporal relations that are expressed through ‘clusters of temporal features, each implicated in all the others but not necessarily of equal importance in each instance’ (2004:143). Time exists in humans and in nature. These are the ‘embedded times’ of, say, a woman’s pregnancy, the time it takes for fingernails to grow, the two years it takes for polar pack ice to form, or the seven years it takes for the pearl to grow from the grain of sand in the oyster—and so on. Moreover, we can ‘relive’ times through memory or anticipate the times of future events. Times can be cyclical, such as in menstruation, or be linear and irreversible such as the process of ageing.

Context matters too. It is the social point at which temporal features in humans and nature intersect to produce context and culture dependent times. This multiplicity of possible times is what has given different cultures different perceptions of time for millennia (Evans-Pritchard 1940). Crucially, however,

our seemingly innate predisposition towards ‘technicity’ interacts with these embedded times to add another, potentially preponderant, dimension to the timescapes we create. As we shall see, this is very much the case when we analyse the social, cultural and technological ‘timescapes’ that intersected to construct the specific temporality of liberal democratic politics at the beginnings of modernity in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Modernity as timescape**

Modernity itself constitutes a timescape and liberal democracy is a political temporality that exists within its overarching context. What do we mean by this? Modernity of course is a social construction, a vast economic, cultural, intellectual and technological context. It is, moreover, the first form of human organization that became global, shaping every level of culture and society. It transformed the ways in which we saw ourselves (as modern), allowed us to utterly reshape our built and natural environments (through modernism), and enabled us to realise and universalise this new way of being as a project (through modernity). To have a better understanding of what precisely makes modernity, especially its innate temporality, we need to separate out, and briefly explain, its major constitutive features.

Modernity as we know (or knew) it, in its most general and schematic form, evolved out of the fusion of 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment thinking and the capitalist mode of organization and production that arose around the same time. As nascent social impulses, Enlightenment thought and capitalist practicality became deeply interpenetrative forces that depended one upon the other. This synthesis made the Industrial Revolution possible and elevated knowledge, learning, science and the liberal arts and humanities to the peaks of human achievement. Enlightenment reason in its ‘pure’ form sought to transform the world of religion and feudal relations. It became a means or intellectual method by which to arrive, as David Hume put it ‘...at the discovery of truth or falsehood’ (Gare 1996:138). The dream was to create a ‘world entirely transparent to Reason, free of...prejudice, superstition and

obscurantism' (Eagleton 1991:64). As an intellectual mission the Enlightenment sought to transform the *physical world* as well as its metaphysical dimensions through giving a primary role to science and technology. These were seen as the indispensable means for realizing the project; to drag humanity out of what Marx saw as the 'slothful indolence' of feudalism and the 'idiocy of rural life' that it engendered (Marx 1975: 38-39).

To convert the potential of human thought into purposive achievement required the agency of powerful social dynamics. The rising capitalist surge of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century gave dramatic effect to this. The onslaught of change proved to be an unstoppable social, economic and technological force. It was an energetic fusion of Reason and commerce that would produce the modern way of life. The emerging capitalist class, for its part, took Enlightenment thought as its lodestar, especially its emphasis upon science and technology as a means to achieve practical ends. The effect was the emergence of a practical way of viewing the world. Adam Smith experienced this process first hand, in its original blossoming in mid-18<sup>th</sup> century Britain. He theorized it as the release of the innate human propensity 'for action'; whereas Max Weber, writing a century and a half later saw the *sturm und drang* of modernity as an 'ethic' and a 'spirit', a *geist*, that emanated from the fusion of 'liberal enlightenment' and industrial capitalism (Weber 1971:18). Either way, emergent modernity was willing and able to press its interests, its philosophies, laws, dynamics, 'action', 'ethic' and 'spirit' upon the world in ways and with intensities that were historically unprecedented.

It is important to understand that modernity not only created and shaped an age that would last for over two-hundred years—it also created and shaped a *dominant form of time*: the mechanical and abstract time of the clock. Newtonian physics as a general system, and Newton's personal view of the 'absolute' nature of mechanical clock time as the temporal backdrop to reality, profoundly influenced Enlightenment thinking and the modern, industrial world it would engender. As environmental philosopher Arran Gare has observed 'The permeation and domination of life by abstract [clock] time has become so complete that it is difficult to realise just how extraordinary this is' (1996:104).

Precisely what was being permeated and dominated by the clock needs to be elaborated upon, albeit briefly. As just indicated, there exists a diversity of temporalities in nature and in our bodies. These intersect as multiple durations or flows that we create as social and cultural contexts. Bruno Latour eloquently expresses this point:

The hammer that I find on my workbench is not contemporary to my action today: it keeps folded heterogeneous temporalities, one of which has the antiquity of the planet, because of the mineral from which it has been moulded, while another has that of the age of the oak which provided the handle, while still another has the age of ten years since it came out of the German factory which produced it for the market. When I grab the handle, I insert myself in a 'garland of time'...which allows me to insert myself in a variety of temporalities or time differentials... (Latour, 2002:248).

It is this 'garland of time' or 'timescape' as Adam terms it, our ability to create and experience temporal diversity, which has been dominated and permeated by the clock. Philosophers, theorists and historians have of course realized this historical process of temporal subjugation. Henri Bergson, for example, writing in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, consciously argued against the rationalistic form of temporality adopted by modernity to express time. Time, for Bergson, was a state of becoming; a living duration, not something that can be wholly understood by number, but something lived (internal not external) and durational 'la durée' (Bergson, 1960).

More recently, and more directly to our focus, E.P. Thompson showed the effects of clock time reckoning upon the proto-working classes of early industrialization. In pre-industrial European societies, Thompson argued, time reckoning followed the more 'natural' rhythms of the seasons and the different times it took to perform day-to-day jobs such as planting, harvesting and so on. Thompson referred to this form of time reckoning as 'task time' and 'task orientation' (1991:358). As the Industrial Revolution took hold in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, and as capitalism became more organized and complex, the 'tasks' that people were required to perform became more industrially oriented. This required that individuals and classes *synchronize* with a

rational form of time that could be measured and organized. Moreover, (and this was an important political function) rational, measurable time also inculcated a form of discipline into the emerging industrial working class. It was an internalized ‘time discipline’ as Thompson called it, which synchronized the new class to the rhythms of machine schedules, hourly pay-rates, daily work rates and so on.

As industry and modernity spread the clock became not only the meter of these processes, but also ‘changed the meaning of time’ itself (Adam 2004:113). What we recognized as time changed from its internal forms—or forms that were in synchrony with seasons, or specific tasks—to become an external and abstract time with a precise meter. This was a social construction that had nothing to do with time(s) as we previously understood them, but something that was measurable, constant and, importantly, *valuable*. Time became money; and money could be measured by time. Enlightenment-derived science and technology measured the reality of the world through mathematics and numbers, and clock time (as an expression of this) became what we understood time to be; suppressing, displacing and marginalizing other forms of time-reckoning as its influence took hold. Clock time, indeed, was innermost to the project of industrialism and capitalism. As Éric Alliez argued in his book *Capital Times* ‘only abstract time can ensure an effective function of capitalisation’. Moreover, he argued that the ‘potential time’ that can emerge through the conscious construction and experience of timescapes, has been ‘conquered by [the] power time’ of the clock (1996:154, XV). In addition to becoming the meter of modernity, the clock became a *central metanarrative* through which the world seemed to make rational sense.

### **The time of liberal democracy**

The political system we know as liberal democracy evolved and grew more-or-less ‘interactively’, to use a perfect neologism, with the dynamics of Enlightenment *geist* and capitalist action. The towering figures of modern

political theory were, of course, also major Enlightenment figures. When industrialism was beginning to change the face of Europe and North America, thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, David Hume, John Locke and Montesquieu laid down, in their differing ways, the theories of rights, of property, community, governance and law that underpin liberal democracy. These political forms accorded with modernity's general thrust. They were its philosophical ends and organizational means. Importantly, liberal democratic philosophers imagined they were uncovering essential truths about the human condition, about the ways in which societies should be organized and the ways in which society's differing components (e.g. civil society, the market) should function and interact for the common good.

In its critical evolutionary phase modern liberal democracy was heavily influenced by industrialization and by Enlightenment thought. The interaction of these three foundational dynamics of modernity were a *temporal context* in which they all grew and developed in synchrony with the clock and calendar. Political thinkers, just as much as capitalist industrialists, came to view the world through the temporal perspective of the clock. And this had important real-world effects in terms of the day-to-day dynamics of a functioning democratic polity. In other words, the temporal context infused the ways that the philosophies of liberal democracy (which stretched back into ancient Greece) found their practical articulation in the present. As modernity and industrialism were concerned with order, rationality and predictability (based upon clock and calendar), then so too did liberal democracy evolve to reflect these temporal requirements.

It is here that the fine-grained and seemingly banal temporal details of liberal democracy's processes have their roots and profoundly shape its overall temporal context. Parliamentary sittings, senate committees, election cycles, the times needed to debate bills, reflection upon the consequences of a political act, the delving into the political philosophies of Greece or Rome, or of the modern philosophers of the time, all fed into the temporal context of liberal democracy. These routines and traditions were democracy's meter and they were based upon clock and calendar. As Jean Chesneaux (2000:410)

argued, the ‘time factor’ had become ‘structurally associated with democracy’. This instrumentalizing and temporalizing of the political process created a powerful social tool that rationalized the arbitrariness of feudal political societies and brought technological time (and hence speed) under a new form of democratic control. As William E. Scheuerman (2003: 43) noted: ‘The modern [liberal democratic] nation-state triumphed over an array of competing modes of political organization (empires, loose networks of city-states) in part because of its superior manipulation of speed’.

A fundamental characteristic of classical liberal democracy, derived from the influences of Enlightenment thinking and the action-orientation of capitalism, was its twin modes of reason—critical and instrumental. Critical thinking, or critical reason, functions dialectically to not only question and add to other forms of knowledge but also to interrogate itself and the ontological foundations of its knowledge production. On the other hand, instrumental thinking, or instrumental reason, is essentially non-reflective, goal-oriented and much more concerned with producing concrete results, be they techno-scientific or politico-economic (Barnett 1997:91-92). These forms of thinking, or *thinking and action*, have their own temporal features. Critical thinking is oriented toward the Bergsonian times of flow, to synchronise with the temporality of the ‘task’ or problem at hand—to take the necessary time, in other words; whereas instrumental thinking is oriented towards speed and ‘efficiency’. For most of the modern period, however, the functioning of a workable democratic principle tended to act as a check upon the primacy of one or the other form of reason (Hassan 2003:121-124).

The clock time temporality of liberal democracy, with all its evolving and progressing characteristics would ‘work’ in the context of evolving and progressing modernity for over two hundred years. What David Harvey termed the ‘temporal limits to political action’ had not yet been reached (2005: 27). And so for most of this time we never thought much about its molecular processes of day-to-day decision making—and how these were entimed by the clock. We ‘internalized’ clock time reckoning as constituting what time is, and so its very banality rendered its real-world effects invisible.

Nonetheless, liberal democracy represented what Douglass North (2004:1) termed 'a model of an instant of time, which does not take into account what time does'. And what time does, is change. In the meta-context of modernity, social time, technological time, and capitalist time have been pulled constantly towards speed and instrumental function, and as 'motors of social acceleration, their temporalities ultimately conflicted with democracy' (Scheuerman 2003:43). By the late 1970s, profound economic, social and political transformations would begin to take effect. What this meant was that the modernist promise of liberal democracy that was built upon Enlightenment philosophy and capitalist practicality would be made obsolete by the qualitative and quantitative leap in social, technological and cultural *acceleration* that defines the current neoliberal, postmodern epoch.

### **Neoliberalism, time and speed**

Central to its 'resolution' of the perceived 'crises of Fordism', neoliberalism, emerging as part of a political revolution, consciously broke with the post-war social democratic age that had 'managed' capitalism through a consensus-based politics between big business, big unions and government. Neoliberalism also represented a tremendous technological revolution based upon computerization and networking. As I argued above, these twin forces created what we currently term globalization. The rationale behind these transformations, as in all revolutions was, supposedly, the creation of a better world. Neoliberalism would, after the dog days of an ageing social democracy and unprofitable Fordism, create an 'efficient' and 'productive' economy and society. The 'market', we were told, would function as Adam Smith said that it should, establishing an 'equilibrium' and providing for optimum allocation of resources; we would be richer, have more leisure time, would be less stressed, have more equality and would use the Earth's resources in a more rational way.

Revolutions, however, never follow a pre-set course. They are always replete with disasters, compromises and unintended consequences; events that no one foresaw and new dynamics that no one anticipated. I will look now at what I perceive as the two major (and unintended) developments in our globalizing world: the network society and social acceleration. I will do this from a temporal perspective and then analyse their effects upon the functioning of liberal democracy in its postmodern context.

Our so-called 'network society' is an Internet based economy and society where connectable information technologies are critical to almost every facet of production, consumption and distribution. That we would be absolutely dependent upon 'ubiquitous computing' (Weiser & Seely Brown 1997:5) was not a grand scheme thought up in the 1970s. It was the unplanned evolutionary effect of hundreds of millions of decisions, taken every day by people in business and in government in the new political environment created by neoliberalism. It is also the effect of abstract market logic in which no group, corporation, party or national economy has overall control (Giddens 1997: 4-5).

The computerization of much of the economy that led to our networked society took place simultaneously at the micro and macro levels, with the objective of gaining increases in efficiency and productivity—by doing things faster, in other words. What 'doing things faster' has achieved at the global scale, at the level of the network society, is an economy, a culture and a society that is evolving on the basis of a new form of abstract time—'network time'. What is 'network time'?

Essentially, the space-time compression process that had always been a key effect of modernity becomes ever more intense and all-encompassing through the effects of unconstrained ICT networking. Within the network we communicate (transferring information in bits and bytes) within an open-ended continuum of speed. This continuum is radically different from the regularized and unerring tick of the clock. This is because as we make a connection in the network, through a mobile phone, PC, PDA or whatever, we also produce a

unique temporality—a time generated by the user and the technology in the creation of a network context. This could be an email communication, a chat room, a voice conversation with another person, a video-call, a text message or ICQ note to someone, somewhere else. The point is that it might be 5am at one end of the connection and 7pm at the other. However, the context created by the network means that these times are rendered irrelevant. The same goes for computerized applications that connect with others around the world in banking, manufacturing, data-processing and so on: clock time is extraneous to their functioning. 'Ubiquitous computing', or the suffusion of networked communications into every register of economy, culture and society has created a generalized continuum of network temporalities within the context of the network whole. For the first time in over two hundred years, *clock time is no longer central* to the 'effective function[ing] of capitalisation' as Alliez argues. Production, distribution and consumption operate now on a much faster, more volatile, more disorganized basis. In short, capitalism is entering uncharted temporal waters, and is dragging culture, society and polity along with it through the hyper-flows of networks.

Network time is not the same as 'real time', a 'temporality' assigned by engineers and over-enthusiastic salespeople to describe 'instantaneity' in network communications. It does not take long as a user of ICTs to realise that 'real time' is a misnomer for the temporality of the network. Network time is governed, instead, by the specific level of technological sophistication, and by the user's objectives. The temporality of the network context can be relatively fast or relatively slow, depending upon the speed of the computer, the application being used, the network conditions (busy, clogged or with ample bandwidth), and what it is the user is doing (surfing, blogging, reading, watching, writing, talking, designing, data processing, texting, and so forth). These multifarious conditions create a sliding scale of speed and of times (timescapes) that the user creates within a technologically constructed environment. Functioning as a networked whole, billions of temporalities are created, terminated and recreated through the billions of connections that are continually being made in the creation of the network itself. As an

overwhelming preponderance, however, the network society and network time are oriented towards instrumental purposes and market-driven goals.

This brings us to the second major development of neoliberal globalization: the network society and network time are always driven towards the *faster* end of the spectrum, towards doing things quicker, more ‘efficiently’ and more ‘productively’. Speed is the fundamental corollary to the network. The pursuit of speed is why it exists and what keeps it going. Again, in the quest for the ostensibly simple objectives of ‘efficiency’ and ‘productivity’ it was not anticipated where a generalized, digital speed-up of economy and society would lead to. Most people today still do not fully comprehend its consequences. Seen as a general principal, doing things faster seems laudable. It seems a good thing to be efficient and productive. In the 1960s Moore’s Law (the predicted doubling of the speed of computer processors every two years) expressed the issue as an interesting *technical* process. This was seen as an exciting and creditable process. However, the advent of ‘ubiquitous computing’ and the transference of Moore’s Law to social and cultural processes was not foreseen and thus far has been discussed only fragmentarily and at the margins of the social and political sciences (Virilio 1995; Bertman 1998).

What drives this speed is not some innate tendency of computer technologies (they have no ‘tendencies’ and are subject only to social, economic and political forces), but the ideology of competition and the capitalist mythology that faster is better in all circumstances. Under neoliberalism, speed has become a ‘fetish’ and end in itself, with no thought to the consequences in the present and for the future (Postman 1994; Beck 1992).

### **Disconnected democracy**

If we view this speed, or social acceleration, from the perspective of time, an alternative picture emerges to the instrumental view of the engineers or the rosy vistas painted by neoliberal economists and politicians. If as Hartmut

Rosa (2003:6) notes ‘the speed of communication is said to have increased by  $10^7$ , the speed of personal transport by  $10^2$ , and the speed of data processing by  $10^6$ ’ as a result of the information technology revolution, what does this do to society and its political processes? It has become trite to say that we live in an increasingly fast-paced society—but what, actually, does this mean?

Liberal democracy, as we saw, was the preferred political/organizational mode of the Enlightenment. More than any other political philosophy (such as socialism or anarchism) it was always a favourite to endure—primarily because it accorded with the principles of capitalist industrialization and the tremendous social and political power this dynamic wielded. Liberal democracy (in its various national/cultural forms) became a guiding narrative of the Enlightenment, a narrative and philosophy that morphed, briefly, with the post-war socialist ascendancy to become a *social democracy*. Both were narratives of political order that utilized the ‘self-evident’ way of organizing society to keep at bay the irrationalism and chaos to which humanity might otherwise be prone. Neoliberalism has been seen by its philosophers and political boosters as a way to get back to these ancient ‘self evident’ roots, roots that had been travestied by the post war social democracies (Hayek 1976). However, the social, political and economic evidence that has accumulated over the last twenty-five years or so, suggests that the neoliberal project has failed (Steger 2002).

The temporal perspective, I believe, sheds light on why this is so. Neoliberalism has failed not because of rapacious opportunists in boardrooms who want to make as much money as possible as fast as possible from market opportunities (at the expense of workers’ rights). This is an effect, not a cause. The disconnection in the democratic process, the palpable feeling for millions that ‘democracy no longer works’, stems from a political economy of speed that dominates to the point where democratic and economic/technological processes operate on completely different temporal levels. Open-ended and uncontrolled speed now drives the economy and society; and democratic politics simply cannot effectively synchronise with

them. Existing in the network society means that the time of the network becomes the new temporal meter that individuals and classes must try to cope with. The impossibility of functioning in a full and meaningful way at the increasing speed of socio-economic and political processes means that a postmodern *temporal dissonance* reigns. As Scheuerman (2003:7) explains:

...the past is defined as that which no longer holds/is no longer valid while the future denotes that which does not yet hold/is not yet valid. The present, then, is the time-span for which the horizons of experience and expectation coincide (...) social acceleration is defined by an increase in the decay-rates of the reliability of experiences and expectations and by the contraction of the time-spans definable as the 'present'.

Speed crushes the meter of the clock and the timescapes of modernity upon which liberal democracy was founded. The time needed for reflection, analysis, for planning, for anticipation, for avoiding the always-immanent unintended consequences of political decision-making, all become subjected to the economic exigencies of speed. Indeed, institutional political actors are themselves complicit with this devitalization of democracy. Neoliberalism consciously backs away from 'interfering' with so-called 'market-forces'. This has only increased social and economic injustice on a global scale, whilst allowing the economy to move yet faster, and making any form of general political control increasingly more difficult. Speed and constant acceleration are now hyper-valorized and geared towards surging money, ideas, commodities and information throughout the global system, leaving institutionalized democratic politics and their traditional ethics and principles of democracy and accountability to flounder in their wake. Politics, democracy and our already-diminished relationship with time, takes on the baleful 'duration' of an eternal present:

As the [clock] time continuum is hastily and happily deconstructed, democracy dwindles to the shadow of itself, desiccated, shortsighted both upstream and downstream, reduced to purely functional and functionalist objectives and references. And speed enters the picture; it is expected to provide society with a new, introverted field of activism, as a substitute for the now obsolete

horizons of the future as well as for the rich, successive layers deposited by the past (Chesneaux 2000:417).

Uncontrolled speed is no answer to the volatility of neoliberalism's global project. Yet neoliberal democracy's 'functional and functionalist' objectives are blindly devoted to the creation of the optimal context for capitalist accumulation—which is through yet more speed. This need to make fast decisions in the service of the economy concentrates power towards executive forms of government, to become even more undemocratic. Crucially, the historical dialectic between critical and instrumental reason that had functioned more-or-less in balance for over two hundred years has been thrown out of kilter. Speed has driven instrumental reason and a neopragmatism to the point where it dominates social, economic and political affairs. For example, the universities, the traditional font of critical reason to guide the wider society, have been largely transformed into neoliberalized forcing houses for industry (Hassan 2003).

This temporal dissonance shows why neoliberalism is—and can only be—undemocratic. It reveals liberal democracy as a process that no longer functions within the speed economy of a postmodern capitalism (not a 'late capitalism' as Harvey, Jameson and others have hopefully put it). The speed of modernity was the speed of the clock, a speed that was managed by a liberal democratic tradition that drew its temporal meter from the same sources. The maturation (fundamental unprofitability) of modernist capitalism in its 'high Fordist' phase of the mid-1970s, and the demands by neoliberal ideologues to introduce 'market forces' and computerization as a way to restore profitability, ensured that social acceleration would increase rapidly to the point where liberal democracy could no longer manage or control it in truly democratic ways.

## **A future-oriented digital democracy?**

Today the dominance of the neoliberal worldview is comprehensive—but not total. Domination, as Raymond Williams reminds us, can never be total. By definition ‘...it cannot exhaust all social experience, [and] therefore always potentially contains space for alternative acts and alternative intentions which are not yet articulated as a social institution or even project’ (1979:252). Neoliberal globalization has been a palpable failure. People, in their millions, are acutely aware of this malfunctioning, although may attribute many different causes to it. Many simply retreat behind a shield of cynicism or apathy, losing interest in the political system altogether, so inept does it seem, so irresponsive to their concerns it appears, or so marginal to their real lives it has become. Younger people especially, those who have been born into the world of the inviolability of ‘competition’, ‘opportunity’, and the naturalness of the state of being that is ‘individuality’, simply have not experienced other ways of being and other ways of seeing, so overriding is the neoliberal discourse in the media, in the universities and in the workplace.

And yet increasing millions resist. They consciously reject neoliberal dogmas about the alleged reality of economic life and are consciously seeking to build alternative narratives through which to articulate and measure the realms of possibility. For example, over the last fifteen years the World Social Forum (WSF) has emerged as the first large-scale political experiment that is evolving on a postmodern premise, and foresees the possibility of a post-neoliberal world. From its first activists’ meeting in Porto Alegre in 1992, anti-neoliberal globalization has been its unifying theme. In other critical ways, however, it is not so politically homogeneous or unified. People and groups tend have their own strictly followed agendas. Environmentalists, Christians, hard-line Marxists, anarchists, trade unionists and others nonetheless are *drawn together* in what Michael Hardt sees as a ‘commonality’ which stems from the predation that neoliberal globalization has visited upon them (2002:114).

Such diversity is both its strength and weakness. Its strength is that the ‘commonality’ of resistance matches the scope and depth of the neoliberal project and can therefore meet it at every register of economy and society. The weakness is that such a diversity of political opinion and agenda makes it difficult to establish any programmatic coherence that could have concrete effects and create a viable alternative to neoliberalism. In his discussion on the importance of the WSF and the political impetus it is giving to a wider range of anti-neoliberalism, he touches only briefly on the fact that they constitute a ‘network of networks’ (2002:113). It is almost as if the noun ‘network’ stands for its traditional meaning and not the electronic networks that we now associate with the information society—the network society. In this Hardt misses a vital element of the process.

An epigram attributable to Frantz Fanon appropriately inhabits many political Internet website and blog banners. It states that: ‘A community will evolve only when the people control their means of communication’. Activists for a new politics through new means of communication have understood this since the beginnings of the ICT revolution and the generalization of the Internet. As John E. Young of the Worldwatch Institute wrote in the early 1990s, just before the launch of Windows 95 that would take the Internet to unheard-of levels of access, ‘thousands of environmental activists and organizations around the world [are] using commercial and non-profit computer networks to coordinate campaigns, exchange news, and get details on the proposals of governments and international organizations’ (1993:21). Around the same time ‘Subcommandante Marcos’, leader of the Chiapas rebellion in Mexico in 1994, argued that information technologies are a critical weapon for all who seek to resist neoliberal globalization:

Let us start a communications network between all our struggles, an intercontinental network of communication against neoliberalism, an intercontinental network for humanity. This intercontinental network will seek to tie together all the channels of our words and all the roads of resistance. This intercontinental network will be the means among which the different areas of resistance will communicate. This intercontinental network will not be an organized structure; it will have no moderator, central control, or any

hierarchies. The network will be all of us who speak and listen (cited in Leal 2000:7).

The network as a context, as Young, Subcommandante Marcos and the millions who pour into the space of activism that Doug Kellner (2003) terms a 'technopolitics', is a space for the creation and articulation of alternative narratives for political understanding. The foregrounding of the temporal perspective shows also that the network as context is also a time that is being created in the network, a network time generated by users (activists) through the ICTs they use in their day-to-day work. Increasingly, user/activists recognise that what is at stake in the high-speed economy is *control*. Not simply over the means of communication, as Fanon argued, or of the spatial realm (virtual or actual)—*but of time itself*—the past, present and future.

The ability to consciously create and shape the immanent temporalities of the network has tremendous political potential. Under neoliberal globalization and the surrender of political agency to the fetish of technological speed we have forgotten an important point about power and control in human affairs. Historically, as Adam (2004:123-124) argues:

[T]he quest for control is to a large extent about *obtaining dominion over time* for economic gain and social advantage. For this to happen, the locus of control had to be transferred from natural and supernatural to human powers (emphasis added).

Hence the time of the clock functioned perfectly as a mode and meter of control for the phase of modernity. It synchronized with both liberal democracy and capitalist industry. In the postmodern phase of uncontrolled technologically driven acceleration, and the undermining of the clock that has emerged from the hi-speed networked economy, control of time is now up for grabs. Through the emergent technopolitics of the WSF and in the countless unaffiliated but politically oriented social groups that inhabit the network, user/activists experiment not only with the politics, but also with the technologies of the network itself. Through such experimentation, a

technological 'savviness' emerges that is a vital component in the process of control over network space and network time (Hassan 2004:124,136).

Within the political economy of neoliberal globalization a vast dialectic is turning and a new politics has the potential to emerge out of it. It is a network-based politics that must see democratic control over time as important as control over space, the distribution of wealth, or the organization of political power. The growing crisis of neoliberal globalization is an historical inevitability; its current hegemony cannot last. Indeed Giovanni Arrighi suggests that the rapid rise (and just as rapid 'foundering') of US neoconservatism signals that the endgame for the dominance of 'free markets' is already being played out. The Washington neoconservative view is that neoliberalism has radically 'diluted American influence in the world' to an unsustainable degree and they advocate more state intervention in global economic matters. (2005:50, 62). The trouble for the neoconservatives is that most of the world doesn't share their view. They consider a neoconservative 'globalization' to be, essentially, a right-wing US domination of the world's economy. The WSF and the vast network-organized global demonstrations against the war in Iraq in 2003, show that people will resist both neoliberalism and neoconservatism. However, their dual crises indicate the opening up of a global political vacuum that will be filled by something. The question is by *what?*

Ever the political economy pragmatist, David Harvey in his *The New Imperialism* (2005), argues that to avert a global economic and political crisis 'the only realistic alternative' is to reformulate and reactivate *social democracy* where politics once more takes the lead in curbing the natural excess of the market and unfettered competition. 'This means', he writes:

[L]iberating the logic of capital... from its neoliberal chains, *reformulating state power along more interventionist and redistributive lines*, curbing the speculative powers of finance capital, and decentralizing or democratically controlling the overwhelming power of oligopolies and monopolies...to dictate

everything from the terms of international trade to what we see, read and hear in the media. (2005:209; emphasis added)

Such a change would entail a political revolution of the kind that brought neoliberalism to its hegemony in the first place. This time, however, it would be 'free markets' that would be 'structurally readjusted' by democratic polities in the service of people and their needs. It would be a bottom-up revolution to replace the top-down one that has created such a volatile and unpredictable world in the 2000s.

Seen from the perspective of temporality the current activism of network-based politics holds tremendous potential to fill the vacuum and help regenerate social democratic practices. It illuminates, I believe, the turning of a massive political dialectic that emanates from the short-lived project, but historically driven crises of neoliberal globalization. The challenge is itself political: it requires the shaping of a vast heterogenous movement that inhabits the network into a coherent political alternative to neoliberalism and neoconservatism. On the positive side, the amorphous groups who comprise the WSF and other expressions of postmodern technopolitics are overwhelmingly democratically oriented; and, as we have seen, are antithetical to neoliberalism and neoconservatism. They see network technologies as part of the solution and not the problem. And they are realizing that the spaces and times of the network are vital organizing tools through which they can articulate political objectives.

Of course the transformation will not be automatic. It will require the vital leadership and constant pressure of many 'network revolutionaries' (Lovink & Garcia 1996). However, at some point the crises of neoliberal globalization will reach its boiling point. This could be primarily economic or political or environmental (or a mixture of all as in the context of oil) (Vidal 2005). Whatever it may be, the former social democrats of the western economies, the Labour parties of the UK, Australia and New Zealand; the Democratic Party of the US; and the array of social democracies from the Eurozone who abandoned their political roots in the 1980s and 1990 to ride the free-market

wave, will be forced once more to look down at their political base, to where the ferment is growing. They will be forced to take their cues, at least partially, from where the new politics are taking shape. What could conceivably emerge—indeed what *must* emerge, is a revitalized social democracy, where time, its control and ownership are seen as a *human right* alongside the right to a job and the right to free speech. In other words, control over the creation and experience (individual and collective) of the timescapes of postmodernity should be within properly synchronizing democratic structures instead of a neoliberal turmoil emanating from the ideological fetish for speed.

Given the progressive nature of much global technopolitics, such a temporally oriented politics need not be reactionary. It need not nostalgically hark back to a 1970s world where computerization was minimal and unions were strong. It would embrace the network society (where many of its activists choose to live and work). Through a new means of control over the times and spaces that emerge from a grassroots led globalization—speed, acceleration and time could be made to work democratically. Speed where necessary and slowness when required could be the watchword. And with a new appreciation of speed and time, clock time can simply be recategorized as a technical means of measuring duration and for organizing work in fair way—not as an artefact that stands for social control and an abstract representation of what time *is*. In a high-speed society, change of this kind can also come quickly. We can soon come to understand that people's needs and not the blind pursuit of profit, should be the end-point logic of technological speed in the network society. When we get to this point of network postmodernity, then the currently loose and factious network 'commonality' could legitimately be termed a democratic network community. Its seeds are 'present' in a future that the neoliberal obsession with speed continually denies us.

## References

Adam, B. (1998) *Timescapes of Modernity: The Environment and Invisible Hazards* (London: Routledge).

- Adam, B. (2004) *Time* (Cambridge: Polity Press).
- Agger, B. (1992) *The Discourse of Domination* (Evanston: North-western University Press).
- Alliez, É. (1996) *Capital times* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press).
- Arrighi, G. (2005) 'Hegemony Unravelling—1', *New Left Review* 32 (March-April), pp.23-80.
- Barnett, R. (1997) *Higher Education: a Critical Business* (Buckingham: Open University Press).
- Baudrillard, J. (1983) *Revenge of the Crystal: Selected Writings on the Modern Object and Its Destiny, 1968-1983* (ed. trans. P. Foss & J. Pefanis) (London: Pluto Press).
- Baudrillard, J. (1986) *The Ecstasy of Communication* (New York: Semiotext(e)).
- Beck, U. (2004) 'Cosmopolitical Realism: on the Distinction Between Cosmopolitanism and Realism in Philosophy and the Social Sciences', *Global Networks* 4(2), pp.131-156.
- Bergson, H. (1960) *Time and Free Will* (New York: Harper and Row).
- Bertman, S. (1998) *Hyperculture: the Human Cost of Speed* (Westport, CT: Praeger).
- Chesneaux, J. (2000) 'Speed and Democracy', *Social Science Information* 39(3), pp.407-420.
- Eagleton, T (1991) *Ideology* (London: Verso).
- Evans-Pritchard E.E. (1940) *The Nuer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Fukuyama, F. (1992) *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Hamish Hamilton).
- Gare, A. (1996) *Nihilism Inc.: Environmental Destruction and the Metaphysics of Sustainability* (Sydney: Eco-Logical Press).
- Giddens, A. (1990) *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity).
- Giddens, A. (1997) 'Excerpts from a keynote address at the UNRISD conference on globalization and citizenship', *UNRISD News* 15, pp.4-5.

- Hardt, M. (2002) 'Porto Alegre: today's Bandung?', *New Left Review* 14 (March-April), pp.112-118.
- Harvey, D. (1989) *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell).
- Harvey, D. (2005) *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Hassan, R. (2003) *The Chronoscopic Society* (New York: Lang).
- Hassan, R. (2004) *Media, Politics and the Network Society* (Maidenhead: Open University Press).
- Hayek, F. A. von. (1976) *The Road to Serfdom* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul)
- Jameson, F. (1996) *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso).
- Kellner, D. (2003) *Globalization, Technopolitics and Revolution*, available at <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/essays/globalizationtechnopoliticsrevolution.pdf>.
- Latour, B. (2002) 'Morality and Technology', *Theory, Culture & Society* 19(5-6), pp.247-260.
- Leal, P. (2000) 'Participation, Communication and Technology in the Age of the Global Market', *Forest, Tree and People (Newsletter)* 40/41, available at <http://www-trees.slu.se/news/40/40leal.pdf>.
- Lovink, G. & Garcia, D. (1996) *The ABC of Tactical Media*, available at <http://www.timesup.org/Times.UP/ABC.html>.
- Lyotard, J. F. (1979) *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).
- Massey, D. (1994) *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press).
- North, D. (2004) *Understanding the Process of Economic Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- Postman, N. (1993) *Technopoly* (New York: Vintage).
- Rosa, H. (2003) 'Social Acceleration: Ethical and Political Consequences of a Desynchronized High-Speed Society', *Constellations* 10(1), pp.11-22.
- Scheuerman, W. (2003) 'Speed, States, and Social Theory', *Constellations* 10(1), pp.23-38.
- Soja, E. (1989) *Postmodern Geographies* (London: Verso).

Steger, M. B. (2002) 'Putnam, social capital and globalization', in S.L. McLean et al (eds.) *Social Capital* (New York: New York University Press).

Thompson, E.P. (1991) 'Time and Work-Discipline', in E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (London: Penguin).

Thrift, N. & May, J. (2001) *Timespace* (London/New York: Routledge).

Vidal, J. (2005) 'The end of oil is closer than you think' *The Guardian* 21<sup>st</sup> April.

Virilio, P. 1995. *Speed and Information: Cyberspace Alarm!*, available at [http://www.ctheory.net/text\\_file.asp?pick=72](http://www.ctheory.net/text_file.asp?pick=72).

Weber, M. (1971) *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (trans. T. Parsons) (London: Unwin University).

Weiser, M. Seely Brown, J. (1997) 'The Coming Age of Calm Technology' in P. Denning, J. Metcalfe, & M. Robert (eds.) *Beyond Calculation: The Next Fifty Years of Computing* (New York: Copernicus), pp.75-87.

Williams, R. (1979) *Politics and Letters* (London: Verso).

Young, J. (1993) *Global Network: Computers in a Sustainable Society* (Washington, DC: Worldwatch Institute).