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Davos and 'capitalist time'

Gareth Dale | 22nd January 2019

How does capitalism condition the ways in which we measure, imagine and weaponise time - and what does this mean for our future?



Image: Monica Blatton, [Flickr](#).

It's [Davos](#) time again. Our overlords are arriving at the Alpine resort for the World Economic Forum (WEF). But the ski slopes all around are melting. The mountain's snowline is receding.

As they gather, they're unpacking [environmental anxieties](#) and comparing magic bullets. We hear Adair Turner, the former CBI Director, [call for](#) the large-scale expansion of agrofuels and hydrogen—without the slightest grasp of the [destructive effects](#) of the former or the [wastefulness](#) and colossal energy thirst of the latter.

Turner's colleague, WEF Director Klaus Schwab, is [gesturing airily](#) at 'public-private partnerships' and 'technology.' Business as almost-usual. Future hope, he says, lies with the CEOs (and *shhh*, please tiptoe around the oil giants). It's the polite liberal etiquette of climate change: rhetorical dedication, practical denial.

Schwab tries to integrate 'time' into his diagnosis. "Quarterly reporting cycles and shorter terms of office cut time horizons for decision-makers. The urgent scientific message on climate change finds it hard to cut through the news cycle." This is not wrong, but is flimsy and evasive. For time is indeed of the essence. What is 'Davos time'? How does 'capitalist time' intersect with 'ecological time' — the CEOs amidst the snowmelt?

Economies of time

We can find a few pointers in a novel set in early twentieth-century Davos: Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*.

Davos today is a jet-set magnet, thanks to its climate and elevation - ideal for skiing. Back then a sprinkling of Europe's upper crust congregated at its sanatoriums, for which the climate and elevation were similarly suited.

Magic Mountain is a time-rich novel. It asks: is time a linear axis of existence or is it subjective and non-linear, a concertina? Is boredom the 'compression of time'?

The novel interrogates temporality. By this I mean the structures through which humans perceive and organise time, through the rhythms of their interaction with the natural environment (diurnal and seasonal cycles) and through technologies, myths, music, and so forth.

Temporalities and [timescapes](#) vary across space and through history, with different 'economies' embodying diverse dispositions of time. Who owns the future: the [gods](#) on Mount Olympus, or is it - like credit - a resource to be exploited by the monied classes? In a capitalist society, time is sliced and priced by states and capital — a time-money continuum.

"Time and the world"

In its own temporality, *The Magic Mountain* is classically 'modern.' Through a protagonist-centred narrative continuum, the present is looped through the past and toward the future. Narrative time is synced to clock time, and a focus on the detailed interactions of everyday life facilitates a tight control of tempo. As a [Bildungsroman](#), it foregrounds processes of development and (self-)discovery.

In short, it represents a late flourish of classical literary realism. The novel's genre was keyed to a particular social order: bourgeois, individualistic and meliorist; its advent, some 150 years earlier, signalled a profound shift in sensibility. For the first time in literary consciousness, as [Mikhail Bakhtin](#) observed, "time and the world" became historical, unfolding "as an uninterrupted movement into a real future, as a unified, all-embracing and uncompleted process."

The conceptual twin of this 'modern' literary sensibility is Progress. It too courses through Mann's novel. Its champion is the Italian lawyer Lodovico Settembrini, who sees himself as a warrior for freedom, knowledge, transformative action, and 'Europe,' in opposition to tyranny, bondage, passivity, and inertia—in short, ['Asia.'](#)

In Settembrini's view, time and history are propelled by machines. "As technology brought nature increasingly under its control," improving communication "and triumphing over climatic conditions," it also brought the peoples of the world together, driving a global shift from "darkness and fear" to happiness and virtue. Technological progress paves the road to a shining moral order. Through dominating nature, it secures liberation.

In Davos this week, Settembrini's ghost feels right at home. It laps up the WEF mission statement, "Committed to Improving the State of the World," and the ubiquitous undertakings to "[shape the future of economic progress](#)."

The Magic Mountain is set prior to 1914, but Mann wrote it between 1912 and 1924, as liberal order crumpled and burned. Its narrative acceleration conjures a society hurtling toward doom. One hundred years on, ecological collapse is provoking a crisis in our perception of the ontological coordinates of human life, including nature and time. I'll return to these. But first, how did we get here? And what is 'capitalist time'?

Ringling the changes

The revolution in temporality of the last millennium is conventionally associated with the diffusion of the mechanical clock. By producing minutes and hours in fixed ticks, it enabled the reproducibility and universal standardisation of time. In severing time from the natural and supernatural realms, it helped foster a vision of an independent world of [mathematically measurable sequences](#), the sphere of Newtonian science. Time could now be imagined as a uniform continuum: linear, divisible, and abstract.

But the transformation cannot have been the work of mechanical clocks alone. Clock time is a productive force, enabling the synchronisation of human purposes—but these are under whose command?

In medieval Europe and the Islamic civilisations, clocks were used less to measure time than by clerics to *mark* it — the call to prayer. ('Clock' derives from *clocca/klocke*: a bell.) But when clock-bells entered the public sphere to coordinate trade and public intercourse, and above all when they entered workplaces to quantify the working day, that [changed](#).

If pre-capitalist systems were visibly kleptocratic - based on the extortion of labour's product - in capitalism the goal is labour productivity. Capital is the command of labour *time*, with the worker appearing as a commodity: [personified labour-time](#). Capitalist rationality is governed by the law of value, the imperative to reduce the labour time of production below the 'socially necessary' average required to sell commodities at or below their value—where value is an [abstraction of social time](#).

Put more simply, capital's aim is to increase profit by saving time. This accounts for the core dynamics of 'modernity': the systematic disciplining of labour and its segregation from the rest of the human experience, enabling labour time to be demarcated and measured; the endless acceleration of labour processes and of technical and social change; the centrality, and fetishism, of technology (in view of its key role in displacing labour and reducing circulation time); and the systematic derogation of the natural environment. Capitalism eats time, and in the process erases nature.

Weaponising the clock

Capitalist time can be thought of as a system of interlocking temporalities under the dominance of capital. To simplify, the pulse is capital's, the wage relation determines the worker's calendar, while the overarching framework is established by states — not least through the strict metronome of education institutions and other sites of 'disciplinary social reproduction.' Outside those structures, 'social reproduction time' tends to be cyclical, and gendered.

The imposition of capitalist temporality - a unity of time projected by capital and nation states - is sometimes crisis-prone and arrhythmic, is always contested, and never total. Capitalist temporalities are differentiated, contradictory and uneven across space and time, and they face resistance. In the system's 'primitive' phases, the plantations and workshops and warships and factories became battlegrounds in a war of capitalist time-consciousness.

The same war was fought globally. The early-modern West European bourgeois defined himself by his separation from nature and a taste for regimes of abstract time and space. These predilections were weaponised, deployed in explicit justification of the domination of indigenous peoples whose space he was conquering and whose labour time he was appropriating. The very idea of the 'savage' was constructed on the belief that to be fully human requires a rigorous separation of ritual and habit from the rhythms of nature. Indigenous peoples' lack of alienation *from* their land served to justify the colonists' alienation *of* their land.

Put differently, bourgeois Europeans saw themselves in the mirror of their clocks. Clocks symbolised technological prowess and material well-being — a nation's 'civilisation' and 'modernity.' Abstract-regimented time was simultaneously the banner and goal of European militarists, merchants and missionaries in their colonisation of the world who defined their civilisation as orderly, regimented, linear, and uniform, a culture to be imposed on the irrational, irregular and timeless — hence childlike— Others. Punctuality was ordained a moral category: keeping the right time was *right*.

Choreographing modernity

Religious time and capitalist time consciousness adapted to one another, most famously in seventeenth-century England, where Puritans "censored the social calendar, flattened the swinging seasonality of time and decreed instead a mechanical routine of six days' work followed by one day's pray." Puritanism choreographed society along business lines, featuring employers for whom saving souls requires saving money, and prayerful-punctual employees. Here the time-money continuum came into being. Saving time is "gainful," preached the Puritan Richard Baxter, so "spend it wholly in the way of duty." "Time is money," chimed Benjamin Franklin, setting the seal on time's historic transition: once a gift from the gods, now a resource exchangeable for money.

In European visualisations of the human journey, the correlative shift was from Providence to Progress — from a sacred cosmology "bounded by the approach of the Last Judgment" to a secular historical time in continuous forward motion. In early formulations of history as a stadial process of civilizational advance, the analogy was with the individual.

Just as individuals progress from infancy to maturity, said Lord Kames, "so there is a similar progress in every nation, from its savage state to its maturity in arts and sciences." Before long, the Progress idea became infused with connotations of 'economic infinity' — the beliefs that human industry has infinite wealth-creating potential and that the credit system is endlessly elastic. Later on, it fused with the growth paradigm — the ideology of unending economic growth.

In identifying a ladder of historical time from barbarism to civilisation, the progress idea hammered the diversity of human populations into a particular temporal-economic chain. Under its banner, abstract time and technological novelty became markers of modernity, defining the cities against the countryside and imperial powers against the colonies. Because the richer and higher-tech nations (and 'races') are indexed as history's vanguard, they should boss the rest, and surgically redirect their faces to the future. When the future appears as a dream of infinite progress, the past is perpetually deficient and the

present must be continually [realigned with the future](#) through political intervention. It is a manifesto that drums out capital's rhythms - it appeared as 'modernisation theory,' 'the development project,' and so forth.

Empty time

In *The Magic Mountain*, the debate on progress pits the bourgeois progressive Settembrini against Naptha, a socialist-reactionary Jesuit. The latter was nostalgic for medieval hierarchy and sternly critical of liberal Progress. Yet the actual socialist movement of Thomas Mann's day, above all the Social Democratic Party (SPD), was aligning itself unreservedly with 'Settembrini.'

The thinker who joined the dots connecting the SPD's "[stubborn faith in progress](#)" and its "[servile integration](#)" into the apparatuses of bourgeois order was Walter Benjamin. In his [Arcades Project](#), Benjamin highlighted a paradox in the temporality of commodity society. Competition drives the production of ever greater masses of commodities for which buyers must be found, with ever new lines and new seductions, yet novelty is immediately rendered obsolete by its own onward rush.

The paradigm is the fashion industry: the realm of the short shelf-life, the quick kiss. Commodity production inhabits twin temporalities, with a linear acceleration which - in its circularity, its repetitiveness - appears as stasis.

Benjamin uses the phrase "[homogenous empty time](#)" to describe the infinite, inevitable timetable of bourgeois progress to which social democracy had pledged itself in the baseless belief that capitalism's accelerative dynamic pointed to a socialist society as its pre-determined telos.

The SPD had become prisoner of its conviction that the historical tide was on its side, pushed ever onward by "[technological development](#)." From there it was a short step "to the illusion that factory work ostensibly furthering technological progress constituted a political achievement," and to a "corrupted conception" of industry that recognizes only "progress in mastering nature" and not the attendant regressions, and finally to the "naïvely complacent" belief — shared by social-democrat and liberal economists — that nature donates itself "gratis" for the benefit of humanity. These beliefs, Benjamin suggests, lay at the root of the SPD's rejection of radical strategies geared to rupturing the historical present.

Great acceleration

Capitalist progress, in Benjamin's oracular [phrase](#), "must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That it continues like this, *is* the catastrophe." He wrote this in the late 1930s, following his exile from Nazi Germany, incarceration in Vichy France, and not long before his flight and (probable) suicide.

A complacent observer, a Settembrini, might assume Benjamin had needlessly generalised from the unfortunate juncture. After all, 1940 was "midnight in the century" but the good guys then won the war, eradicated Nazism, and soldered the world economy back together. Progress resumed full-throttle, powering miraculous advances in literacy, life expectancy and prosperity.

But Benjamin's warnings were prescient. He had earlier described how the same coruscating technologies — gas, dyes, electricity — that had lit up late nineteenth-century

city skies morphed into the 'colourful infernos' (in Esther Leslie's [paraphrase](#)) and the 'fire terror' of the world wars.

A similar and even more treacherous dialectic was to follow. Fossil fuels had become the elixir of growth. As Sadi Carnot, the father of thermodynamics, long ago [understood](#), fossil fuels confer on technologies "the invaluable advantage of being *employable at any time* and in any place, and of never suffering an interruption' in their work. Digging deep through geological layers to the Carboniferous, Jurassic and Cretaceous past brings present dividends to capital in the form of [cheap energy](#) which then, pumped out as exhaust gas, cues up future infernos and fire terror.

The capitalist system, in the wake of its postwar [Great Acceleration](#), is producing new temporal twists, not least to ecological time and geological time.

Ecological time

Ecological time refers to humans' interaction with natural events and processes, whether over the short or longer-term. Humans have long had the capacity to rapidly wrench local environments, but ecological time has been generally understood as cyclical and continuous. One sociologist of time describes it as '[enduring time](#).'

Today, ecological time is changing globally, and fast. No longer is our image of the planetary future simply an extrapolation of the present. Ecological time is, for a significant minority, infused with a sense of hair-raising change.

A spin-off is that our sense of geological time is undergoing an irreversible shift. The geological past, in the form of carbon-bearing seams, irrupts into the present, irrevocably altering the future. Anthropocene is the buzz word, [with Capitalocene](#) its more accurate substitute.

Geological time is accelerating, and this will continue, thanks not least to the time-bending features of climate change: the gargantuan future warming pent up in the form of [oceanic thermal inertia](#), and the irreversible non-linear positive feedback mechanisms ([albedo decline](#), [oceanic methane](#) release, etc.) that are either already in train or in view — a climate time bomb that could propel the planet toward a 'hothouse state.'

The earth's climate of the last ten thousand years was uniquely benign and stable, if at times with sharp local and occasional minor global volatility. That age is over. Put differently: whereas all human-recorded timescapes were lived under a (relatively) serene sky, over the next thousands, or millions, of years the forecast is stormy.

Jetztzeit - 'now time'

Facing the catastrophes of his era, and the complacency of progressives, Benjamin offered the image of the [emergency brake](#): "Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train — namely, the human race — to activate the emergency brake." The metaphor, Benjamin Noys [argues](#), presents a "non-teleological politics of temporality," grounded in a belief that future liberation cannot be entrusted to "the continuing dialectic of production/destruction" that generates a ceaseless "state of emergency."

In strategic terms, Benjamin insisted that movements of the "[revolutionary classes](#)," at moments of crisis, must seek not to push history faster along its pre-existing tracks but seek

"to make the continuum of history explode," manifesting "a conception of the present as now-time [*Jetztzeit*] shot through with splinters of messianic time," and that, however, this will require a seizing of memories of past defeats when they 'flash up' at moments of collective peril.

This is a stance not of impotent voluntarism or aestheticized defeatism but a squaring up to the ways in which the present embodies the outcome of the catastrophic defeats of past struggles, in order precisely to warn against the "[conformism](#)" that tends always to overpower us. Far from being an idiosyncratic fantasy peculiar to Benjamin, it is a red thread through radical politics. (To give a notable [example](#), it's there in W.E.B. Du Bois' analysis of the tragically missed opportunity to unite workers across the "colour line," in [Black Reconstruction in America](#).)

As the ice melts, a helpless [catastrophism](#) can set in, breeding ennui or apathy in the face of predicted doom. But the dominant forms of passivity, surely, stem either from low levels of social-movement activity itself, which a catastrophist consciousness might in small ways improve ([Extinction Rebellion](#) is the obvious example), or from complacent hopes that those who gather at Davos, and their colleagues worldwide, will proffer business-almost-as-usual remedies in the form of [green growth](#), [geoengineering](#), and so forth. These, in turn, tap into the long-ingrained belief in the inevitability of progress, with its tendency to foster "[apocalyptic blindness](#)": the reluctance of humans "to understand that their existence is threatened, and that this could lead to a bad end."

It's against this background that Benjamin's arguments, and his uncovering of the strings that attached the complacent historicism of his day to the modes and rhythms of capitalist time, appear, well, *jetztzeitig*.

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