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What Time Is It?

A Response to Zerzan

Bob Brubaker

1983, Summer

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In response to “Beginning of Time, End of Time,” FE #313, Summer, 1983.

The question of time and its relationship to domination is central to understanding our captivity. John’s article attempts to come to grips with this very difficult subject; while what follows is often critical of his attempt, I do not want to slight its radical intent or the hard work he put into it. Nor should these criticisms obscure the fact that it is an important introduction to the question of time: it helps us to see our perception of time as unnatural, as something imposed upon us, as a force to be overthrown if we are to liberate ourselves.

John’s original manuscript contained 109 footnotes, comprising an extensive reading list on the subject. I’m sorry that space limitations and our unwillingness to typeset the footnotes will prevent readers from having ready access to his sources. These sources stimulated me to do my own reading on the subject; and if from that reading (and my own reflections) I conclude that there are some fundamental problems with John’s argument, I nevertheless acknowledge that he provides an opening to what promises to be a fruitful dialogue.

While it might seem trivial to begin by complaining about John's extensive use of quotations, I think it reveals something more significant than a hesitant or unsure writing style. Many of us had the same impression upon reading the article: we think it would have been more interesting if he had said more things in his own words; but more importantly, some of us feel that he uses quotes in ways that do not strengthen his argument. Some of these quotes seem tangential to the main argument. Others seem to have different meanings than what he attributes to them, or are torn from their contexts, defeating understanding. This suggests to me that John is unsure about what he is trying to say, or unaware of some of the implications of his arguments. Perhaps we should treat his argument as a suggestive, impressionistic effort rather than as "something done."

One of John's central contentions is that "alienation begins to appear in the shape of time." He believes that a sense of time gradually emerges out of "no-time", the primordial unity of hunter-gatherer life. Although it is unclear to me how this sense of time "intrudes upon the human psyche," (at one point John says a sense of time emerges in early infancy) its consequence is said to be anxiety and separation—the genesis of alienation. Once people acquire a sense of time, anxiety drives them to "spatialization," the subduing and control of space, as a kind of compensation. John calls the "large growth of human numbers" the "first spatialization"; he believes it responsible for the progressive breakdown of hunter-gatherer life and the emergence of the "division of labor and other ensuing separations." Spatialization is the high road to domination, setting in motion a process which culminates in fixed property, cities, and the state. Each new surge of spatialization leads to a further refinement in the sense of time, until the emergence of linear time and history, a "radical departure." From which point on we can say that time, alienation, and domination have become one in their dominion over the human being.

It seems to me that the sticking point in this argument is what caused a sense of time to emerge in the first place. As in all attempts to account for the origins of alienation or domination, it is difficult indeed to answer the question John poses: who brought the curse?

It is unclear to me how John deals with this question. He seems to believe that population growth gradually brought forth social changes which resulted in domination. But if, as he says, the large growth of human numbers is “the first spatialization,” and spatialization is a compensation for a sense of time, then a sense of time (and the origins of alienation) must have preceded the increase in population. This leads to the dismal conclusion that, once having acquired a sense of time, people tried deliberately or otherwise to increase their numbers in order to ameliorate their sense of deprivation. Reproduction leads to domination. Furthermore, we still haven’t located the origin, or cause, of the emergence of time. Perhaps the answer is to be found later in the article, where John says alienation in time can be traced to early infancy. What, then, is there which distinguishes this position from the pessimistic “bourgeois” conclusion that “domination was the natural outcome of population pressures”; or from the even more pessimistic conclusion that alienation has ontological status—that all individuals, and all cultures, experience time, and hence alienation? The human being as the “alienated animal.”

Although it is necessary, on the basis of John’s argument, to accept so dismal a conclusion, we should not be deterred from questioning the merits of the argument itself. It seems to me unnecessary to accept John’s equation that a sense of time equals alienation.

I think his linkage of the two is the result of a failure to appreciate that primitive people have a rich and subtle time-sense. Or we could put it differently: what John calls “no-time” is identical to the psychological experience others have called “pri-

mordial” or “biological” time. If he could see how different this primitive time-sense was from our own abstract, linear, alienated sense of time, then he might be less inclined to equate alienation with any and all senses of time.

In a sense, John is aware of this distinction among different cultural perceptions of time, referring to distinctions among kinds and qualities of time. This is one of the most confusing and exasperating things about the article: if John wants to make such a sharp distinction between “no-time” and “alienation in time,” why these qualifications and discriminations? Doesn’t the delineation of “formal time concepts” or “official time” imply that an informal, unofficial, “vernacular” sense of time exists in opposition to it? Likewise, when John writes that “differences in the interpretation of time constituted a demarcation line between a state of nature and one of civilization,” is this not tantamount to saying that people in the state of nature perceive and interpret some sort of time? What exactly is meant by a “qualitative sense of time” (which he appears to think is a good thing to have)? And why does he call the emergence of linear time a “radical departure”—is he arguing that while other time-senses are alienating, they are much less so than linear time? How, then, does one conceive of these degrees of alienation?

These confusions illustrate my earlier remark that John’s copious use of quotes often does his argument no good. Or perhaps we can now state the reverse: John’s argument is not consistent with the examples he adduces to support it. These examples, in fact, point to a completely different interpretation of time.

When John first sent us the article, I wrote to him about some problems I had with his concept of “no’ time.” In response, he sent me a quote from the book *Political Philosophy and Time* by John G. Gunnell, who contends that primitive people have neither the perception nor the conception of time. Following Ernst Cassirer and Susanne Langer, Gunnell argues that the

I questioned his “naive” version of primitive society. But where does this leave me? I have no more answered the question “Who brought the curse?” than has John. But if this question is answerable, I believe it is more likely to be found when we see with utmost clarity what primitive society is and is not.

Related

See “Confronting the Enemy, A response on Time,” FE #314, Fall 1983 (<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/314-fall-1983/confronting-the-enemy/>)

in terms of ritual beliefs; society takes over the burden which, with us, falls entirely on the individual. Restored to the esteem of his fellows he is able to take up with ease the routine of existence which was thrown temporarily off its course by an emotional upheaval. Behavior that would be the maddest of fantasies in the individual, or even the worst of vices, becomes tolerable and sane, in his society, if it is transformed into custom and woven into the outward and visible fabric of a community's social life. This is easy in primitive societies where the boundary between the inner world of the self and the outer world of the community marks their line of fusion rather than of separation."

In my opinion, this passage conveys a much more accurate impression of primitive society than anything in John's article. And it raises yet another question about the pessimistic implications of his argument. The above description is meant to apply to all primitive societies, including those which practice agriculture. But according to John, agricultural societies are already hopelessly mired in time and alienation. When Diamond, or Fortes, or Pierre Clastres refer to primitive society, they are assuming an essential continuity between hunter-gatherer and agricultural communities. Clastres, for one, explicitly argues that the movement of societies from hunting to agriculture "appears to have been affected without changing the nature of those societies in any way." Perhaps John would consider the above description of the resolution of conflict in primitive societies to actually be a betrayal of alienation. If so, this would indicate with utmost precision the pessimistic connotations of his argument: his envisioned society would belong not to the earthly plane of existence but could only be situated in heaven.

By now I have hammered away at virtually the entire scaffolding of John's argument. I began by criticizing its pessimistic implications; I criticized numerous confusions in his usage of the word time; I questioned his central notion of "no-time"; I questioned whether time in fact engenders domination; finally,

primary human attribute is symbolization: "For man reality is what is presented to him in his symbols, and there is no penetrating beyond symbols to a more ultimate datum; the factual world is given in the symbolic. Man is continually in the process of creating a virtual reality which forms the boundaries of his activity."

Gunnell believes that primitive people order experience through the symbolic form of myth, and that people in history order their experience by the symbolic form called time. He writes that "time in the myth is not really time at all"; continuing, "It may seem odd to maintain that primitive and archaic societies lack a consciousness of time when it can easily be demonstrated that such societies possess procedures which it is difficult to designate by any term other than 'time-reckoning,' and the high cultures of the ancient world developed complex and relatively sophisticated methods and systems for calculating 'time.' But although ancient man engaged in what, in retrospect, may be termed 'time-reckoning,' there is no distinction between the 'time' of nature, the 'time' of creation, and the 'time' of society."

But while Gunnell argues strenuously that primitive and ancient people had no experience of time, he makes no claim that time emerges gradually out of primitive society, leading to domination. In fact, he sees state society, specifically ancient Egypt, as still existing within the mythological order. And he argues that "in the ancient world time-calculation was not primarily a function of an interest in chronology as such, although a monopoly on this skill contributed to the power of the kings and priests; it was essentially related to the elaboration of the myth and served ultimately to bind together the rhythms of nature and society. Discrete time symbols could not appear until human existence emerged as a separate order, even in the societies of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia which possessed the complex social structures which are normally associated with refined notions of time and multiple levels of temporal order-

ing.” For Gunnell, then, domination, in the form of state society, precedes the emergence of time. Whatever one thinks of Gunnell’s argument, it is clear it does not confirm John’s schema in which the emergence of time engenders domination.

Gunnell’s argument does, however, support John’s conception of “no-time.” But Gunnell occasionally exhibits the same problem John has in taking quotes out of context. For instance, he quotes Ernst Cassirer in the discussion about the timelessness of myth, arguing that (to quote Cassirer), that in the myth “there is not only an absence of historical time but ‘no time ‘as such,’ no perpetual duration and no regular recurrence or succession.’ ” Gunnell ends this quote with a period, but in the actual text, from Volume 2 of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer follows the word succession with a semicolon. Let’s look at the larger passage to see what Cassirer is actually saying: “For myth there is no time ‘as such,’ no perpetual duration and no regular recurrence or succession; there are only configurations of particular content which in turn reveal a certain temporal gestalt, a coming and going, a rhythmical being and becoming. Thus, time as a whole is divided by certain boundaries akin to musical bars. But at first its ‘beats’ are not measured or counted but immediately felt....The fact is that long before the human consciousness forms its first concepts concerning the basic objective differentiations of number, time, and space, it seems to acquire the subtlest sensitivity to the peculiar periodicity and rhythm of human life. Even at the lowest stages of culture, even among primitive peoples who have barely arrived at the first beginnings of enumeration and who consequently cannot possibly have any exact quantitative conception of temporal relations, we often find this subjective feeling for the living dynamic of the temporal process developed in astonishing subtlety and precision....Thus we see that for mythical consciousness and feeling a kind of biological time, a rhythmic ebb and flow of life, precedes the intuition of a properly cosmic time.”

As we can see, the contextual emphasis of this passage is counter to Gunnell’s truncated usage of it. The same fault plagues John’s article: one would never know from his scatter-shot style of quotation that Frankfort, Eliade, and Levy-Bruhl each are describing what they consider to be a sense of time in primitive cultures.

Aside from this, Cassirer’s seems to me a plausible way to describe the primitive sense of time. Indeed, as Frederick Turner points out in *Beyond Geography: The Western Spirit against the Wilderness*, “consciousness of the passage of time is inevitable in deaths, births, natural disasters, and other phenomenon that willy-nilly record duration.”

Perhaps one problem with John’s article, although I won’t insist on it, is that he has what I would call a “naive” conception of primitive, specifically hunter-gatherer, society. He equates their way of life with Eden, and history with the Fall. Primitives are seen as living “only in a now, as we all do when we are having fun.” Nietzsche on the eternity of pleasure is also summoned to convey John’s impression of hunter-gatherer life. While all this is suggestive it is probably too utopian. Perhaps John is so allergic to anything smacking of anxiety, or conflict, that he perceives as alienation what is only primitive society’s ingenious ability to mollify its problems. Let me illustrate what I mean by quoting Meyer Fortes, who is cited by Stanley Diamond in his book *In Search of the Primitive*.

Fortes: “I do not mean to imply that everybody is always happy, contented, and free of care in a primitive society. On the contrary, there is plenty of evidence that among them, as with us, affability may conceal hatred and jealousy, friendliness and devotion enjoined by law and morals may mask enmity, exemplary citizenship may be a way of compensating for frustration and fears. The important thing is that in primitive societies there are customary methods of dealing with these common human problems of emotional adjustment by which they are externalized, publicly accepted, and given treatment