

Thirty years of *Time & Society*: The challenges for time studies revisited

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Thirty years ago, as founding editor of *Time & Society* (T&S), I set out the challenges for contributors in the Editorial to the first issue. [1] T&S was launched as an international trans-disciplinary journal, primarily straddling the sciences and humanities. This involved taking great care that all published communications connected with readers outside contributors' own specialist knowledge practices and it entailed a commitment to publish works from scholars whose first language was not English. Clearly, this was a massive task to take on then. Today, we tend to take these two policy decisions for granted but the journal's sustained commitments to these are something it can be justly proud of. To publish not only established academic researchers, but also scholars at the very beginning of their respective careers, proved an additional positive influence on the journal's development, which greatly enhanced efforts to make research relevant to the complex interdependencies and problems of the day. From its very start, therefore, this approach ensured that traditions and academic conventions were and are constantly checked against experiences from across a wide range of spatially and temporally diverse life worlds.

The issues looming large during the last decade of the 20th century were carried over into the early 21st century where they have been further complicated by the introduction and global adoption of the worldwide web together with the massive expansion and intensification of environmental problems ranging from pollution to species loss and dramatic global warming. Most recently, a global viral pandemic has added to the complexification of issues that were in the making during the last decade of the 20th century, all of which have massive temporal implications.

For the launch of T&S, emphasis was placed on a temporal lens, complexity, and multiplicity that encompassed the local and global as one. 30 years later, we have to add the task of approaching open pasts and futures as an inseparable mutually implicating whole, which means holding the extremities of time together for all action in the present that is rooted in the past and impacts on open futures. The nuclear threat, so prevalent during the cold war and after the accidents of Chernobyl in 1986 as well as Fukushima two decades later, may have been moved out of the field of vision and displaced by global environmental change, which confronts scholars with a Now that extends into open pasts and futures. The focus may have shifted, but the temporality of the threat has remained one without clear cut-off points. In both cases, we are confronted by a potential end in the present. For both, much of the past features in our present and foreshadows the future, just as present actions ripple outward, creating open futures that simultaneously foreclose options for future generations.

Such time-based expansion of concern beyond a few decades demands engagement with the invisible and intangible, which have taken on ever more significance during the intervening years,

whether it is applied to the temporal vastness of environmental impacts or the invisible processes of viral infection webs as they invade our current life world. Both, in turn, need to be appreciated together with the layered complexity of “glocal” inequalities that are deeply implicated in the way these matters play out. Any of these issues, I want to contend, could be encompassed conceptually only after time had begun to be taken seriously across the full range of academic disciplines. T&S has clearly played a significant role in preparing the ground for this shift in perception and subsequent knowledge practices.

The journal’s time focus was accompanied by a number of important conceptual and methodological developments, such as a shift from time as spatial measure to time as lived experience that included the measure. It entailed a subtle move from social science *in* time (with time as backdrop frame and context) to social science *of* time that now includes the backdrop as integral to its deliberations. Importantly, the journal’s time focus brought with it the need to not only facilitate sensitivity to differences but also encourage recognition of relationships, shared aspects, and common principles that would otherwise have remained locked within incompatible perspectives and incomparable, self-contained disciplines. Disappointingly, many of these challenges persist. Despite significant advances having been made during the past 30 years, layered complexity, multiplicity, simultaneity, implication, and the significant growth of uncertainty continue to pose difficulties for time scholars who tend to operate in academic and public domains where not only either/or frames of reference continue to operate on an everyday level but also certainty is pursued in situations that would demand explicit engagement with uncertainty. Much work remains to be done, therefore, in bridging scholarly insights and everyday common sense.

And yet, today’s global problems, from climate change and the viral pandemic to electronic systems out of control, confront scholars not only with challenges but they also point the way to potential and necessary changes. First, it is becoming obvious that conventional factual knowledge tends to be stretched to its limits when so much of the most troubling issues operate out of sight and the reach of the senses. From the issues themselves arises a palpable need for conceptual/theoretical prowess, creative/imaginative skills and understanding of systemic processes, relations and interdependencies. This is the territory of time studies as they deal with latency and invisible change-process that ripple outwards in time without clear cut-off points, while engaging with questions of scale, speed, timing, intensity, and reach of actions in the present. This, in turn, raises questions of ethics. How is it possible to take individual and collective responsibility for present actions whose dispersed impacts will emerge sometime, somewhere, thus evade conventional methods of establishing causal links and traceable lines of accountability?

Furthermore, in a world where everything connects to everything else and where impacts of actions tend to extend to the furthest reaches of our world, potentially affecting untold generations of future beings, it has become obvious that there is a need to change the way we organize and produce knowledge. Emphases are beginning to shift from the individual to simultaneously embracing the collective, from an exclusive present-orientation to approaches that neglect neither past sources nor potential future impacts, and from evidence-based knowledge to research that encompasses the full range of knowledge practices from the hard sciences to the arts and ethically-based wisdom. In the early 21st century, our world requires knowledge that is inter- and trans-disciplinary is conceptually and theoretically innovative, embraces complexity, and is not afraid to take a normative/ethical stand. Even more so than 30 years ago, this demands time-literate process thinking and requires horizontally connective collaborations across the knowledge domains that are appropriate to the connective, interdependent world of today.

Each century presents new questions, poses new problems, and offers new challenges which, in turn, affect our appreciation and utilization of and relationship to the past, present, and future. Socio-economic changes, environmental crises, political upheavals, and technological advances, as well as shifts in scientific understanding and in the representation of reality, they are all imbricated in such collective and individual reorientations to time. Thus, at both the substantive and the epistemological level, time is not just a worthwhile but a pertinent focus for a journal that seeks to take note of the consequences of contemporary existence on epistemology and on the deconstruction and reconstruction of knowledge. [2]

This statement from the Editorial to the inaugural issue of *Time & Society* is as relevant today as it was 30 years ago. One could even say that the intensified complexities and the vastly expanded reach of impacts across time, space, and matter make the explicit focus on the invisible process world of time more pertinent than ever.

Footnotes

[1] For a detailed account of these challenges and the enormity of the task, see Adam B (1990), *Time and Social Theory*. Cambridge, UK and Philadelphia: Polity Press and Temple University Press, Chap. 1

[2] Adam, B (1992) Editorial. *Time & Society* 1(1): 5-8.