

# The tyranny of clock time ? Debating fatigue in the US truck driving industry

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**Abstract :** Social theorists frequently claim that clock time—a cold, mechanical, and intensifying culture of time reckoning—has the tendency to dominate “process time”—a warm, humane, and leisurely culture of time-reckoning. This article interrogates this “tyranny of clock time” narrative through an in-depth examination of the fatigue debate in the US truck driving industry. I find that trucking regulators use clock time to encourage rest and recovery. Drivers, meanwhile, are committed to process time in ways that encourage intensification and overwork. Process time culture involves its own forms of time discipline that are related to power, exploitation, and overwork in surprising ways. Yet even though the normative ends of the two time orientations are reversed in this case, I still find that clock time is tyrannical in a certain limited sense. Clock time disrupts the rhythms of the labor process leading to work scenarios that drivers find fatiguing. In their efforts to use clock time to regulate fatigue, then, trucking regulators have actually created new kinds of fatigue. The tyranny of clock time narrative is thus challenged and supported in ways that refine our understanding of both clock time and process time. The distinction between clock time—a highly quantitative conception of time focused on abstract and decontextualized measurement—and process time—a more qualitative conception of time focused on the concrete rhythms of social activities, bodies, and the natural environment—has been foundational to the social analysis of time. Scholars have drawn this distinction in myriad ways and have long found it useful for understanding differences in ways of “doing” time. One of the most enduring claims arising from this distinction is that clock time is tyrannical toward process time. Clock time is cold, mechanical, and empty. It alienates us from the natural environment, encourages the hyper-rationalization of social life, and intensifies labor. Process time, by contrast, is warm, organic, and alive. It is a more humane temporal culture that encourages rest, recovery, and playful spontaneity. Scholars frequently argue that, when they are pitted against each other, clock time tends to “triumph” over process time. This “tyranny of clock time” narrative is pervasive in social theory and lies at the heart of many of the most compelling critiques of modernity (Giddens, 1995 ; Lukacs, 1971 ; Marx, 1955 ; Postone, 1996 ; Thompson, 1967).

In this paper, I interrogate the tyranny of clock time narrative by grounding it in a concrete empirical case—the US truck driving industry—a context in which the proper management of time is a matter of life and death, and clock time, in the form of drivers’ work schedules, is seen as both cause of and solution to the industry’s notorious health and safety problems. I focus on a period of heightened debate about work time and driver fatigue, which occurred between 2010 and 2013. Through an in-depth examination of this debate, I document how two cultures of time have developed within the truck driving industry : a clock time culture practiced by regulators, and a process time culture favored by drivers and other industry insiders. I show that, contrary to

theoretical assumptions, it is regulators' clock time culture that is allied to norms of rest, recovery, and a more humane relationship to bodily fatigue, while drivers' process time culture encourages intensification and overwork, thus confounding the typical formulation of these concepts. In yet another complication, however, I ultimately find that regulator's clock time culture is indeed tyrannical in a certain limited sense. It tends to disrupt drivers' ability to fully commit to process time, resulting in work scenarios that drivers find fatiguing. The resulting picture, then, both contradicts and supports the tyranny of clock time narrative in complex ways.

## **Temporal cultures**

Temporal cultures are grounded in what Glennie and Thrift (2009) call communities of temporal practice—groups that share similar ideas, skills, and technologies related to temporal reckoning. Social theorists typically divide temporal cultures into two ideal types, which for the sake of simplicity I call “clock time” and “process time.” This framework has ancient roots, such as the distinction between Chronos and Kairos in the Greek rhetorical tradition (Kinneavy, 2002), and has been reformulated by contemporary scholars in dozens of ways (e.g., Adam, 1990 : 30). Postone, for example, uses the words “abstract” and “concrete.” Abstract time refers to “uniform, continuous, homogeneous, ‘empty’ time” and is thus marked by “equal, constant, nonqualitative units” (Postone, 1996 : 202). Concrete time, by contrast, refers to “various sorts of time that are functions of events : they are referred to, and understood through, natural cycles and the periodicities of human life as well as particular tasks and processes” (Postone, 1996 : 201). Whatever the specific terms, scholars draw this distinction in order to describe two ideal typical ways of “doing” time. Whereas the more abstract clock time perspective assumes action is best planned ahead of time, the more concrete and embodied process time perspective assumes “things take the amount of time they need to take” (Davies, 1994 : 279). [...]