

Time: A Historical Sociology Perspective

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Čas v historicko-sociologické perspektivě

Abstract: This review concerns Jiří Šubrt's latest book *The Sociology of Time: A Critical Overview* (2021) and examines the text within the framework of sociological and historical sociological thought. Šubrt's book attempts the ambitious task of summarising the 'labyrinth of questions and answers' [Šubrt 2021:1] surrounding the topic of time within the field of sociology. In doing so, the author provides a detailed exploration of various theoretical approaches to time which are drawn from his extensive knowledge of the historiography of sociological thought. Owing to his own theoretical background in processual and historical sociology, one of the core themes of *The Sociology of Time* is the concept of temporalized society as a distinct theoretical approach to the sociology of time. As a historical sociologist primarily focused on theoretical concepts, Šubrt presents us with an analysis of the attempts to understand time within theoretical paradigms. By offering a variety of sociological approaches and linking their various developments across the 20th century (and sometimes before), Šubrt is guiding the reading towards the conclusion that a sociology which lacks a temporalized grounding is theoretically insufficient.

Key words: time; historical sociology; temporalized society; process sociology; sociological theory; long-term processes

DOI: 10.14712/23363525.2022.10

The concept of time within sociology is certainly not a singular issue and time itself has been the subject of discussion by theorists from across the sociological spectrum. These varying perspectives have led to calls for a greater consideration of the place of time within sociological methodology. Yet despite this previous consideration, the issue of the sociology of time still seems not to have been resolved satisfactorily into a cohesive paradigm and remains, in the words of John Hassard, 'the missing variable in modern sociological analysis' [Hassard 1990: 1]. The reluctance of many sociologists to address this concept stems from the fact that time is often considered to be simply a 'fact of life' [Adam 1991: 1] and thus to interrogate it further is to complicate an otherwise simple presupposition. Where time is analysed, it is often confined to a particularly subject-specific approach rather than within a consideration of the multiplicity of meaning the concept holds. Previous attempts to summarise these theoretical perspectives have notably included Barbara Adam's 1991 work *Time and Social Theory* and John Hassard's 1990 anthology also titled *The Sociology of Time*. Adam's book interrogates the underlying assumptions made by theorists about the nature of time and instead categorizes time into core elements such as 'human time' versus 'industrialised time'. Through a discussion of time in relation to physics, Adam is inviting a fundamental reconfiguration of time within sociological thought

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and a rejection of existing classical frameworks. This attempt by Adam is clearly a source of inspiration for Šubrt's own investigation in which he also recategorized the concepts of time and questioned the importance of previous research. Adopting a different approach, John Hassard's volume consists of stand-alone contributions from leading theorists. Pierre Bourdieu, Bronislaw Malinowski and Georges Gurvitch are a few examples of the calibre of researchers who were involved in this book. Hassard's stated aim was to provide a collection of authoritative contributions on the subject time in sociology. This, Hassard argued, was necessary due to the lack of any existing collected works on the problem as well as the dispersed nature of previous publications which in turn obscured the importance of investigating this concept. The sparsity of anthologies on time is surprising considering the very fundamental nature of the subject in question but it also highlights the diversity and specificity of the existing research. Werner Bergmann had previously suggested that sociologists studying time had often adopted a 'solipsistic' [Bergmann 1992: 82] approach. The tendency was to ignore existing studies in favour of producing their own interpretations of the classical theorists, thus giving the false impression that there were many studies on time in existence but most of them were theoretically unconnected. Such an assessment is not born out as much in recent years due to the steady increase in publications on the topic, however the fact remains that time still constitutes an incidental factor in much of sociological discourse. Collecting and collating such studies is therefore not a simple undertaking and Šubrt's attempt should be considered as a continuation of the work done previously by those such as Adam and Hassard.

Jiří Šubrt is a founding member of Charles University's Historical Sociology department and author of numerous publications related to contemporary sociological theory. His most recent publications have dealt with various aspects of social process theory as well as the issue of the sociological dichotomy of individualism and holism. Both of these themes are present throughout this latest work, *The Sociology of Time*, and inform his underlying argument which calls for a consideration of the 'long-term' processes within the sociology of time.

Time has been an ongoing concern within Šubrt's work, both in English and the Czech language, with this current volume representing a culmination of his ongoing consideration of the topic. The concept of time was first addressed by Šubrt in his 1993 article "K vývoji názorů na problém času v sociologii" (On the development of views on the problem of time) and in 2001 in English with "The Problem of Time from the Perspective of the Social Sciences". These early works provided initial introductions to Šubrt's argument for the 'irreversibility' of time which is further developed throughout this book with reference to the concept of the 'arrow of time'.

Šubrt has also devoted two previous books to the subject of time in the Czech language: *Problém času v sociologické teorii* (*The problem of time in sociological theory*) [2000] and *Čas a společnost: K otázce temporalizované sociologie* (*Time and society: On the question of temporalized sociology*) [2003]. Both works address key aspects of temporalized sociology which are once again explored within this latest publication, further underscoring the breadth of knowledge Šubrt has acquired on the subject of time.

In his 2017 book *The Perspective of Historical Sociology: The Individual as Homo-Sociologicus Through Society and History*, Šubrt discusses the notion that our concepts of time and progress have changed throughout history. This change, he argued, resulted from

societal factors such as the rigid time schedules of the monastery and the rationalising influence of modernisation. In his recent publication *Explaining social Processes* (2020), Šubrť provided an overview of sociology’s theoretical approaches to the concepts of social time and astronomical time, concluding that temporalized sociology underpins the entire field of historical sociology. These previous works represent the intellectual foundation from which the major themes of *The Sociology of Time* developed and provide for interesting additional insights into the subject.

The problem of time in sociology is introduced as an ongoing subject of speculation within *The Sociology of Time*, about which many theorists, such as Émile Durkheim, George Mead and Pitirim Sorokin, have contemplated but which did not fully penetrate mainstream sociological research until the 1970’s. Šubrť presents the reader with these varying attempts to categorize time alongside philosophical perspectives in order to unpack the problem of time in the context of social theory. A useful distinction to make here would have been to draw a line between the issue of time in sociology and a true sociology of time – a concept which is explored throughout the text although not overtly acknowledged until the final chapters. This would have enabled a contextualisation of the contribution of the classical theorists such as Marx and Weber who undoubtedly inspired more overt discussions of time based upon their analyses of the structuration of time. What is also not made clear from the introduction is exactly how the author intends to proceed with their own perspective on the subject and in what ways the ‘labyrinth of questions and answers’ [Šubrť 2021: 1] will be addressed within this work. This is unfortunate given the scale of the subject matter which is otherwise explained in a clear and logical manner throughout the text.

The first major element to be considered is Nobert Elias’ concept of the ‘Civilising Process’ which describes the long-term social processes leading to the creation of modern society. For Elias, time was not an a priori assumption but acted as a social phenomenon which came to be perceived only when social pressures made it a necessary part of psychogenesis. Time cannot be considered in isolation but as a reference framework with which people may create landmarks within continuous change. In his 1984 text *An Essay on Time (Über die Zeit)*, Norbert Elias addressed the fundamental question ‘what is time?’ from the perspective of a theoretical problem that was neither the creation of the human mind nor a quality of the physical world [Elias 1984]. Šubrť highlights gaps in Elias’ analysis, such as his lack of consideration of objectivity of the ‘arrow of time’ and the finality of human existence (death). This critique is fair however it underrepresents the more subtle point Elias made which was to consider time as a tool of orientation on a continuum of change. In his discussion of the development of time, Šubrť maps a progression (in terms of people’s perception of time) from the Middle Ages to the present, assigning the cause to various social factors such as the development of the church. Such an analysis of early conceptions of time is a direct nod to Elias’ *An Essay on Time* in which he traced the changing attitudes to time from the ancient to the modern in order to illustrate certain processes of social development. An interesting interlude on the history of the measurement of time is then presented which serves to underline the importance of social processes in the construction of such systems. This leads neatly on to the next discussion of the temporality of modernity which examines the major 20th century theorists such as Max Weber and his concept of time within the protestant work ethic. Šubrť describes times as a ‘tyrant’ to

which individuals must submit' [Šubrt 2021: 28] – a concept which is explored further by the subchapter focusing on Karl Marx and the notion of the 'alienation' of time. This 'alienation' with regards to time is explained as the exploitation of the individual as represented by the time lost in work, both paid and (and in some more modern examples) unpaid.

The opening of chapter three invites us to consider time as a social category through an exploration of Durkheim's approach to logic, which in turn is based upon Aristotle's ten fundamental categories of concepts as well as Kantian empiricism. Durkheim's sociology acts as the theoretical backbone to this chapter with deviations made to consider further developments of the concepts he identified. A detailed discussion of Kant and Durkheim's consideration of consciousness is given and the correlation between that discussion and time as a category is later explained: time is a fact of supra-individual nature [Šubrt 2021: 46]. Durkheim's concept of time expresses the temporal dimension of religion and as such is characterised by rhythms and discontinuation. This effectively lays the theoretical groundwork for the discussion of social time which occurs later in the paper. We instead next turn to interesting analysis of the history and development of 'calendars' from the pre-historic to the modern (which is more descriptive than analytical but worth reading nonetheless). There is also a digression into the scientific divergence of astrology and astronomy through Elias' concept of involvement and detachment which provides an explanation of the significance of time to the individual. The development of historical sociology as a discipline is presented as a natural progression from sociological perspectives, such as those of Comte, Spencer, Marx etc., on the dimension of history. Memory too is considered within the concept of time as a social category through a discussion of Halbwachs and the constant reconstruction of reference frameworks within collective memory. Constructions of history which are also considered by Šubrt include: Eliade's view that the linear flow of time was not historically universal, Braudel's *courte durée* and *long durée* and Wallerstein's concept of time and the social process. This latter point relates to the theme of time through the notion of long-term cycles of societal expansion and contraction that were not linear, as Marx would have it, but chaotic and currently in crisis. Wallerstein argued that space-time should be central to the methodology of the social sciences and should be achieved through the use of five key categories of space-time: episodic-geopolitical, cyclical-ideological, structural, eternal and transformative. What would have further benefitted this section would have been a discussion of social time in the sense of the quotidian. Adam made a similar connection in *Time and Social Theory*, in which she identified everyday life as one of the more obvious instances of sociologists self-consciously examining time as category of study [Adam 1991: 30]. Henri Lefebvre is one such example of those theorists who examined the concept of everyday life in terms of the contradiction between linear and cyclical time¹. Lefebvre argues that cyclical time slows down the dynamic of historical change and acts as a retardation device which leads to the uneven development of modernity. Although time and modernity could constitute an entirely separate book, it is unfortunate that an analysis of time in relation to modernity is not overtly explored here given the discussions of Marx and Elias previously mentioned.

The constructed nature of time is a consistent theme throughout this book and in chapter four Šubrt considers the impact of human action on the construction of time. The

¹ See Lefebvre, Henri [1991]. *Critique of Everyday Life*. London: Verso.

author highlights that this approach to human action and time was not greatly examined within Durkheim's school of thought and was best addressed later by those of the school of interpretive sociology. The two approaches which are most suitable for interpretation are that of George Mead's symbolic interactionism and Alfred Schutz's phenomenological sociology. An assessment of Mead's indirect approach to time is then explored through the concept of the present as the locus of reality and therefore reality as a whole is formed from emergent events. The construction of time, according to Mead was thus a specific arrangement of human action defined in correlation with the present. Schutz on the other hand distinguishes between ongoing and realized action which in turn represents the differences in the direction of time. Ongoing actions are always present activities directed towards the future; on the contrary realised action was always rationalised from the present to the past. In a continuation of Schutz's position on the temporal nature of the lifeworld, Thomas Luckmann stated that our everyday lives were determined by the synchronisation of inter-subjective action through socially objectified time categories. These time categories were markers which transcended an individual's existence and were referred to by Luckmann as 'biographical schemes'; history, social units, nation are all elements of the socio-historical *a priori*.

The role of time as a key to analysing social reality is the focus of chapter five. Through an exploration of those theorists directly concerned with considering time as part of the process of learning about social reality, Šubrt reinforces the need for interdisciplinary considerations. Sorokin and Merton's work on social time first introduced it as both a theoretical concept and methodological tool which acknowledged the potentially uneven, irregular and qualitative nature of social time (in a similar fashion to that found in philosophy, psychology and economics). Sorokin and Merton questioned the assumption that the division of time was determined by astrological phenomena but instead largely correlated to social demands and thus was culturally specific. Sorokin's three levels of socio-cultural time (eternity, age and time) allowed for all classes of socio-cultural phenomena to be accounted for and extended beyond the limitations of only 'tempus'. Further explanation of more recent developments in the concept of cultural time would have been of benefit here, especially in regard to role of time as an 'artificial imposition on people's temporal experience' as discussed by Eviatar Zerubavel [2020: 6]. Zerubavel's exploration of time from the socio-cultural perspective would have provided a crucial link between Sorokin and more contemporary discussions on time within the social realm. The role of human agency in influencing the sociotemporal orders in which they exist is an implied element of the discussion of time as a social construction. This assumption could have been expounded upon here in relation to Šubrt's theme of social reality and would provide additional nuance to the concept of the division of time.

Instead, Šubrt next turns towards some initial examples of time analysis within the social sciences in order to evaluate the variability of the perception of time. Temporality itself had been studied within the work of early field anthropologists, who, inspired by Durkheim, considered the determination of time as essential in every culture. Bronislaw Malinowski's study of the Trobriand islanders and Edward Evans-Pritchard's work among the Nuer provide culturally specific examples of temporal variation whilst Edmund Leach's studies of 'alternating time' asserted that experienced time was not cyclical. Claude Lévi-Strauss' opposing structuralist position posits that 'hot' societies attempt to internalise

their histories whereas ‘cold’ societies externalise their historicity in an attempt to remain static and ‘non-temporal’. In Šubrť’s explanation of functionalism, the work of Wilbert Moore associated the time structures of society with rhythm and repetition. Moore claimed units of time normally held a natural base and combined psychological and astronomical aspects. Temporal segregation was to Moore the key issue within social systems especially within the context of industrialised society and its need for synchronisation. Having presented opposing perspectives on the existence of time, the chapter then turns to those who argue for a ‘pluritemporalism’ of social time. Georges Gurvitch’s concept of multiple social times stems from his consideration of the various ‘depths’ of social reality which have both horizontal and vertical dimensions and encompass their own specific times at each level. This led Gurvitch to create an eight-part typology of social time which moved the focus of the research field further towards the components of social reality. A final note is given to the Czech sociologist Jaroslav Krejčí’s work on the paradigms of the human condition which he argued were based on six reactions to human finiteness. A society’s reaction to the concept of death defines how their society and its tradition’s function and provides them with answers to the basic existential questions of humanity.

In chapter six it is the theoretical issue of time during the 20th Century which is examined, namely through the works of Niklas Luhmann and Anthony Giddens. Both theorists addressed the roles of time and space as being where all social action was situated and therefore integral to structuration theory. As a founder of systems theory Luhmann, introduced time into his analysis of systems in order to explain the presence of changes to the social system. Through an analysis of the scarcity of time, Luhmann demonstrated a distortion in the order of values leading to the primacy of time in the formalization of work. An interesting and divergent discussion of Luhmann’s systems theory and in particular the concepts of contingency and communication then follows. Šubrť here focuses more on explanations of structure and evolution than their relationship to the empirical concept of ‘time’. This reflects Šubrť’s own research interests which have frequently dealt with the concept of long-term societal development², and he therefore situates the theoretical perspective of time as integral to various social constructions. Anthony Giddens, on the other hand, provides a more concrete relationship between time and structures through the relationship between time and the actions of individuals; all interaction patterns are situated in time. The internal differentiation of temporal and spatial zones in a society are contained, according to Giddens, within their structures. Giddens’ three concepts of time are described as: *durée* (reversible time), *Dasein* (irreversible time) and *longue durée* (reversible time). This incorporation of time within societal structures is a common concept to both Luhmann and Giddens’ theoretical constructions and the chapter also highlights the influence of Foucault, Braudel and Marx in their construction of their long-term theoretical perspective.

Our next chapter constitutes a significant subject shift into the realm of the natural sciences. Šubrť here attempts the ambitious task of explaining time from the perspective of theoretical physics in order to emphasise the ‘interdisciplinary’ nature of the problem.

² See Šubrť, Jiří – Kumsa, Alemayehu – Ruzzeddu, Massimiliano [2020]. *Explaining Social Processes* and Šubrť, Jiří [2017]. *The Perspective of Historical Sociology: The Individual as Homo-Sociologicus through Society and History*.

Such a comparison had previously been made in Barbara Adam's 1991 work *Time and Social Theory* in which Adam demonstrated that much of modern sociological theory is firmly entrenched within the Newtonian sciences. Where Šubrt and Adam differ, however, is in the criticism Adam levels towards the inadequacy of utilising classical frameworks to conceptualise contemporary time. Šubrt does make this critique later in the book in reference to the sociology of time as a whole, however it is not apparent within this discussion. Šubrt thus presents us with the history of the two most famous theories regarding time in the natural sciences: the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics. Both theories are indifferent to the direction of time and as such indicate a disconnect between the theoretical description of time and time as experienced by the individual. Šubrt therefore turns to Eddington's concept of the 'arrow of time' to distinguish the past from the future through three categories: thermodynamic, psychological and cosmological. In explaining these processes in detail, Šubrt is laying the groundwork for his main argument: that theories of time originating in the natural sciences can, and have, influenced sociological concepts. This is illustrated by Šubrt in a metaphorical sense rather than a literal one given that one of his examples constitutes a connection between entropy and organised social behaviour. Nonetheless these non-literal comparisons provide an intriguing connection between the two disciplines which is further explored throughout the remaining chapters.

One of the central elements of this book has been the documentation of the historiography of the sociology of time as well as the various theoretical interpretations of temporalized sociology. In chapter eight we see a collation of these ideas in order to emphasise their centrality to sociology. Arguably this chapter would be better suited to the beginning of the book given that it provides us with a concise overview of the main themes of the sociology of time: leisure time, time perspectives, time structures, the collective consciousness of time and modernization. Temporalized sociology is, however, the most significant idea within this chapter as it reflects the overall preoccupation of Šubrt's wider research interests: historical sociology. By examining approaches to temporalized sociology as described by Patrick Baert, Šubrt presents the 'open' approach as providing a different direction in research to that of the current sociology of time. Here Baert draws on and extends Giddens' concepts of *durée* to emphasise the existence of multiple temporal spans of equal importance, which differ and yet are interconnected. The long-term development of society is therefore central to the concept of temporalized society and is in keeping with Šubrt's own work on social processes³.

In chapter nine, Šubrt brings together what he perceives to be the most challenging problems and questions surrounding time in sociology and suggests a broader approach to their solutions. The first major theme is the Durkheimian concept of time as a social construction or 'a problem that we have created ourselves' [Šubrt 2021: 227] which is then revealed to lack the essential element of the 'arrow of time'. The question of the reversibility of time is an underlying theme throughout the chapter and is described through Husserl, Heidegger and Giddens' work on the subject. Giddens also addressed the concept

³ See Šubrt, Jiří – Kumsa, Alemayehu – Ruzzeddu, Massimiliano [2020]. *Explaining Social Processes*; Šubrt, Jiří [2017]. *The Perspective of Historical Sociology: The Individual as Homo-Sociologicus through Society and History* and Šubrt, Jiří [2019]. *Individualism, Holism and the Central Dilemma of Sociological Theory*.

of modernity which Šubrt presents as another aspect of the question of a temporalized society and the 'transformation' of time and space. Šubrt concludes that the concept of the 'open future' forms the underlying assumption of historical sociology and an unspoken assumption in wider sociology as well. The solution presented for all stated problems is that sociology should adopt a more conscious understanding of the nature and function of time in order to exceed the limitations of current theoretical research.

Within the final chapter, Šubrt brings together all the theoretical principles previously discussed in order to suggest his own theoretical 'route' through this complex topic. Here the core principles of time as having rhythm, duration, structuration, repetition and direction are summarised and solidified into a theoretical chronology. The final note is once more devoted to the link between the natural sciences and sociology, reiterating Šubrt's call for an interdisciplinary approach to this ubiquitous concept.

Šubrt's book tackles an ambitious and theoretically challenging concept in a unique and interesting way that readers will find both engaging and enlightening. *The Sociology of Time* provides a comprehensive overview of the many sociological approaches to the question of time and as such makes for an excellent source for the various theoretical advances and divergences. We are provided with a thorough explanation of the difference between those who overtly work within a temporalized sociology and those who have attempted to formulate a sociology of time. Given the breadth of material, the reader comes away with a sense that whilst most sociologists have addressed the topic of time at some point in their studies, the question has certainly not been settled and requires active consideration. This final point is certainly a reiteration of the calls made by the sociologists of the nineties, such as Adam, Bergmann and Hussard, and implies that the lack of a widespread consideration of time within sociological theory remains an unresolved issue.

The work contains many fascinating insights into the various aspects of time however the connections between these different elements are sometimes not clearly signposted even within the chapters. The overall cohesiveness of adopting a thematic rather than chronological approach is somewhat undermined by lack of obvious connections between the themes which makes for a slightly stilted read. Having said that, the writing itself is clear and concise which helps guide the reader through the more complex theoretical considerations. Greater consideration of more recent studies of time in sociology would also have provided the reader with a clearer sense of the direction this field is likely to take in the future and made for a more satisfactory conclusion.

The Sociology of Time demonstrates a deep understanding of the history of sociological thought surrounding the concept of time and provides an excellent reference point for those wishing to explore such theories within their own works. Šubrt has effectively built upon the foundations laid by Adam in her work *Time and Social Theory* to expand the categories of the sociology of time to include the works of many sociologists who might otherwise not be considered theorists of this topic. Many of the chapters work well in isolation, as mini-historiographies of selected concepts, and contain detailed explanations of complex theoretical approaches. Although there is, at times, discontinuity the work is overall a thorough exploration of the topic and should be referred to in future examinations of the concept of time in sociology as an important source for sociological research.

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