

Time: The Invisible Frame of Experience

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Abstract

*This article is a conversational engagement with Michel Alhadeff-Jones' recently published book, *Time and the Rhythms of Emancipatory Education*. The book makes the argument that we live in a milieu of multiple, competing, even alienating, temporalities. This is contrasted with a hegemonic concept of time as objective and measureable—one identical moment following another into eternity. The prevailing dominance of this latter concept elides awareness of multiple temporalities and the impact they have on human experience. Given this state of affairs, we remain ignorant of the temporal causes that contribute to incoherent and fragmented selves. This book aims to alleviate that ignorance, while furthering the goals of emancipatory education by teaching us temporal literacy. In this respect, it furthers the work of Mezirow (2000), who encouraged us to critically examine the assumptions that control us. Understanding that challenge, and employing the methods of psychotherapy, I outline a process whereby individuals can first understand and possibly author an emancipatory relationship with time. I expand on the author's thesis by bringing in the notion of liminality to articulate the existential challenges encountered in such a project.*

Keywords: critical distance, liminality, temporality, transgression

Overview

Michel Alhadeff-Jones (2016) has written and published a book with the intriguing title, *Time and the Rhythms of Emancipatory Education*. The task he sets for himself is to theorize the medium through which we live. That medium is time. In particular he wishes to examine how various temporalities condition what can occur in education. For example, conflicting, but unthematized, temporalities work against the emancipatory goals of education. Conceptualizing those temporalities increases the potential for, but doesn't guarantee, emancipatory outcomes. He situates his contribution within current and past European thought on temporality and rhythm—the work of Bachelard (1931, 1936), and Lefebvre (2002, 2004), and, more currently, the work of Sauvanet (2000) and Michon (2005, 2007). The book offers a comprehensive framework for thinking about time and, consequentially, provides some transformative potential (Alhadeff-Jones, 2012; Mezirow, 2000). It is divided into three parts. The first part employs an epistemological lens; the second, offers a genealogy of conceptions of time and rhythm; the third, and final part, focuses on the implications for educational practices.

Rather than presenting a traditional book review, I will respond to his text with an essay that articulates and responds to those ideas that I found to be heuristic. For example, by foregrounding temporality rather than spatiality, he makes *event*, rather than the object, his unit of study. All else follows from this assumptive ground. For him, life is a process of becoming that can be characterized by a rhythm or pattern of continuities and discontinuities. In fact, these continuities and discontinuities are what constitutes rhythm. Next, he argues that time is not a homogenous medium. Rather, there are multiple temporalities which can be compared to tides, currents, wave action, rip tides, etc. These various rhythms can interact in competing and/or synergistic fashions. His claim is that we are disturbed, even alienated, by the temporal turbulence buffeting our lives. We are beset by individual, social and institutional temporalities that often make competing demands on us such that to respect one temporality; for example, institutional time, means to ignore or deny our individual or idiosyncratic learning rhythms.

Hetero- Versus Homogeneous Temporalities

What makes navigating these contending demands even more difficult is our inability to recognize and conceptualize these heterogeneities. Alhadeff-Jones (2016) makes the argument that when we *assume* homogenous time, we have little chance of extricating ourselves from the conflicting imperatives that these multiple temporalities impose. To simplify, homogenous time is clock time: discrete, identical moments, one following the other in an endless procession—a conception of time that is impersonal and “objective” and elides nuanced, experiential conceptions of duration. Alhadeff-Jones is endeavouring to overcome the resultant conceptual blindness—an aporia—by articulating the temporal force field in which we find ourselves. In so doing, he performs what he eventually prescribes. That is, the first step in liberating ourselves from hegemonic time is to separate from it—to take some critical distance from it in order to “know” it. It is a movement from *being* to *knowing*. When we transgress the parameters of hegemonic time, we can consciously experience, perhaps for the first time, a different temporality. For example, if a person raised in a family where mealtime is “refuel as fast as you can,” meets a partner whose family considered mealtimes an occasion for leisurely conversation, then each has an opportunity to step outside a hegemonic time. And that fresh experience can become the basis for a different *concept* of time. Once in possession of the concept of heterogeneous time, we can begin to understand and exercise the choices implied by that term. For example, we might be able to move from experiencing time as tyrannical and scarce to a sense of time as abundant. Or we might be able to understand the existential truth behind phrases such as “killing time” and “making time.”

Knowing Time Rather Than Being Time

The process I am describing is parallel to the statement that a fish couldn't possibly know water because it is their uniform environment. That is, in order to “know” water they would have to contrast their experience of it with another medium—air, for example. In a similar manner, it is difficult for us to conceive of the

rhythms of our culture if we've never lived in another. It is the contrast that allows us to make what formerly implicit, explicit. Through being made explicit, our experience of time is given conceptual form.

This process of taking one's psychic distance from the immediacy of experience in order to know it conceptually is similar to the processes that occur within psychotherapy—my profession. Whereas, my professional focus is primarily on the self, Alhadeff-Jones highlights the competing temporalities and rhythms encountered in social circumstances in general and education in particular. Of course, self and circumstances exist in a dialectical relationship. Whereas, I explore the faulty beliefs that distort one's perceptions of one's circumstances, he explores how invisible temporalities produce *incoherent* selves. Alhadeff-Jones' argument is particularly relevant when we consider that time is utilized as a framework for bringing order to our lives. Time structures our biography into before, during and after phases; a beginning, a middle and an end—producing a coherent narrative. According to Mezirow (2000), “[a] defining condition of being human is our *urgent need to understand and order the meaning of our experience*, to integrate it with what we know, in order to avoid the threat of chaos” (emphasis added, p.3). When we are not aware of the conflicting demands of multiple temporalities, that task of bringing order to our experience becomes even more challenging, if not impossible.

Through articulating these simultaneous, but competing temporalities, Alhadeff-Jones reveals the challenges of bringing order to our lives and thus contextualizes education's emancipatory project. This project might benefit from an examination of the processes that occur in successful psychotherapy. People often begin therapy because they are unable to actualize the kind of life they desire. Although they can describe their ideal life—the life they “should” have—they are unable to describe nor understand their “natural” or pre-reflective self. Because of this lacuna in their self-knowledge, they are often unaware that their actual self might be frustrating the strivings of their ideal self. For example, their natural self might prefer solitude, whereas their ideals compel them to be ambitious and gregarious. If they were to acknowledge and accept their spontaneous or natural preference they could consciously construct a life style in which their nature might flourish. Unfortunately, however, their *conscious* strivings are instead directed toward a cultural ideal—a photoshopped depiction of a celebrity's life, for example. The inarticulate, but “real” self is in conflict with their fully articulate, idealized self. They are working at cross purposes. The idealized self's goals are favoured because they've been given a clear and distinct form; whereas, the actual self's goals are tacit and require reflection in order to take on a conceptual form. Frustration, disappointment and anxiety often signal this *unrecognized* conflict. Perhaps an example drawn from an early developmental stage will make my point clearer. A child who has yet to learn that tiredness conditions their perceptions assumes that their reactions to obstacles are appropriate and reasonable. However, once they develop the concept that tiredness skews perception, they can consciously compensate for its distortions. Psychotherapy formalizes this natural learning process by making the client's pre-reflective self an object of inquiry. Contemplating their prereflective self, the client begins to know it. With that knowledge, they might begin to reduce the gap between their actual and idealized selves.

Alhadeff-Jones comes at this issue from the opposite end of the self/circumstance interactional pattern. He is conceptualizing the temporal “force field” in which we find ourselves. When we don’t know that we are being riven by competing temporalities we might attribute our difficulties to some kind of personal failing. Alhadeff-Jones’ book helps us to avoid that error of attribution by explicating the source of our distress. His work is particularly significant for us today as it seems that time is accelerating as well as multiplying. Our contemporary ethos seems to expect the same amount of productivity within a shorter time. Furthermore, because consultancy and self-employment are becoming more prevalent in the West, many individuals move through multiple contexts each with their own time signature.

Transgression: A Possible Path to Emancipation

As stated earlier, Alhadeff-Jones helps us to first understand, and possibly emancipate ourselves from the resultant confusion. Let me offer a concrete example of such a process. Students could come to know institutional time by “skipping classes”—a transgressive move that might “refresh” their awareness of their own idiosyncratic rhythms and temporalities. Their teachers, however, will likely be offended by what they interpret as a normative trespass. Perhaps that affect, if critically reflected upon, could be a signal that teachers have also been confined within a hegemonic conception of institutional time. That could open the possibility for designing a temporal environment that had the effect of reconciling institutional, instructional, and idiosyncratic rhythms. At the very least, they might develop a compassionate understanding of the tensions involved.

My example of skipping classes is illustrative of the transgressive move that Alhadeff-Jones considers necessary for emancipation. Although he is aware of the troubling connotations of “transgression,” he uses the term intentionally. Furthermore, he doesn’t mute its radical implications. Rather he deepens our understanding by returning us to its denotative meaning. “The Latin etymology of the term opens up . . . a richer space of meaning; *trans-gredior* literally signifies ‘walking’ or ‘moving through,’ ‘beyond,’ ‘above’ or ‘on the other side.’” (Alhadeff-Jones, 2016, p.196). Transgression is necessary to break through the boundaries of hegemonic time. I find his etymological, “space of meaning” useful as it qualifies the connotation of the term—which has come to imply a normative trespass—while legitimatizing its necessity.

Emancipation, therefore, is dependent upon the initial transgressive act. However, if I understand Alhadeff-Jones correctly, this operation must be repeated a number of times in order for this self-authored temporality to replace the hegemonic, alienating one. By self-authored, I am not suggesting (and neither is Alhadeff-Jones) that the individual has total control over the temporalities through which he or she lives. Some can be authored, while some cannot. However, with the knowledge and acceptance of rhythms outside of one’s control, one can attribute the resultant stress to one’s circumstances rather than to the self. This is an empowering move because it calls attention to the troubling circumstance rather than to self-doubt. This is important because a potent self is required for emancipation—especially for the first transgression. The first is the most difficult as the individual has no concept of an

alternate temporality. One is plunging into the unknown because this particular present can no longer be lived. However, having made this breakthrough once, and discovering that alternate temporalities do exist, subsequent “transgressions” could be embarked upon with more confidence.

Alhadeff-Jones gives a comprehensive catalogue of the various temporal rhythms through which we live. His argument is particularly relevant when we consider that we use time to bring order to our lives. Time structures our biography into before, during and after moments; a beginning, a middle and an end. According to Mezirow, “[a] defining condition of being human is our urgent need to understand and order the meaning of our experience, to integrate it with what we know, in order to avoid the threat of chaos” (2000).

The Challenge of Liminal Time

Here, I wish to challenge his account as requiring a more nuanced description of the transition from hegemonic to emancipated temporalities. Alhadeff-Jones account could be enriched by employing the anthropological concept of liminality. That concept highlights the loss of certainty entailed when one “overthrows” or relinquishes the previously assumed framework in favour of authoring one’s own. After all, the previous temporality structured one’s life in predictable ways that allowed a fit with other social actors. With the overthrow of previous certainties, however, one finds oneself in an unstructured space, a kind of limitless space, in which, nevertheless, one must respond to the relentless challenges of daily life. The inadequacies and incompatibilities of one’s previous temporal map have been revealed but the demands of living continue. One risks a new way of being with no guarantees of success. Because the stakes are so high, the existential engagement is total. One commits to one’s decisions and thereby is informed, or “stamped” by those decisions. A new temporality is authored. One emerges “on the other side” as some new form. The literature on liminality does justice to the existential demands of transgression and thereby highlights the courage required to see the process through.

Nevertheless, Alhadeff-Jones has performed a service in mapping the temporal force field in which we find ourselves. The journey from alienation to emancipation will be less daunting because of the signposts that he offers.

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