TIME

At the turn of the twentieth century, the way time was told shifted in a number of significant ways. The long process of adopting a global standard for time was becoming widely felt. Rather than setting clocks via local observations of the position of the sun, standard hours would divide the globe into segments, each with a set offset from the prime meridian in Greenwich, London. Far from being a straight-forward process, there was agitation about where time should be standardised from, with France retaining its prime meridian in Paris until 1911. Of more general concern, though, was the loss of local time. As artist David Horvitz has explored, political pamphlets in the late 19th century cried, "Let us keep our own noon", while historian Michael O'Malley tells us of authors railing against the majority being forced to take on a "corporate time" that only seemed to serve those few people who frequently took long railway journeys. The new standardised time was also seen as a lie and a fraud, since it ignored the reality of astronomical time. Indeed, some religious commentators saw it as immoral and sacrilegious, with its movement away from the solar time given by God.

More shifts were afoot though, with discussions of further changes to how societies would tell the time also taking in the possibility of daylight saving time (DST). While proposed measures reached the UK House of Commons in 1908, and were considered by a select committee, it was not until the German Empire adopted DST during World War I that it began to be implemented more widely. While energy savings were the key motivator in this case, the wider discussion of DST included much reflection on what constituted the good life and how clock time could be designed to support this. Greater use of daylight hours was, for example, thought to be able to increase physical and social activities, strengthening bonds between families and communities.

How societies should tell the time, including how they set their clocks, has not generally been seen as a philosophical problem. Indeed, Martin Heidegger wrote that "neither Aristotle nor subsequent interpreters of time posed this question. What does it mean to speak of using a clock?" His question turned to the problem of why we find "time" when we look at the movement on a dial. Yet the two examples I have described above offer a wider range of questions that we might properly call philosophical. There are ethical questions about

by Michelle Bastian
University of Edinburgh

51

whether to prioritise the timing needs of the minority over the majority; asking whether solar time is a "truer" time than standardised hours takes us into metaphysical questions about the nature of time; and DST places our time measurement practices at the heart of questions about what it means to live well, to build community with others, and to develop virtuous practices. Why, then, has there been so little philosophical interest in the role that time plays in societies, and specifically in how we might measure time in order to live well with others and as part of the wider world around us?

During this period, there was certainly interest in time, but most philosophical debates about its measurement where taken up with a third great shift, Albert Einstein's theories of relativity and the notion of time dilation. At the infamous 1922 discussion between French philosopher Henri Bergson and Einstein about the nature of time, Einstein claimed there was no such thing as a "philosopher's time". However, for continental philosophers in particular, there was a concerted effort to show that the time of the physicist (which they conflated with clock time) was, in fact, subordinate to the non-linear temporality of human experience. Indeed the ethicist Emmanuel Levinas later wrote in praise of Bergson for "having liberated philosophy from the prestigious model of scientific time" partly through his "destruction of the primacy of clock time". Thus, in Bergson's own work but also in the work of the father of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, there is a strong rejection of clock time as not being of concern to a philosophy of time.

But what if we are interested in developing a philosophical take on clock time since, as I've suggested, the time of clocks is not only the time of science, but the time of society as well? The time they tell shapes how we live together with others, and expresses social values and concerns. At first it might seem that those philosophers we often turn to for an understanding of the time of our lives will be of little help. Bergson's work, for example, is a determinedly critical approach to clocks and the quantitative time they are thought to provide. As he argues in *Time and Free Will*, in turning from our inner experience to the time governing society, we are unwittingly replaced by a shadowy trespasser, taken over by an almost parasitic outer life, with the clock "profiting" from this influence. Heidegger, too, has spoken about the dangers of the "vulgar time" of

society which distracts us from the real nature of time. The impact that ideas like these had within modernist art and culture, and which continue into the present, has encouraged the sense that the most useful thing we might do with a clock is to make every effort to free ourselves of its constrictions.

We might, therefore, feel that we have to turn to fields such as sociology, anthropology, science and technology studies, or similar, all of which have provided significantly more resources for exploring the complexities of "social time", including time-keeping practices. Indeed, while Bergson, Heidegger, Husserl and others were turning away from a study of time in social life, other authors in what would become the social sciences gladly took up these questions. The philosopher turned sociologist Émile Durkheim, for example, challenged Kant's claim that concepts of time where given to us *a priori*, and instead suggested they were given to us through the particular society that we find ourselves part of. For Karl Marx, time, particularly labour time, was a critical aspect of social struggle, while for Max Weber a particular ethic of time, and conception of its proper use, was central to

© William Eckersley

the rise of capitalism. So much, then, is missed if we retain the philosophical division between objective and subjective time, overlooking all that philosophers might contribute to debates on social time.

***

The neglect of social time suggests that philosophers interested in these problems will inevitably need to become more interdisciplinary in order to understand and address the time of our lives. Even so, we might also take more complex questions back into key texts to retrieve some unusual insights, particularly around what time-keeping tools are, and importantly what they *might* be. For both Bergson and Heidegger, for example, clocks are explicitly defined in quite narrow and closed terms. They both emphasise that clocks are systems for providing the measurement of exact and repeatable intervals. At first, this might seem to allow little room for social concerns, but a closer reading shows that they are both also aware that we only rarely use clocks to count moments, and instead most often use them because they help us navigate our social worlds.

Bergson makes this point in Chapter Four of *Duration and Simultaneity* where he asks why it is that we build clocks and buy them. It is not in order to answer questions that someone studying relativity would be concerned with, i.e. whether two clocks remain simultaneous with each other or not. Instead we want to find out the relationship between a moment of our lives and what it says on the dial of the clock. That is, we look at clocks because they are *useful* to us, because they connect our lives to events we want to keep track of and to worlds that we want to be part of. So, as much as he might be critical of the way that clocks divide and homogenise our temporal experiences, he also understands, as he writes in *Time and Free Will*, that in using them we are "much better adapted to the requirements of social life". If we are willing to make time for this claim, rather than moving directly to the negative arguments that Bergson is better known for, then we can start to ask why this form of time-keeping has been taken up by society, what underpins these requirements, and perhaps even how social life might be imagined otherwise.

For Heidegger too, alongside his dismissal of the clock, are discussions of it as a handy tool that is shaped by interests, concerns, future plans, and purposeful actions. Far from being the objective time-keeper that it has often been glossed as, Heidegger is explicit in claiming that the clock arises from the need to address temporal problems we face in our daily lives. Like Bergson, he also suggests that we don't look at clocks just to count an unending series of nows. Instead, he writes in the *Basic Problems of Phenomenology* that when we look at the clock we are "directed toward what occupies us, what presses hard upon us, what it is time for, what we want to have time for". Unpacking this claim, we might ask by whom or what are we directed, what shapes our sense of the "time for", and how does this differ within and across cultures? Further, given that Heidegger ties clock reading to our wants, we might ask whether all wants are catered to equally? Thus, once again, a philosophical approach to time-keeping, which moves beyond the quick dismissal of clock time as objective scientific time, is perhaps possible, even from within these canonical texts.

SO MUCH IS MISSED IF WE RETAIN THE PHILOSOPHICAL DIVISION BETWEEN OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE TIME

What about the possibilities of changing our clocks? After all, Bergson, Heidegger, and Husserl also lived through the changes wrought by time standardisation and tweaks like daylight saving time. Heidegger, for example, would have been in his late 20s when it was introduced to Germany in 1916. These changes are not discussed explicitly in their work, but Bergson and Heidegger do recognise that there are in fact many options available for which rhythms or processes we use to track and calculate the time. In his reading of Aristotle in *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, Heidegger notes that for Aristotle the counting of time could be found "*en panti*, everywhere, *en ge*, on the earth, *en thalatte*, in the ocean, *en ourano*, in the heaven". This is because the "before" that is a central part of Aristotle's definition of time as what is counted, could apply to the moment just before any kind of change or movement (Book IV 223a 17f). We might think, for example, of tracking moments of high tide, or sidereal time where

time is measured via the relationship between the rotation of the Earth to certain fixed stars. In *Duration and Simultaneity*, Bergson also states explicitly that any motion "could become representative of time and be given the status of a clock". While Heidegger focuses on the sun in particular, and Bergson on the earth's rotation, their emphasis on clocks as useful for "what occupies us" could potentially lead us to see that different requirements will lead to different clocks. Indeed they already have done. Those working on the oceans, for example, need to track other rhythms alongside the day and the earth's rotation, including the daily cycles of tides, and intersections with yearly and lunar cycles that produce larger rhythms such as those of king tides and neap tides.

THE CLOCK AS UTENSIL COULD OFFER SOCIETY TIMES THAT ARE VERSATILE, SPECIALISED, UNIQUE, AND GENERALISED

Overwhelmingly, continental philosophy has given us the sense that the time that coordinates social life – the time of the clock – is a distracting and even dangerous influence that obscures the true nature of time. But, in doing so, philosophy has been cut off from the many ethical and political debates about how we keep time, and to which it might usefully contribute. There has also not been an engagement in more speculative philosophies about which other ways of telling time might be useful, for example in addressing issues like climate breakdown, the continued impacts of colonisation, extractive labour practices, and more. One example here is the Climate Clock, created by a team of artists, activists and scientists (but no philosophers!). The clock is prominently installed on buildings in Berlin, New York, Seoul, Rome, and Glasgow. Time here is in countdown mode, with the clock tracking the time left to limit global warming to 1.5°C according to IPCC predictions. At the time of writing, the clock read 7 yrs, 87 days, 15 hours and 1 minute.

One slightly strange prompt in this direction comes from Heidegger's *Zollikon Seminars* where he offers an alternative definition of the clock, calling it "a utensil"(!). What happens when we compare the clock to that humble utensil, the spoon? Why is it that spoons are easily understood as varying according to purpose, while the clock is not? We have the common tea, soup, dessert, and serving spoons, as well as more specialised spoons for eggs, parfaits, grapefruits, and melons. Our clocks, however, have come to be conceptualised in philosophy as that "objective" tool that scientists use. The clock as utensil, by contrast, could offer society times that are versatile, specialised, unique, and generalised. If we can extract Heidegger and Bergson's insights about the centrality of "what is significant to us" to time keeping, and refuse the narrowing down of clocks to tools for measuring exact intervals, then perhaps we are actually offered some very open ways of imagining what the time of our lives is, or could be.

Michelle Bastian is a Senior Lecturer in Environmental Humanities at the Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh, and an Associate Professor II at the University of Oslo in the Oslo School of Environmental Humanities. She works on the role of time in human and more-than-human communities, and is an Editor-in-Chief of the journal Time and Society. *In 2021-2022 she is a mid-career fellow with the Independent Social Research Foundation exploring philosophical approaches to time in phenology, the scientific study of cyclical timing in plants and animals.* michellebastian.net