Sustaining time

exploring the emergent times of alternative economies

Final Project Report

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An AHRC Care for the Future Exploratory Project

Executive Summary

The *Sustaining Time* project demonstrated the potential for arts and humanities research to make a distinctive contribution to issues surrounding the current economic crisis. Turning attention to the ways culture, value and belief become apparent in our experiences and understandings of time, this project's core question was: What would be the time of a sustainable economy? Working with a range of national partners, the academic team visited 10 different organisations, interviewed experts in a further 7 organisations and visited 4 archive collections. The aim was to identify whether present or past attempts to develop alternative economic models could be understood as challenging dominant models of time. Rather than identifying a single 'sustainable time,' the project revealed the way such attempts involve complex negotiations between different kinds of time that might not always appear explicitly. In all cases, however, there were clear attempts to transform dominant understandings of time, particularly around the time of instant gratification, the time of community and struggles around concepts of productivity. The project also highlighted a range of methodological issues when researching time, including the lack of shared vocabulary, exemplified by its absence from archive catalogues, and the way assumptions about time operate largely implicitly. An event focused on temporal methods, held partway through the project, helped to address some of these concerns. Currently the team is engaged in writing up their analyses of the research, with publications planned in a range of venues. Further events have been planned and longer term research projects are being developed.

Researchers and Project Partners

Researchers:
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Dr Alex Buchanan (University of Liverpool)
Dr Jen Southern (Lancaster University)

Project Partners and Advisors:
Anna Coote, new economics foundation
Fiona Ward, REconomy Project (part of the Transition Network)
John Goodman and Michelle Parkin-Kelly, Cooperatives UK
Chris Warburton-Brown, Permaculture Association
Katherine Gibson, Community Economies Research Initiative, University of Western Sydney
Molly Scott-Cato, Professor of Strategy and Sustainability at Roehampton University
Peter North, School of Environmental Studies, University of Liverpool
Lynne M Pettinger, Department of Sociology, University of Essex
Deborah Bird Rose, Centre for Social Inclusion, Macquarie University
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Background

The *Sustaining Time* Exploratory Project (AH/K005553/1) ran from February to October 2013.[1] Its central aim was to ask whether attempts to shift towards more sustainable economic forms might be associated with shifts in experiences and expectations around time. Previous broad-based economic transformations have often been characterised as creating temporal shifts. Industrial capitalism intensified the use of clock-time in distinct ways, while late capitalism is often characterised by speed and time compression. With current widespread interest in developing alternatives to the capitalist model, we wanted to explore whether practitioners were challenging norms around time that had been developed within the capitalist model, either explicitly or implicitly.

Our initial review of the topic suggested that responses to current contexts are indeed bringing with them shifts in expectations about time and the future. This can be seen in moves away from narratives of unending growth in favour of steady-state futures, or even de-growth. Further, within movements such as Slow Food, Permaculture or Transition Towns, one can see deliberate attempts to reconfigure daily life around slower tempos and the use of non-linear models of social change. A strong focus on looking to the past for inspiration, rather than the future, also suggested an interesting take on the core issue within *Care for the Future* of 'thinking forward through the past.' Thus in seeking to identify alternative approaches to time we did not assume they would only be discernible in the present, but also explored whether there might have already been potential alternatives in the past.

In order to explore these issues further we developed three key strands of activity. The first was to develop a range of case studies in the UK and Australia, using participant observation, interviews and document analysis. The second involved visits to archives based in the UK to assess their suitability for further research on the topic of time. Third, we were also keen to reflect on the kinds of methods that might be available for studying experiences and perceptions of time. More generally, we recognised that time can be seen as both a common, everyday concern, and an obscure academic problem. As a result, we were interested whether an explicit focus on time might be seen to be helpful to practitioners in their efforts to produce social change, or whether it was primarily viewed as a side issue that took energy away from more important efforts. Thus, we tried to keep the project fairly open and experimental in order to see how the question of time might resonate with our participants.

This project took place in a context where the academy has been perceived as being slow to respond to the current crises of the neoliberal capitalist model. Debates around Aditya Chakrabortty's criticisms of political scientists for seemingly ignoring the financial crisis altogether are a good example. From the perspective of this project, what was particularly important was the way these criticisms fell squarely on the social sciences and there seemed to be very little interest in what the arts and humanities could contribute, or indeed whether they could make any contributions at all. This is the case even while many of the academic contributors to the influential *Uneconomics* debate on opendemocracy.net, for example, argued that there is an

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[1] NB: Our project was originally titled *Making Time* but this was changed during the project initiation phase to *Sustaining Time* to better reflect the scope of the project and also due to domain name availability.

urgent need to develop holistic approaches to the study of economic systems that take culture, value and belief into account. This project thus brought together a philosopher, an archivist and an artist to explore how their disciplinary backgrounds might be utilised to promote further research on alternative economies.

Achieving our Aims
In our original funding application we set out five key aims for the project. In what follows, we outline how we achieved each of these aims over the course of the project.

1. To assess whether current experiments with alternative economies could be understood as producing challenges to hegemonic forms of time.
In order to develop materials that could serve as a basis for this assessment and a foundation for further work, Bastian visited ten different enterprises and completed a further seven interviews with representatives of related organisations.

Approaches to alternative economies that were covered include:
- fostering cultures of repair and reuse
- Co-operatives
- Permaculture
- Transition Town Enterprises
- developing more sustainable approaches to IT and electronics
- an ecovillage
- supporting local food
- sustainable events management
- collaborative consumption
- voluntary simplicity
- co-working spaces

1 Bastian at local-food based Community Lunch

Given the short duration of this project and the amount of data that has been produced (e.g. over 20 hours of interview material, field notes etc) there is still much to be analysed and explored. But our initial explorations of this topic do suggest that issues to do with time represent a core struggle for almost all participants, even if these were sometimes implicit. While we did not find one 'sustainable time' in particular that could be said to be common across our case studies, a range of critical approaches to time operating at varying levels were apparent. A good example, found in nearly all the projects, was the effort to challenge cultures of instant gratification in favour of slower processes and intermittent availability. Importantly, this and other critical approaches to time remained entangled with multiple kinds of other times that needed to be negotiated in a variety of ways. In particular, the pressure to be continuously productive, and the associated ideals of the 'hard worker', remained significant forces in people's

lives, even if this productivity was shifted towards building more sustainable futures, rather than more traditional capitalist goals of material gain.

2. To assess the potential of archive resources to reveal insights into the temporalities of past experiments with alternative economies and challenges to hegemonic economic structures.
Buchanan visited four UK based archives that were identified as being particularly promising for the aims of this research project, based on the range and extent of material, the provenance of the materials held (a focus on alternative economic businesses and organisations) and the accessibility of this material. The archives selected were:

- The Co-operative Archives
- The Working Class Movement Library
- The Modern Records Centre at Warwick University
- The Guildhall Library

After assessing each of these collections, Buchanan found that of the archive material available there was little that was specifically devoted to temporal issues. However, she did find that time was implicit within almost every document examined. The most useful resources in terms of

2 The Working Class Movement Library by Andrew Nić-Pawełek (CC BY-SA 2.0)

providing data appeared to be organisations and units with a specifically research mission, which often included research on relevant subjects, such as working hours, time management, flexi-time etc. Situations of industrial conflict were often the most forthcoming about temporal issues - in particular conflicting temporalities. However these tend to be reactionary, focusing on preserving the status quo, and offer less insight into desired alternatives. Even so, given the range of insights offered around the emergent themes in the project (discussed further below and in our longer project report) we conclude that it is indeed the case that archival material can be a valuable resource for temporal research in this area.

3. To identify emergent cross-cutting themes, approaches, barriers and areas of contention
This aim was addressed in a variety of ways. Initially Bastian discussed the project with each member of the advisory board individually in order to ascertain which issues they would like the project to address. This led to a preliminary set of questions that helped to guide the rest of the project and which included:

- Are participating organisations approaching the relationships between time, money and value in new ways?
- Who has the time to try new economic models and how are they supported in doing this?
- Do specific frameworks around the co-operative movement or permaculture movement already have things to tell us about time?

- What kinds of time frames are alternative businesses using, specifically are they challenging short-termism in favour of longer senses of the past and future?
- How do people engaged in alternative economies understand the time of social change? Particularly given the unevenness of climate change and the need to shift from a growth based model to one which recognises environmental limits.

Alongside these questions, further issues that we explored in our research were: how people's work-time feels, whether they ever deliberately try to shift their customers or users senses of time, and how were issues around scheduling and co-ordination handled. In our preliminary analysis of our results there were also a further number of emergent themes that were particularly promising in terms of future research. The temporality of exchange, for example, arose as an issue across most of the case studies. Rather than aiming for smooth, instant transactions, there were many examples of businesses encouraging longer interactions in order to support storytelling, skill sharing and community building. Time also came up as an issue in people's changing relationships to their material possessions. For example, shared items become more valuable as they gained new stories and more complex histories. Building community was also very much a core interest for all

3 Repair Cafe Brussels (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

of the businesses involved, which led to criticisms of hegemonic capitalist time frames for not allowing the kind of time that is needed for communities to work well. Finally, an interesting methodological issue that arose was participants' frustration with the lack of terms, stories and frameworks available for talking about time and understanding its different aspects.[2]

4. To support the development of a common language around the issue of time and sustainable economies across disciplinary and institutional boundaries, as well as internationally.
As was just illustrated, 'time' can refer to a multitude of different issues while also remaining difficult to address directly. Thus, following on from strategies developed in the AHRC-funded *Temporal Belongings* project for supporting wider conversations around time,[3] this project included a range of events, the production of new resources and provision for wider public discussion of our results.

To get a sense of the reach of the project so far, our website (www.sustainingtime.org) went online in late February and to date has received 1025 visits, with 816 unique visitors from over 30 countries. The project was also cross-referenced on related websites, including the *Temporal*

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[2] Our longer project report (available from www.sustainingtime.org) explores each of these themes in relation to the archive material and the case studies in more detail.
[3] See www.temporalbelongings.org

Belongings site (408 views). Our project was highlighted as a 'project of the day' on the P2P Foundation's blog and on Permaculture Manchester. We were discussed on the REconomy project's website (part of the Transition Network) and on the Connected Communities Leadership Fellows blog.

Over the course of the project we held three events with just over 100 attendees altogether. This included a public event in Liverpool called *Time in the Archives*, a researcher focused event in Edinburgh on methods for studying time and a smaller event for project participants in London

that examined the preliminary results of the project and possibilities for future development. Feedback from these events was very positive with 72% of attendees at the Liverpool event rating it as interesting or very interesting and 62% of those new to archives saying that they would now be interested in visiting one. Attendees at our methods event also gave the event high ratings and commented positively on its interactive nature and support for inter-disciplinary discussion.

In terms of developing resources, all the presentations from the *Methods* event were recorded and made available online, as well as collated lists of recommended methods, resources and sites for studying time.[4] Unfortunately trouble with the acoustics at the *Time in the Archives* event meant that these recordings were not usable. Further resources include seven hour-long expert interviews, which are currently being edited and approved. These will be published online as part of the *Temporal Belongings* interview series.[5]

4 Participants at our Methods Festival

Finally, dissemination of the project results is taking a number of forms. Public facing publications will include the *Transition Free Press* and *Permaculture Magazine*, as well as further blog posts on our own website and those of our project partners. Researcher focused dissemination plans include conference presentations (two confirmed so far) and journal articles (one currently under consideration).

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[4] See here for the talks and resources http://www.temporalbelongings.org/methods-festival.html

[5] Published interviews will be available from this web-page http://www.temporalbelongings.org/interview-series.html

5. To explore new methodological approaches to researching experiences and conceptions of time

The primary avenue for exploring methods for studying time was our one day event in Edinburgh, organised by Jen Southern, which brought together a range of academic speakers to talk about how they investigated time in their work. Methods included participatory design, video analysis, quantitative methods for analysing synchronisation, ethnography, historical research, ethnography and quantitative longitudinal research. We also used collaborative sessions to develop the crowd-sourced resources that we made available online. Discussions from these events helped to inform the approaches taken in the archival and case study sessions, as did issues raised during our initial conversations with our project advisors.

Lessons Learnt
What went well…

The project included a large number of case studies, and so it was particularly helpful to have a diverse advisory board in order to contribute recommendations and introductions. This meant that we had very little trouble organising the 10 site visits within the 9 month period of the project. We were thus able to build a wide network of non-HEI partners interested in the project, and also to develop an initial view into a broad range of alternative economic models. We used a flexible approach to these, particularly around what they entailed and how they could be scheduled. We were keen to minimise any extra work for the organisations and so tried to fit in with existing planned events and/or meetings. The ability of smaller organisations to take time out for this project was further helped by our being able to offer them a monetary contribution in recognition of their inputs. This supported a wider range of members, users, customers etc. to be involved than might have otherwise.

These kinds of collaborative working practices extended into other strands of the project and so provided a range of benefits. This was particularly the case for our methods event, where each person attending was able to receive feedback on their current projects. Interdisciplinary conversations were supported by the focus on shared exploration, rather than primarily on presentations. Our archives research also benefited from collaborative working, where Buchanan and Bastian were able to discuss materials together drawing on perspectives from their different disciplinary backgrounds.

What problems arose…

While there were many benefits arising from the wide range of activities included in this project, a lot of materials have been produced and these have taking longer to analyse than was originally anticipated. Our initial expectation was that we would be able to write up insights and experiences as the project progressed. However, due to the volume of material to be processed, we were not able to accomplish this to the extent that we would have liked. This resulted in mismatches between our much slower 'academic time' and the reasonable expectations of participants around when they would receive insights and reflections from the project.

More specifically, in our archive research, we found that 'time' is rarely mentioned in catalogues, so this work was partly dependent on pre-existing expectations, both by the researcher and curators, which may mean that some potential resources turned out to be less valuable than anticipated, whilst others may have been missed.

What would we do differently in hindsight…
The two key changes we would now make would be, first, to either complete fewer cases studies, or be more circumspect in setting expectations around what a small exploratory project could feedback to our participants. Second we would have arranged for more joint visits to the archives to build on the collaborative process developed on our first visit.

Further insights and observations…
Most importantly, this project illustrated the depth of interest in exploring the issue of time outside of some of its more obvious manifestations (e.g. public science projects around clock time etc). This was the case even when many participants did not originally have specific opinions on the topic or might even have been unsure about how it related to their work. That is, rather than time being seen to be alienating or irrelevant, generally participants were intrigued by the topic and welcomed the opportunity to explore it further without knowing exactly where it might lead them.

Many participants also welcomed their involvement in the project for more pragmatic reasons in that it allowed the team to have time to think about broader issues and to reflect on their project together. Their involvement in the research process thus allowed for the creation of a certain kind of 'time out' that enabled team-building and exploratory discussions.

In terms of publicising the project and generating wider discussion, having our website up within the first month of the project was particularly useful and also helped with the recruitment of participants. Embedding the project within the networks developed in previous AHRC-funded projects around time was also beneficial, particularly the *Temporal Belongings* network.

5 Doing the veg box run with Regather

Finally, our archive work continued Buchanan and Bastian's interest in how archives could be used for purposes other than traditional historical research. In particular, we showed how they could be incorporated into activist projects as a potential reservoir of ideas for the present and future. Our final meeting with the project participants was particularly important for this, with project partners showing a strong interest in using examples from the past to challenge present preconceptions (e.g. with regard to the length of the working day). This project thus showed the potential for archive-based research on time and illustrated public interest in the results. This suggests that issues around temporality could be exploited by archives for audience development, specifically in developing awareness of archives as 'future-facing' resources.[6]

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[6] For other interest in this possibility see http://archivesforthefuture.wordpress.com/

Where to next?

Our immediate focus in the near future is to continue with the analysis of the materials developed within the project and to publish these results in a wide range of venues. Our project partners are keen to help facilitate this and so we are currently developing pieces tailored to the interests of their members. We also have at least two research-focused presentations confirmed, which will serve as the basis of a published paper.

As part of maintaining the momentum of this project members of the team have successfully applied for funds to run an event on Temporal Design in mid-2014, which will support further discussions around the way we tell the time of our lives and what kinds of specific interventions participants in the project might want to develop.

Looking further ahead, the team is in the early stages of planning a larger funding application that will be able to build on the insights gained in this exploratory project and the networks that it has helped to develop.