

The integrity of other cultures is brushed aside as the new year zero of civilisation (stage three) reels in. How, amidst pre-millennial fever, can people acknowledge the cultural multiplicity of time realities? The anthropologists of time offer a way in.

Instant meaning: new moves in the anthropology of time

A Moment's Notice: Time Politics Across Cultures,
by Carol J. Greenhouse, Cornell University Press 1996

Begin with a turn of the mind, and the notion that day and night is stripped of the watch or clock-face, and of the silent digital pulsing of the numbered liquid crystal time devices. This could return us to non-mechanical time reckoners: sundials, water dials, Zeno working out the distance of Alexandria from the Pyramids from the length of shadows thrown from the tip of the Giza Pyramid. Remove those. Next, remove the edifices of time measurement: age-old calendars of seven-day-week cycle and moon-waxing months making up years and years. Or if you are a Mayan or an Aztec a double calendar: of thirteen twenty-day cycles completing a 260-day year cycle complementing alongside a second 365-day calendar. Remove those too. And what continues? The rhythmic resilience of day for night, shorter getting longer, before a zenith, and longer becomes enshortened. In places seasons would change, grow, ripen, fruit and fade with or without agricultural intervention.

What are you left with? The sun and the earth. The cosmos and astronomy. Begin with this world, this halfway voiding of our time culture. From here maybe, without the encumbrances of the above, is the realisation that the company of time we keep is all a part of the cultural baggage of our cultures. And being modern kinds, we are open to the cultural relativities that the post modern 'normal' permits. Our entanglement with time, the entrapped relationships of the vast majority of the Western populations, allow for only one primary definition of time; that is, linear time progressing ever onward.

This is the focus of much of the loosely connected world of Time Studies. It has been central to the project of J.T. Frazer, this part of the century's leading explorer of humanity's diverse experience and relationship

with time. In various arts of the world, time studies continue, unknown and unremarked, for the most part. In Britain, 'Time and Society' is one of several journals devoted to studies in time. And the mesmerising potential in the idea of time bore unusual fruit in the runaway and epic publishing success story of the late eighties, Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*. Hawking's success was not only a publishing phenomenon, it was a time phenomenon, demonstrating a mass public's restless desire to get to grips with the mysteries of duration. Even though *A Brief History of Time* was the success it was, it still begs the question of how many of its readers therefore feel at ease in comprehending relativity and quantum mechanics? How far have the mysteries Einstein and co. introduced the twentieth century to – time as illusion, for instance – been assimilated?

Absorbed by time, many people in the West relate to time as a canonical mystery, which if successfully decoded and deciphered will render clearly visible an otherwise obscured truth. Maybe this includes hints of the schoolchild fascination of origins. Thus, was there a beginning to the universe, and if so what was before the beginning? If, alternatively, as the Western Church continues to teach us, there is objective reality in eternity, how does one talk of the edges of endlessness?

The roots to the time so many of us subscribe to, or are imbued in, return to the Medieval Church and to Medieval Theologians. There, two sources, Jewish and Christian, coalesced to give form to time as a finite line, reaching from origins of Biblical beginning, to the future fixed 'end of time', definitively imagined in the Western psyche as 'the day of judgement' and 'apocalypse'. Linear time thus revealed, in the geometrical language of lines, becomes a versatile variety of time lines between these two problematic, bookend time-points. Into the varieties to be considered, a finite line, an infinite line, a braid, this linearity has long provided the