
THE REGIME OF POLARIZED TEMPORALITY:
A TEMPORAL THEORY OF MODERN SOCIETIES

*UNA TEORÍA TEMPORAL DE LAS SOCIEDADES MODERNAS:
EL RÉGIMEN DE TEMPORALIDAD POLARIZADA*

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In the social sciences, the category of time depicts such a fundamental concept that it tends to be taken for granted. In this sense, Immanuel Kant's famous assertion that time "grounds all intuitions"¹, also functions as an *a priori* for the epistemological framework of the social sciences, insofar as they conceptualize time as a condition of possibility for the social to unfold. However, time is far from constituting a "blind spot" in the body of knowledge of the social sciences: For Max Weber, the task of a foundation of the social sciences was closely interwoven with the status of "time" as an epistemological problem, in line with the question of the appropriate (the "idiographic" versus the "nomothetic") methodology of the emerging discipline.² Up until today, the periodization of time plays such a central role in sociological concept formation – most obvious in theories of "modernity", "social evolution", "progress" and other "process terms"³ – that, metaphorically speaking, it seems to constitute the analytical toolbox that stores the other analytical instruments deployed to assemble theories of societies.

Nonetheless, for the social sciences time not only represents an epistemological category but also a concrete social product and a manifestation of human practices that can

¹ KANT, Immanuel: "§ 4-7: Second section. On time", in *Ibid.* (ed.): *Critique of pure reason*, 1998, p. 178.

² WEBER, Max: "Objectivity" in *Social Science and Social Policy*, 1st. ed. Somerset: Taylor and Francis, 2011, p. 66.

³ JOAS, Hans: "Spannungsverhältnisse. Eine neue Deutung von Max Webers ‚Zwischen-betrachtung‘", in *Ibid.* (ed.), *Die Macht des Heiligen. Eine Alternative zur Geschichte von der Entzauberung*. 2. Ed., Berlin, Suhrkamp, 2017, p. 365.

be studied as such. Notably, in the course of the “cultural turns” in the 20th century⁴, social scientific accounts have increasingly developed diverse categories for conceptualizing the “subjective experiences of time” as well as “objective temporal dynamics”, for instance perhaps most prominently the “social acceleration”⁵ of capitalist societies.⁶ However, a “duality in the sociological analyses of time”⁷ can be diagnosed: While, on the one hand, time seems increasingly standardized, quantified, and ultimately homogenized, on the other hand, a diversification, pluralization, and heterogenization becomes observable.⁸ But how can the social sciences theoretically and conceptually account for this “simultaneity of the non-synchronous”⁹?

II

In his seminal work, Felipe Torres proposes to bridge this deficit by introducing the concept of “temporal regimes” to account for the organization of temporal differences on an analytical level. Starting from the assessment that “the gap among the temporal analysis in social and cultural studies lies in the lack of a holistic understanding of general-global temporal logics and the more particular and local specifications”¹⁰, Torres aims to conciliate these two seemingly paradox findings. While the “duality” could easily be mistaken for a methodological issue regarding the tension between micro and macro approaches, this is not (only) what Torres has in mind.¹¹ Rather, he is interested in providing a conceptual tool and through this a comprehensive framework for the adequate

⁴ RECKWITZ, Andreas: “Toward a Theory of Social Practices. A Development in Culturalist Theorizing”, in *European Journal of Social Theory*, 5 (2), 2002, p. 245.

⁵ ROSA, Hartmut: *Social Acceleration. A New Theory of Modernity*. New York, Columbia University Press, p. 2013.

⁶ This differentiation of the “subjective experience of time” and the “objective measurement” can be traced back to the analysis of time by Henri Bergson or Edmund Husserl. Cf. BERGSON, Henri: *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience: Par Henri Bergson* (6. éd), Alcan, Bibliothèque de philosophie contemporaine, 1908. HUSSERL, Edmund: *Texte zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins*, in Rudolf Bernet (ed.), Hamburg, Felix Meiner Verlag, 2013.

⁷ ROSA, Hartmut: “Foreword”, in Felipe TORRES, *Temporal Regimes. Materiality, Politics, Technology*, London, New York, Milton, Taylor & Francis Group Routledge, 2021, p. xii.

⁸ TORRES, Felipe: *Temporal Regimes. Materiality, Politics, Technology*, p. 1, 19, 38f.

⁹ KOSELLECK, Reinhart: *Futures Past. On the semantics of Historical Times*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2004.

¹⁰ TORRES, Felipe: *Temporal Regimes. Materiality, Politics, Technology*, p. 40.

¹¹ Critiquing the homogenizing “macro”-theories, Torres argues that: [I]t is important to point out that this is not a work on the *experience* of time, neither an attempt to inquire a sort of list of temporal possible experiences”, *Ibid.*, p. 32.

description and analysis of the temporal structures of modern societies, which are precisely characterized by their polarized¹² temporality, that is, by being both homogenizing *and* diversifying¹³ and hence constituting, a “simultaneity without synchronicity”, as Hartmut Rosa puts it.¹⁴

Torres proposes to bring in the concept of “regimes” as a missing piece in the social studies of temporality. For this, he operates in four steps: In the first chapter, he introduces and clarifies the concept of temporal regimes. In a second chapter, he systematizes the political dimensions and implications of “temporal categories”¹⁵. Thirdly, Torres explores the materiality of temporality in more detail, specifically analyzing the impact of the transformation of the “technical” infrastructure of “temporal regimes”.¹⁶ 4) Lastly, he validates his concept by presenting an analysis of three “temporal orders”, namely, “progress”, “utopia”, and “acceleration”, which are inscribed in a “futuristic” sociopolitical ideology and hence constitute “prototypical” regimes of modern societies.¹⁷ I will discuss the contributions of Torres’ work briefly before I address a few critical points.

III

Drawing upon François Hartog’s concept of regimes¹⁸, Michel Foucault’s concepts of “regimes of truth”¹⁹ and “dispositive”²⁰, Louis Althusser’s “apparatus”²¹ or Aleida

¹² In this sense Torres shares the conceptualization of modernity as an “area of conflict” as e.g. represented by Johann Arnason or Peter Wagner – in contrast to a conception of modernity as a “project” as most prominently elaborated by Jürgen Habermas, cf.: HONNETH, Axel; JOAS, Hans: *Kommunikatives Handeln. Beiträge zu Jürgen Habermas’ Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1986. And here specifically: ARNASON, Johann P.: “Die Moderne als Projekt und Spannungsfeld”. in *Ibid.*, p. 278–326. Also cf. WAGNER, Peter: *Soziologie der Moderne. Freiheit und Disziplin*, Frankfurt, New York, Campus Verlag, 1995.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

¹⁴ ROSA, Hartmut: “Foreword”, in Felipe TORRES, *Temporal Regimes. Materiality, Politics, Technology*, p. xii. In fact, Torres argues: “Doing this [deploying the concept of “temporal regimes”, CN], it is possible to identify more than one temporal logic simultaneously, considering their (de)synchronies with other temporal regimes in differentiated layers and fields (such as political, religious, economic or aesthetic ones)”, *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁷ “Therefore, temporal categories work as ideological ones (...) Each case of temporal uses for describing groups, cultures or areas into the world is associated with specific tempos that are considered as inherent aspects of coordination and social regulation”, *Ibid.*, p. 84.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

Assmann's "Zeitregimes"²², Torres understands "temporal regimes" as a material infrastructure that governs, sorts and organizes time in specific ways.²³ Regimes are further characterized by three features: their "iterability, articulability, and governmentality"²⁴, which refers to the relative stability, the discursiveness, and the power effects of temporal regimes.²⁵ Analytically, the concept of temporal regimes is deployed to provide an account for both: On the one hand, to analyze the relative stability and consistency in the patterned organization of time in (modern) societies achieved through the implementation of "standard time zones", or the technical innovation, or the institution of "communication media" that allow for almost immediate transmission and generalizability of information.²⁶ And on the other hand, "to account for *more than one* stable pattern. Insofar, various regimes can be analyzed as homogeneities simultaneously interacting with each other. Consequently, we can identify patterns of 'acceleration' coexisting with 'slow food' movements or decelerated pandemic contexts".²⁷

Moreover, Torres develops the concept to show that temporal orders are political instruments of domination that follow hegemonic orders.²⁸ To be more specific, the concept of "regimes" stresses that a) multiple regimes may exist, and b) that various regimes compete for dominance hence creating a hegemony that is not only contended but, in the sense of a "governmentality", also emerges somewhat contingently.²⁹ Torres especially focuses on the material and political dimension of temporal orders that, according to him, always carry along specific political ideas and interpretations of history, which, however, do not operate "above the heads" of individual actors, but always on the level of embodiment, perception, and experience.³⁰ Time, from this point of view, is an inherently

²² *Ibid.*, p. 44.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22., my emphasis.

²⁸ More specifically he states: "[D]erivations of *regere* indicate a set of rules and the sort of governance that orders a community. These aspects refer specifically to the rules of the animated and unanimated organisms and objects inside one specific space (real or imaginary), defining their distributions, locations, places as well as frequencies, hierarchies and privileges. This is the socio-political role that is traditionally emphasized", *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24., 59. In the sense of Pierre Bourdieu, it can be stated that they operate on the level of "doxa", which he defines as: „the ordinary acceptance of the usual order which goes without saying and therefore

bio-political category. It constitutes a “*material* dimension of the governing over life”³¹ imposing stratification effects and unequal attribution of resources.

Furthermore, Torres discusses the material fabrication of time, especially investigating “technologies *of* time and the technologies *over* time.”³² Here, the author shows, building upon Georg Simmel or Niklas Luhmann, how technology, e.g. the use of the pocket watch³³ but also “digitization”³⁴, has brought about an increasing precision, standardization, and coordination allowing for the rationalization of modern life including wide-ranging transformations such as the periodization of biographies, the invention of leisure time and the institution of the “global standard time”. Technologies of time, however, have not only brought about the differentiation between the “life” and the “world” time³⁵, but Torres further argues that this domination of time has also transformed the relation to the temporal order itself, creating the conditions for a “futurization” of history exemplified in the concepts of “utopia”, “acceleration” and “progress”.³⁶ While Torres discusses each of the three in detail³⁷, he concludes that they all show a) a shared orientation towards social change, b) particular orders of repetition, c) a “futuristic structure”³⁸ including a planning orientation for societies in relation to time and hence constituting “a temporal regime that turns temporal experiences into expectations about the future”.³⁹ Here Torres makes a strong argument that for a theory of society it is crucial to analytically consider the temporal order of social formations to analyze their inner structure.

IV

usually goes unsaid.” Cf. BOURDIEU, Pierre: *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste*, Cambridge, Routledge, 1984, p. 424.

³¹ TORRES, Felipe: *Temporal Regimes. Materiality, Politics, Technology*, p. 25.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 100.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

³⁷ He shows that the temporality of Utopias is characterized by the idea that “via planning, the future common life appears as a programmable domain and, with that, is feasible and improvable in terms of progress” (138), progress by a linear conception of time and acceleration by the “repetition of change” (142).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

Ultimately, Torres' proposition of integrating the concept of "temporal regimes" into the social sciences proves feasible. In showing how through the homogenization of time, heterogeneity emerges and is in turn "organized" under the pressures of hegemonic temporal regimes, he provides a useful analytical tool. Moreover, Torres' work is not only targeted at enhancing the repertoire of social theory but his approach also calls for an interdisciplinary merging of perspectives, as his "temporal regime" approach allows for an engagement of social theory with political history and cultural studies. In this sense, his conceptual work is more than just an add-on to the existing fields of research but productively merges the disciplinary lenses. Nonetheless, and to come to an end, I want to raise a few critical points here.

(1) The concept of "temporal regime" sufficiently highlights how the temporal and the political are intertwined. However, what remains unclear is whether different levels of "temporal regimes" exist, and if they do, how they are intertwined. Following Niklas Luhmann's theory of systems,⁴⁰ perhaps three levels of temporal regimes can be differentiated: the interactional-social, the organizational, and the societal. The question of whether these different levels exist, how they are related, and what role especially the meso-level of organizations plays, this far, remains open.⁴¹

(2) Furthermore, the concept also outlines how temporal orders can be understood as results of power struggles and hence include subtle and drastic structures of exclusion and sanctions (i.e. of those who "cannot keep up"⁴²). Nonetheless, the terminology also suggests a somewhat coherent, rather stable, and static system of shared assumptions, practices, and values relating to temporality. However, Torres advocates at length for an understanding of temporal regimes as not only homogenized but also diversified⁴³. Hence it seems unclear to me whether all practices (e.g. slow-food-movements) and especially such that directly aim at subverting a specific temporal regime (e.g. de-growth movements) need to be considered part of "temporal regimes" or whether they rather represent "temporal

⁴⁰ LUHMANN, Niklas: *Social systems*, Stanford, Calif., Stanford University Press, 1995, p. 2.

⁴¹ Especially the Meso-Level is not necessarily in Torres's analytical focus. Cf. TORRES, Felipe: *Temporal Regimes. Materiality, Politics, Technology*, p. 151.

⁴² For an analysis of "slowdown" as a dysfunction, Cf. ROSA, Hartmut: *Social Acceleration. A New Theory of Modernity*, p. 84.f

styles”⁴⁴ that only add up to a “regime” on a societal level.

(3) Torres understands his work not only as descriptive but moreover also as a critical enterprise, providing a point of departure for a critique of societal developments, e.g. from their paradoxical organizations or formations of temporal orders.⁴⁵ What remains somewhat unclear is a clarification of the drivers or carriers and, in turn, of the “subjects” of hegemonic regimes. More specifically, to quote William Reddy on his concept of “emotional regimes”, in my opinion, the question of “[w]ho suffers? (...) [I]s this suffering a tragedy or an injustice?”⁴⁶ in my opinion needs to be posed here as well. Even though Torres hints at the unequal distribution of resources and chances of recognition of time e.g. based on gender, this seems to require further elaboration.

⁴³ Cf. TORRES, Felipe: *Temporal Regimes. Materiality, Politics, Technology*, p. 30.

⁴⁴ Analogically to Peter Stearns or Barbara Rosenwein’s concept of “emotional styles”, cf. ROSENWEIN, Barbara H.: “Problems and Methods in the History of Emotions”, in *Passions in Context*, 1 (2010), S. 15.

⁴⁵ More precisely he argues: “The temporal regimes thesis follows the same path as critical theory and cultural studies, namely, to envelop a diagnosis of the contemporary society and a criticism afterwards”, *Ibid.*, p. 149.

⁴⁶ REDDY, William: *The navigation of feeling: A framework for the history of emotions*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 130.