



The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race & Ethnicity
433 Mendenhall Laboratory
125 South Oval Mall
Columbus, OH 43210
www.kirwaninstitute.org

Written in summer 2004

Title: Briefs Comments on Wealth and Time

by Hiram José Irizarry Osorio

So, in the end, what is time, this elusive notion that bewildered St. Augustine, misled Newton, inspired Einstein, obsessed Heidegger? And how is it being transformed in our society..? I find it helpful to call upon Leibniz, for whom time is the order of succession of 'things,' so that without 'things' there would be no time (Castells, 2000; 494).

We have been exposing throughout this paper, as an essential departing perspective and understanding, a social construction of reality. Nevertheless, we need to include also some comments about *time* as socially constructed and not natural or equally experienced. A discussion of *time* becomes important to present dynamic, instead of static, perspectives of reality. However socially constructed we might argue that *time* is, it still helps us to expand our analytics through an abstract dimension with real consequences. The social construction perspective of *time* helps us to differentiate the perception of *time* within the societies we study. Accepting *time* as unproblematic or natural departs from the premise that it is something equally experienced by everybody. Our analytical objectives of conceptualizing a socially constructed *time* become clearer within a discussion of wealth.

We have argued that wealth can be associated with a broadening, lengthening of the “shadow of the future” for those who amass wealth; consequently, permitting them to plan, gaining *surplus security*. Nevertheless, when we try to think of how to change the present conditions because of existing unjust inequities, which blunders the possibility of many human beings to *live the life they have reason to value*, we are confronted with a contradictory conclusion of what was just stated: *time* suddenly shortens. We are familiarized with the phrase “time is money,” which underscores the idea that if we make “productive” use of time it can be converted into money. And productivity here means minimizing the time spent on performing the necessary tasks to produce/create something or perform a service. Is this really contradictory evidence, which then diminishes the instrumental relevance of wealth as a *time* lengthening, broadening purveyor?

We would argue that it is not, because we can further take analytical advantage of this apparent contradiction and present it as a puzzle. Furthermore, this apparent contradiction could further present the analytical leverage of pursuing a socially constructed perception of time. And this would imply, tentatively, that as we have

discussed regarding wealth or Diamond (1999) regarding food production, that surplus creation of *time* is also possible. This *time surplus* is valuable and perceived asymmetrically: the *time* length that “wealth haves” experience and enjoy is taken/usurped from “wealth have-nots.” In other words, the apparent contradiction is only so if we do not differentiate between the existence of different *times*. Furthermore, the *time* society has/experiences should not just simply be an addition or a putting together of the different times of the different sections of the population, if we want to understand them clearly and promote change. In addition, the apparent contradiction is a juxtaposition of the *time* experienced by the “wealth have-nots” unto the society as a whole; from the analytical point of view (not conspiratorially-wise) this makes sense to be able to have *surplus time*.

Castells (2000) labels today’s society as *the network society*. Among many different arguments that he puts forth in his book, what concerns us here are his arguments with respect to *time*. In a nutshell, he argues that today’s network society lives within a *timeless time*. Nevertheless, this does not imply the elimination of *time* as in zero *time*, but the eradication of the conceptualization of *modern time*. He arrives to this conclusion because of the eradication of *succession* and not of *things*, following the terminology used in the quote at the beginning of this section. This quote states that to have *time* we need *things*, but not only *things*, we need a *sequence of things*. It is very difficult to argue that we do not have *things* anymore so what has been eliminated in this *network society* is the *sequencing*. How? Because of the *time* compression made possible by technological advances. This *time* compression makes *things* available almost instantaneously, continuously which presents the possibility of random discontinuity. Hence, the element of *sequencing* loses its meaning and with it our *modern* understanding of *time*; and from our *modern* understanding, what we have is not the elimination of *time*, but its conversion into an always, a forever.

How is this related to our task at hand? How is Castells’ discussion of *time* advances our understanding of wealth? An important caveat that Castells presents is that he acknowledges that this *timeless time* is not equally experienced. Although it is becoming the dominant framework, it still has conflicting encounters in today’s society. Furthermore, Castells’ discussion underscores and differentiates among sectors of society and countries. He also emphasizes the importance of *space* in defining *time*. For example,

The multiple space of places, scattered, fragmented, and disconnected, displays diverse temporalities, from the most primitive domination of natural rhythms to the strictest tyranny of clock time. Selected functions and individuals transcend time, while downgraded activities and subordinate people endure life as time goes by. While the emerging logic of the new social structure aims at the relentless supersession of time as an ordered sequence of events, most of society, in a globally interdependent system, remains on the edge of the new universe. Timelessness sails in an ocean surrounded by time-bound shores, from where still can heard the laments of time-chained creatures. (2000; 497)

Herein lays the connection with our main interest in this project: the underscoring of *time-chained creatures* within *time-bound shores*; that differences exist of experienced *time* through different sectors and spaces of society. The aforementioned conflict between different *time horizons* and the issue of *time surplus*, more than an agency creation, which would flirt with conspiratorial theorizing, is better understood structurally. Structurally, it makes sense to have this conflicting *time horizons*, which produce *time surplus*. Why? Because intentional actors (i.e., individual and/or collective) construct reality within established institutional arrangements and as a result these constructions become new or extended institutional arrangements, which further affect future intentional actors. Since there is no perfect communication and understanding within these processes, there are always possibilities for the creation of institutional arrangements; however, arrangements could make perfect sense within their immediate realms, while also conflicting with others (realms here could be cross-sectional or temporal). Thus, these conflicting results can then be labeled as *institutional incoherencies*. Returning to our discussion of different experienced *times* the same ones can be theorized as possible *institutional incoherent* outcomes. These *institutional incoherencies* should not be perceived as value judgments, but as natural or extremely probable phenomena in human history; without them we would have stasis, which is counterintuitive to living.

Hence, what to do regarding wealth and experienced *time* disparities? We argue that we need to make explicit those experienced *times* differences and find a way of how to put them together to be able to have a more real sense of the *time* we experience as a society and being able to promote a lengthening/broadening of that society's *time*. Castells (2000) argues that,

What must be retained from the discussion at this point is the conflictive differentiation of time, understood as the impact of opposed social interests on the sequencing of phenomena. Such differentiation concerns, on the one hand, the contrasting logic between timelessness, structured by the space of flows, and multiple, subordinate temporalities, associated with the space of places. On the other hand, the contradictory dynamics of society opposes the search for human eternity, through the annihilation of time in life, to the realization of cosmological eternity, through the respect of glacial time. Between subdued temporalities and evolutionary nature the network society rises on the edge of forever. (498-499)

We propose and underscore the importance of paying attention to existing institutional arrangements in place. This is so to be able to identify those mentioned *institutional incoherencies*. The relevance of these is to propose alternative institutional mechanisms. These alternatives should be inclusive with two important characteristics: *de-centered* and *flexible* power-wise (see Unger and West, 1998). We depart from the premise of the relevance of deliberation and communication, which adequately designed institutional arrangements could facilitate, although this should not be interpreted as top-down designing. These arguments do not depart from a *Habermasian* perspective of the elimination of conflict through a proposed *ideal communicative action*. Institutional arrangements that facilitate deliberation and communication are means for permitting contrary and conflicting perspectives to encounter, meet, collide, from which future

syntheses would emerge (e.g., partnerships, interconnectedness, constant deliberation, etc). This is why the characteristics of *de-centered* and *flexible* are so important, which increase the probability of just and adequate outcomes. The former pays attention to inclusiveness and the avoidance of a concentration of privileges and resources; the latter promotes a monitoring ethos, values of checking and gauging for incongruence between ends and means. Monitoring is something troubling and uncomfortable because we would like to have something finally set to take it for granted, while at the same time we value dynamism that goes against this static possibility. This is a contradiction that we need to gauge, confront, and realize that it will not just go away.

References:

Castells, Manuel (2000). *The rise of the network society*. Oxford; Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

Diamond, Jared M. (1999). *Guns, germs, and steel: the fates of human societies*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

Unger, Roberto Mangabeira and Cornel West (1998). *The future of American progressivism: an initiative for political and economic reform*. Boston: Beacon Press.