Title
"Any time is Trinidad time": Social meanings and temporal consciousness.

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chapters, totaling about 150 pages and constituting the bulk of the book, draw almost completely on the 1960s research. The sample of upper strata households in New Capital provides a proxy for "change" without any critical comment or warning to the reader that this is being done. Such an analytical choice by default leaves all of the Old Town households and the poor households of New Capital as proxies for "tradition." The last two chapters present findings from the 1989 fieldwork. During this period, Seymour followed a less structured approach than she did in the 1960s, eliciting, recording, and reporting women's own words with little interpretation or analysis. In these two chapters, Seymour changes her style of representation. We find no tabulated data but instead many direct quotations from the women. Yet Seymour's structure is there, lying underneath the responses, since she took with her a list of queries on topics such as attitudes toward girls' schooling and dowries. The quotations offer no evidence of spontaneous conversations or discussion of issues outside Seymour's list.

Basu's approach is to pursue positivist-sociological goals and methods with a lamination of postmodernist-feminism. She chose her topic—women's property rights—and she selected three New Delhi neighborhoods with a range of economic and ethnic patterns. She conducted a demographic survey among randomly selected households and then drew a subsample from those households of women for formal and informal interviews. Along the way, as Basu discusses her approach, she provides reflexive insights about what the women thought of her, her concerns about her role, and "fieldwork angst."

Basu's research yielded abundant data of the old-fashioned positivist sort along with substantial amounts of "women's words" from open-ended interviews and casual conversations. She presents her findings in a basically old-fashioned, positivist sort along with substantial amounts of "women's words" from open-ended interviews and casual conversations. The inclusion of direct quotations from women relieves the tedium of lock-step sociological reportage but never succeeds in doing what a good postmodernist might think it should do: destabilizing, through rich and deep meaning-centered discourse, the "facts" in the tables, or at least adding new and surprising angles. It's as if Basu provides two little books cross-woven into one, a numbers book and a voices book. The sum is a densely presented book with more material than analysis (other than counting up totals and calculating percentages) or interpretation (helping the reader make sense of the direct quotations instead of letting them stand for themselves).

Hancock's book represents an attempt to abandon positivist ethnographic methods in favor of a postmodernist meandering inquiry. Yet she neither succeeds in truly abandoning positivism nor in providing richly inductive insights. The subtraction is only partial and the addition hard to find. Hancock entered the field wishing to study women's domestic rituals among upper-middle class Smarta Brahmanas, and thus a self-defined research field wishing to study women's domestic rituals among upper-middle class families in Bhubaneswar are increasingly promoting individualism. We learn from Basu that, both across and within classes in New Delhi, different women have contrasting views of their property rights. We learn from Hancock that Smarta brahman women of Chennai are little interested in discussing their domestic ritual roles and that ethnographic understanding of domestic rituals needs to take the public domain into account as well. These lessons demonstrate that all three authors met with and attempted to address deeper ontological challenges than the authors of Notes and Queries imagined to be the work of ethnography.


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Scholars have long noted the occupational multiplicity of Caribbean peoples and the interplay of ideologies of equality with hierarchies and stereotypes based on putative ethnic or racial characteristics. Kevin Birth, in this finely textured and eminently readable ethnography of a rural Trinidadian village, supplements conventional accounts of these phenomena with attention to the temporal frameworks within which they are actualized. The result is a highly original and welcome addition to Caribbean studies and the anthropology of time. That said, however, the book fails in one key respect: although it describes diverse temporalities and a rich metaphorical language of time animating a field of argument as well as social cohesion, it paradoxically treats time itself as a given and ultimately fails to escape the pull of a functionalism which, although attentive to time, ultimately recasts temporal dynamism in static terms.
As I discuss below, this is less an oversight on the author’s part than it is a symptom of our inability to think through theoretical and temporal alternatives to causal, functional, or statistical forms of argumentation in the human sciences.

The book contains an introduction, six chapters, and a short conclusion. The introduction situates Birth’s study within the anthropological literature on time and temporal consciousness. It also provides a short sketch of Anamat, the community in which Birth worked (following in the footsteps of Morris Freilich, who worked there in the late 1950s), and a taste of the chapters that follow. Chapter 1, “The Past in the Present,” traces changing conceptions of temporality in the history of Trinidad, from the plantation era, to the post-emancipation transformation of the plantation system through the importation of indentured laborers, to World War II, the late colonial political era of patronage, to national independence, and finally the oil boom and subsequent bust. Birth finds that individuals’ time of first employment tends to characterize their temporal attitudes later in life and gives shape to conflicts with other age cohorts (p. 52).

Chapters 2 through 6 are less historical and concern different aspects of daily life in Anamat in terms of the temporal cycles, consciousness, and metaphors used by Anamatians as they move through their routine affairs. Chapter 2, “Producing Times,” outlines the rhythms and cycles of daily work activities, from domestic chores to export and subsistence farming, to transporting produce and working out of town. Birth summarizes these different rhythms in terms of Anamatians’ occupational diversity, building on his earlier point that Trinidadians’ different conceptions of time reflect the historical moment of their first paid employment. Differences in time, thus, encode ideas about the past and, by extension, metaphorically contour conflicts between elders and youth over work and leisure. This insight is a piece of Birth’s larger argument, namely, that generational, ethnic, class, and gender relationships are figured in terms of conflicting or competing temporalities, and that temporal attitudes and stereotypes serve to construct and maintain ethnic, gender, class, and generational differences rather than reveal any attributes or characteristics of differently positioned subjects. In this, Birth is in line with recent theorizing on difference and adds the dimension of time and temporal consciousness to this body of theory.

In chapter 3, “Distributed Times,” Birth looks at the way different mundane temporalities are distributed across some of these social differences. In spite of the different temporalities in Anamat, for instance, many individuals must coordinate their schedules in terms of another time—as when taxi drivers must accommodate school children’s schedules, or when students and others engaging the educational system must accommodate “clock time” (p. 80). Birth provides a nice account of the practice of “liming,” or hanging out, in terms of its temporal resistance to clock time, especially for students lingering along the way home from school. Men and women coordinate their different home and work schedules—or fail to do so, leading sometimes to violence—around other gender-specific temporal activities like liming and watching soap operas. Elders and youth conflict over the relative virtues of punctuality versus sociability. Religious leaders and employers conflict with their subordinates over the power to manage time.

In chapter 4, “Institutional and Consensual Temporal Coordination,” Birth explores the role of formal and informal institutional structures in creating, maintaining, and sometimes enforcing temporal definitions and temporal coordination. The institutional range here is from cricket to the workplace to Christmas and Carnival. Birth’s main focus in this chapter is on the power to define time and contestations of the legitimacy of those who would exercise such power, on the one hand, and on special moments that achieve some degree of “consensual” temporal coordination in the apparent absence of such authorities, such as Carnival, which, Birth argues (echoing but not citing Victor Turner), constitutes a kind of “anti-time” (p. 120).

Chapter 5, “Cohesion in Chaos,” concerns instances where different temporalities come into conflict. The emphasis in this chapter is on means of marking and managing temporal differences, leading to “social cohesion” (p. 121). In contrast, chapter 6, “Social Conflict and Time,” focuses on instances where differences lead to conflicts that disrupt the everyday temporalities of life in Anamat. It is in these two chapters in particular that I found myself wanting greater theorization of time itself. Birth’s ethnography unwittingly recalls debates in structural-functionalism and its aftermath about the temporal flow of social life and the relationship between conflict and cohesion in maintaining “social order.” There are traces here both of Gluckman’s theory of functional conflict and Leach’s equilibrium in dynamic social systems over time. The main culprit is Firth, whose führings of social organization and social structure were meant to counter the charge that structural-functionalism rendered static the dynamism and flow of social time.

This is not to deny that Birth demonstrates savvy and nuanced theoretical moves in this book. Indeed, tackling time demands deep thinking and grappling with core concepts of the discipline of anthropology and, indeed, all of the human sciences. Birth does the job admirably, backed up by sound and exciting ethnography. But what the effort demonstrates is the difficulty of critically engaging with our notions of structure, order, agency, and person once we pay attention to the temporal logics underlying those notions. As Carol Greenhouse reminds us in A Moment’s Notice: Time Politics Across Cultures (Cornell University Press, 1996), notions of agency developed in practice theory rely on ideas about the temporal intervals separating social actions and on strategies within the temporal flow of a social game. These ultimately may tell us much more about the normalization of time in the legitimation practices of modern nation-states than provide a universal analytical language for interpreting “structure” and “agency.”

Yet Trinidad is not a modern nation-state in the sense implied by Greenhouse: rather, as Birth reminds us in the conclusion to his interesting book, it is “a place that uneasily straddles the contrasts between East and West and between the industrial and the agricultural” (p. 163). Indeed, then, Birth’s Trinidad case could be used to push the point further: whither time itself in a peripheral postcolonial nation-state whose normalizing practices and legitimation strategies are far from coherent, much less “successful”? And whither social theory “after” its encounter with this postcolonial moment?