

Tenses and Tensions: Temporality in the Future of Work¹⁵

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Abstract

Contemporary organizational literature has largely overlooked the temporalities involved in our understandings of work and the ways in which our understandings of work depends on temporal boundaries. Thinking about temporality can open up fundamental political and philosophical issues around the nature of work and its place in our societies. The current essay examines temporality at work through three temporal modes of inquiry: the past continuous, the present tense, and the future (im)perfect. By interrogating how each of these modes raises certain questions and dilemmas, I hope to stimulate reflection around the ways that temporality structures inquiries around work.

Keywords: Tensions; Temporalities; Work; Future of work.

Increasingly, discussions of work are framed in terms of its “future” – will there be work in the age of AI, how will work transform in a post-industrial period, will there be new “green” jobs, will we work into old age, and the like. In these discussions it is very rare that we directly acknowledge our temporal shift into this “future” mode, as if the current and past of work were now less important topics than imagining its future. More generally, very little scholarship takes seriously the temporalities involved in our understandings of work, or the ways in which how we understand work depends on the temporal boundaries we use to frame those understandings.

Thinking about temporality can open up fundamental issues around the nature of work and its place in human society. For instance, it makes us confront question about the extent to which is work a human constant with an “existential” aspect, versus a socially-historically contingent type of activity. In some sense, it is impossible to imagine human society without productive, collective activity; yet at some point in history (the industrial revolution? The agricultural revolution?) these have been more recognizable as work in the contemporary sense. Put briefly - have we always ‘worked’?

Moreover, if we accept the historicity of work, its periodization remains a puzzle. If we were to write a history of work, where would it begin, and what would be the grand periodizations? Many of the core debates about work experience and its critique depend on whether we see work as an aspect of social organization as such, as a “modern” phenomenon, or as an aspect of capitalism

specifically. In the latter case, we may focus on the “classic” capitalist images of Victorian factory work or more contemporary precarious, platformed, gig work. We may think of an evolution from bonded to free labour or focus on the forms of bonded labour that continue to exist today. By changing those categories or periodizations, we change our attentional focus to reveal certain aspects of our world and obscure others, revelations and obfuscations that have political and social effects.

In these brief remarks I would like to give a small sampling of the ways that temporalities might become part of our reflections on work. Rather than an elaborated these, these are meant as conceptual “amuse bouches” that can whet the appetite for discussion around temporality and work. I use the metaphor of “tenses” to communicate that these ways involve linguistic and discursive frames, built around a temporal orientation. I also hear in the notion of “tenses” an echo of the political and social “tensions” that each of these temporalities brings to bear on different conceptions of work.

Past (Continuous?) Tense

Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.....at least in the medium term, work is a constant and foundational aspect of contemporary society. This could be an existential aspect that has followed human along their history, or in could be a illusion created by our attachment to work in the modern period. It can also be inflected positively, by seeing in work the ever-innovative tool using human mind, or negatively, by focusing on the ongoing toil for material sustenance. In some cases, one can discern a combination or hybrid of both of these views or some combination (as in, for example, Arendt’s famous distinction between work and labour, where the distinction itself is universal but their relation can be historically contingent).

By framing work as continuous or discontinuous, evolving or regressing, we can give a sense of the ever present, the ever changing, the linearly progressing, or the sense of a slow descent from a romantic pre-work condition. Moreover, by emphasizing the universality of work but focusing on its alternation between poles of creativity and labour, one can frame social production not as linear but as an ever-returning, cyclical process. What are the practical implications of such choices?

In short, it matters to what extent and in what ways we juxtapose past and present images of the same. An

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evolutionary or progressive discourse can, for instance, create a sense of injustice when we reveal that, despite all of our “modern” advancements, the persistence of exploitation and the emergence of new forms of slavery continue. The dissonance between the cyclical return of unfreedom and the progressive hope for freedom can be a foundation for political mobilization but can also lead to the disavowal of the archaic and fear of the return of the past. As we see the old exploitation return in new guises, will the sense of temporal progression be replaced by a sense of repetition, stasis or stagnation that demand revolt? Or will it create a sense of fatality that change is impossible? How to present temporal continuity in a way that allows us to recognize underlying structures and processes, without destroying the sense of agency and contingency that would be needed to contest and transform those processes?

Present Tense

Using terms like “contemporary workplace” draws upon a window of the present whose amplitude and nature are rarely specified. Increasingly, I read in the term “contemporary” a undercurrent of tension, as if it referred to a hiatus couched between a primitive past and an unknown future. The notion of the present in discourse about work, at least in the “neoliberal” era, sometimes feels like it is waiting for some kind of change, treading water in a liminal period following a “craft” or “professional” work of an imagined past, but without a clear sense of what awaits on the other side. It is reminiscent to the classical Gramscian sense that “the old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters.”

In this now-time of monsters, we confront hybrid visions of work that are full of tensions, ambivalences contradictions and paradoxes, all kinds of double meanings implanting misunderstandings about the relation of work to the non-work spheres of life. Workplace wellness programs and other leisure-oriented activities promise home at work, digital technologies and new workplace logistic promise work at home. Both reflect a general crumbling of the distinction between work/nonwork, which is temporally marked. We are increasingly mobile, accelerated and multitasking, but also increasingly stuck both economically and psychologically. Spurred both by a new reflexivity about the ubiquity of structural relations and global consciousness, yet we are reassured of our own agency and responsibility, we end up asking ourselves whether this situation is just in our heads or whether the world is actually like this. It’s likely both. But for how long? Can thinking about work in the future help us out of this cul-de-sac of liminality and ambivalence?

Future (Im)Perfect Tense

The increasing prevalence of the term “the future of work” should give us pause – what do we mean by the phrase? By ‘future’ do we just mean “different than this”? Is it a description of what we think will happen, or a calling into being of something whose shape we are not yet aware of? Is it a question of what work will look like in the future, or whether work will have a future at all...or for that matter, whether we will?

Similarly to the present, future imaginaries are filled with paradoxes and ambivalences, but this is not surprising because in the vacuum of the future we project or images of the present. Technosolutionist images of innovation and augmentation are juxtaposed against dystopian images of surveillance, lack of social safety net, and diminishing worker rights faced with all-powerful corporations. But the future tense, perhaps because of its imaginary mode and freedom from empirical limitations, may be more totalizing and caricatural. The good in the future is more complete than the good in the present; its evils are more menacing and inescapable. The present, for all its problems, presents us with empirical complexity that allows us not to take our judgements too seriously. The future is free from that constraint, and so it is no wonder that imagining the future is a favorite hobby of the most narcissistic CEOs and visionaries, who find in this uncharted territory a free play for their egos.

It is this totalizing aspect of our dreams of the future that might give us pause before immersing ourselves in excises of imagining utopian futures. While such exercises may help us loosen the binds of current conventions, they may alternatively reimagine those conventions in more tightly constraining ways, dream monsters that are more fearful than those of the present. By contrast, what would it look like to have, to use Weick’s term, a “disciplined imagination” about the future of work? Disciplined imaginations of the future could be useful for creating mid-level and provisional ideas about the near future, keeping our scope close enough for that imagination to have performative effects on reality.

Summary and Conclusion

These very broad musings about three temporalities of work – the past continuous, the present tense, and the future (im)perfect – are meant to underline that temporality is most interesting when we don’t take time as a homogenous and linear dimension along which we string events like beads. Instead, thinking temporally is strategic and involves putting in and out of focus different relations between accumulated experience and stories, phenomenal sensations and the fog of everyday life, and affect-laden ideas about futures whose scope is undefined. In this view, more than simply studying how

time is organized during work, we should study how work is understood as a temporal phenomenon, a process, or a rhythm, as something we remember, suffer through, or anticipate. And more than that, more than an event in time, it is our way of approaching time that makes or remakes what work is and can be. The same word, said in one moment, can be an expression of disdain, that in another moment is a sign of gratitude. So, questions about meaning in the social sciences, which often begin with “what” or “how”, can be complemented by asking “when”.