



Judy Wajcman and Nigel Dodd (Eds.), *The Sociology of Speed. Digital, Organizational, and Social Temporalities.*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, 224 pages

Chiara Vitrano

Volume 21, numéro 2, 2017

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1043793ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1043793ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Georg Simmel Gesellschaft

ISSN

1616-2552 (imprimé)

2512-1022 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Vitrano, C. (2017). Compte rendu de [Judy Wajcman and Nigel Dodd (Eds.), *The Sociology of Speed. Digital, Organizational, and Social Temporalities.*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, 224 pages]. *Simmel Studies*, 21(2), 131-136.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1043793ar>

REVIEWS

CHIARA VITRANO

Judy Wajcman and Nigel Dodd (Eds.), *The Sociology of Speed. Digital, Organizational, and Social Temporalities.*, Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2017, 224 pages.

What are the origins of the *imperative of speed* and contemporary *time famine*? How can social science conceptualize the relationship between time and technology, going beyond a simplistic technological determinism that poses «digitalization as the driver of acceleration» (p. 7)? How a universalizing treatment of this relationship neglects the multiple experiences of time through which structural inequalities are perpetuated? These are some of the questions raised by the essays collected in *The Sociology of Speed*.

The volume, edited by Judy Wajcman and Nigel Dodd, puts together a selection of relevant contributions to the contemporary sociological debate, which offers profound insights also for social science in a broader sense. The authors include prominent academics and pundits engaged in cutting-edge research within various disciplinary areas, encompassing not only Sociology but also Science and Technology Studies, Information Science, Organizational Studies, Communication, and Cultural Studies.

As stated by the editors, the aim of the volume is to «develop new sociological perspectives on digital, organizational, and social temporalities», going beyond the contemporary speed studies. The latter have supposedly failed in providing solid and timely theoretical frameworks, because they have been too «preoccupied with extant debates» (such as «the impact of technology on society,

the “time pressure paradox,” different versions of fast capitalism») and have not given enough attention to the materiality of time. The contributions in the volume aim instead at focusing on future developments of the debate, rather than «overview ideas that have begun to outlive their usefulness and relevance» (p. 2). The book is arranged in 3 sections: Theories, Materialities and Temporalities.

The first section presents social theories dealing with accelerated temporalities, from the earliest formulations concerning modernity (as in the review of Simmel and Benjamin by Dodd and Wajcman in Chapter 1), to the links between de-synchronization and late-modernity crises (as in Chapter 2 by Rosa), to the discourses about the future(s) and the impact of the speeded-up mobile civilization in terms of energy consumption (as in Chapter 3 by Urry).

The second section, “Materialities”, focuses on the «technical and institutional infrastructure that underpins speed» (p. 4), with a socio-material approach. Technology is treated as material and speed as a feature relying on technical infrastructures, as in the high-frequency trading (the fast, entirely automated trading of large numbers of shares and other financial instruments) analysed by MacKenzie (Chapter 4) or in the digital interactive domains described by Sassen (Chapter 5), the access to which is dependent on socio-material events and conditions and benefits some users’ categories. The institutional infrastructure is examined looking at time management in bureaucracy (as in Chapter 6 by Du Gay) and on the workplace, within the productivity discourse (in Chapter 7 by Gregg).

The last – and probably most compelling and innovative – section, “Temporalities”, offers empirical evidence to the link between temporal demands and strategies, and the social, economic and political context: waiting time emerges as something that «displays and constitutes hierarchical position» (p. 121) in Molotch’s essay (Chapter 8); the concept of temporal entrepreneurship is treated in its connection with «temporal expectations demanded by various institutions, social relationships and labour arrangements» (p. 133) for truck and taxi drivers, and gig-economy workers by

Sharma (Chapter 9) and for knowledge workers by Ingrid Erickson and Melissa Mazmanian (Chapter 10); lastly, the essay by Jackson (Chapter 11) explores the «myriad forms of maintenance and repair required to sustain» (p. 170) the infrastructure behind speed.

Among the many interconnections between the contributions, it is possible to identify two main topics in which the authors provide an innovative and sound thesis enriching the sociological knowledge of time: (1) the link between time and social power relationships, and (2) the link between time and technology.

(1) Time emerges as a collective entanglement (p. 9), shaped in the contemporary western society by the cult of busyness and the speed-up discourse. Social relationships and inequalities are shaped also by the dominant temporal logic, defined by Erickson and Mazmanian (Chapter 10) as «the socially legitimated, shared assumptions about time that are embedded in institutional and societal norms, discourses, material and technological processes, and shared ideologies. A temporal logic defines what is rational, normal, and expected [...]». It provides an understanding of time that becomes so embedded that it seems to define reality» (pp. 153-154).

According to Rosa (Chapter 2), the current temporal logic answers to the needs of «dynamic stabilization», the origin of the «exploding volume of our to-do list» (p. 31). A modern society is in a mode of dynamic stabilization because it «systematically requires growth, innovation, and acceleration for its structural reproduction and to maintain its socioeconomic and institutional status quo» (pp. 31-32). The expanding volume of demands on our time budget derives from a logic of increase (in wealth, in the range of options and of contacts), shaping the dominant discourse. «The escalatory logic of modernity» (p. 34) produces time scarcity because it brings about the increase of options for action and contacts within the available time – which can't be augmented, but only compressed. Furthermore, this escalatory logic is at the basis of the deepening of social inequalities, because «faster systems or actors systematically put pressure on the slower ones» (p. 36). As noted by Molotch in

his contribution (Chapter 8), the control of time is one of the essential properties of power.

In this context, the actor is asked for more resources (financial, organizational, cognitive, social) to manage temporal demands. This brings to two considerations:

* The recognition of a temporal privilege is needed (see, especially, Chapter 9 by Sharma), as well as the consideration of gender, class and professional conditions when analysing the now pervasive time pressure – and the strategies available to different social groups to cope with that. As shown in Sharma's work, in order to maintain this culture of speed, the labour of other (unprivileged) temporalities is needed. Molotch's essay (Chapter 8) deepens how queues to access resources make stratification systems evident. The possibility to access priority systems, to get real-time information, to deal with time fillers and anti-wait technologies is dependent upon the possession of material and cognitive resources;

* The social actor becomes a temporal entrepreneur (see, above all, Chapter 9 by Sharma and Chapter 10 by Erickson & Mazmanian), invested by a responsabilization concerning its time management strategies. The control on one's own time is depicted by the dominant temporal logic as an «unquestioned good» (p. 149). This is true both for those working in the gig economy (whose control on time is limited to the immediate working tasks and functions as a «justification for tenuous and precarious working conditions») and for those outsourcing tasks to the former to enhance their own productivity. This thesis updates the research concerning the flexibility discourse and the necessary distinction between the employee's flexibility and their time sovereignty put forward, for example, by Elchardus and Garhammer since the early Nineties.

(2) For what concerns the second thread, that is the link between social time and technology, all the contributions invite readers to go beyond technological determinism and examine those social relationships and discourses shaping the temporal expectations and

strategies. In *The Philosophy of Money*, Simmel had already warned against the focus on technology per se (p. 15):

It is true that we now have acetylene and electrical light instead of oil lamps; but the enthusiasm for the progress achieved in lighting makes us sometimes forget that the essential thing is not the lighting itself but what becomes fully visible. People's ecstasy concerning the triumphs of the telegraph and telephone often makes them overlook the fact that what really matters is the value of what one has to say.

Simmel is certainly a crucial reference for Wajcman, who, in her book *Pressed for Time: The Acceleration of Life in Digital Capitalism* (2015), stated that «temporal demands are not inherent to technology», but are rather «built into our devices by all-too-human schemes and desires» (2015, p. 3). In fact, «It is our own concrete social practices that generate those qualities of technologies we usually consider as intrinsic and permanent» (2015, p. 3). These theses seem to serve as the basis for the analysis put forward by many contributors in *The Sociology of Speed*. This doesn't mean to neglect any role played by technology. As Rosa states in Chapter 2, «technology [...] plays a twofold role in piling up our to do lists: first, it vastly increases the imaginable opportunities and, second, it converts all the hypothetical possibilities into real options» (p. 28). But «It is not the inherent logic of technology that drives the acceleration game – it is the institutional fabric of a capitalist modernity that can only operate in a mode of dynamic stabilization, and that can only meet the temporal requirements of dynamic stabilization through acceleratory technologies» (p. 41).

The Sociology of Speed is a valuable collection of essays, which, thanks to their critical approach, allow moving forward the field of time studies. Furthermore, the reported empirical research goes beyond the recurrent use of anecdotal evidence in studies about social time. Probably the only flaw of the volume is the lack of a fourth part, “Policies”, which would have added additional worth to the selection. To avoid forms of temporal disadvantage or

conflicts between contrasting temporalities is, in fact, the aim of Urban Time Policies, which since the Eighties in Europe have tried to intervene on the temporal well-being of the populations dwelling, working, having fun and moving in the city. These policies are nevertheless limited not only by the scarce chances to act on the pacemakers which *time* the urban space but also by the lack of rigorous methodologies and evaluation tools. Hopefully, the scientific relevance of the contributions collected in this volume will serve as an input for research also in this neglected direction.

DAVIDE RUGGIERI

Olli Pyyhtinen, *The Simmelian Legacy. A Science of Relations*, London : Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, 209 pages.

In the frame of the international sociological debate, a quite large part of sociologists focuses for years on the “relational” issue: the social relations have become *the Mecca* for most of them, and that means not simply new subjects to inquiry or to discover, but a new viewpoint to experience and describe the social realm. In 2013 Dépelteau and Powell edited a well-structured book in two volumes (*Conceptualizing relational sociology. Ontological and theoretical Issues* and *Applying relational sociology. Relations, Networks, and Society*), offering a wide perspective on this theme and on these topical studies. The relational approach is a very frequently recurring topic in the history of sociology: the first author who speaks in explicit terms on the “social relations” is certainly Georg Simmel, who can be considered as the founder of the relational sociology as well as sociology *sensu strictissimo*.

The first aim of Pyyhtinen’s book is to broaden the understanding of Simmel’s work and stress his relevance for many contemporary debates, since his influence does not concern exclusively on the relational debate. What we have inherited, in fact, from Simmel is firstly a certain “mode of thought, a method of