

Analogue Time, People, and the Digital Eclipsing of Modern Political Time

Written by Robert Hassan

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ROBERT HASSAN, AUG 15 2016

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It has been said, perhaps apocryphally, that in 1972 when asked by a Western reporter of his assessment of the 1789 French Revolution, Zhou Enlai, the Chinese prime minister and long-time ally of Chairman Mao, replied that 'It's too soon to tell'. This is one of those tales where it does not matter if it is true or not—it's amusing and thought-provoking at the same time. There's value in that Cho's alleged words may be read as both glib and serious; but what is interesting is that there's a latency as well as a potential *revealing* that stems from the glibness, and this serves to accentuate the seriousness of the point being made.

So what *is* the point? Well, at the risk of putting more words into Cho's mouth, one could have him say that however suddenly a revolution may spring up, to achieve its aims it will necessarily be a *long-run affair*. The passing of a couple of centuries would be the *least time* it would take before an event so historically profound as the French Revolution—by many a hoped-for precursor of the utter transformation of the world by putting Enlightenment thinking into practice—could even begin to look some way assessable, either positively or negatively. When we speak of time in this broad and general way, though, as we tend to do, we miss something very important about the *nature of time* and about what might be called *political time*. And when we think about the nature of political time in the present era, which we will do presently, then disturbing realisations about the future of the institutional political process—politics at both the local and global level—become noticeable. In short, the forms of politics that shaped our modern world were themselves evolved and shaped through a particular relation to time, analogue time. However, this time, and these political processes are being eclipsed and rendered less effective by a new temporal context, a digital context based upon computer networks. The internet and its myriad appurtenances generate and sustain a post-modern *network time* where the long-run political affair characteristic of the modern—be it the evolution of democratic processes between nation-states (Fukuyama, 2011: 245-458), or slow-burning gradualism within states (Havel, 1990: 115)—becomes less sustainable.

Network time suggests an accelerating time, an idea that political theorists such as Kimberley Hutchings (2008:17) and Bill Scheuerman (2004:26-71) argue, is becoming increasingly relevant to how we understand the political process. Some, indeed, such as William E Connolly (2002: 140-176) see social acceleration as potentially a positive thing for democracy. One can certainly agree with thinkers such as these that time is transforming how politics is enacted. However, much of this theorising takes place at a certain level: for example, Scheuerman's otherwise excellent book on liberal democracy and the acceleration of time tells us nothing about why our temporal relationships have been transformed. Likewise, Connolly's nuanced and flexible approach, says a good deal about *speed*, but little about the human experience of time—still less how it may be mediated through communications technology. What this chapter will do is locate the theorisation at what I understand to be the central issue in our new experience of time and politics—which is the relationship between analogue and digital processes, and how the individual and the collective and hence the political, are situated within this new *technological* context. Before we

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come to that, we need first to place time, technology and politics into a wider frame.

Time and the Materialisation of Political Ideas

The rhythms of time for the revolutionary process that began in 1789 were generated by the communication networks that allowed political ideas to disseminate, take root and grow. To understand how this worked, French philosopher Régis Debray laid stress upon what he termed 'the material forms and processes through which [political] ideas were transmitted—the communication networks that enable thought to have social existence' (2007: 5). In other words, to know how ideas materialise from abstract thought to become social reality, we need to know the nature of the communication technologies that relay them. More succinctly: when we speak of political ideas, the medium is a major part of the message.

The epoch that stretched between the Storming of the Bastille and Zhou Enlai's alleged aside to a reporter, Debray labelled the 'graphosphere', or the age of writing. Historian Dena Goodman (1994) referred to the early phase of this era as the 'republic of letters', where major philosophers and politicians and thinkers created their own networks of correspondence that served to materialise their thought and transform their world as a consequence; and more broadly the cultural theorist Benedict Anderson (1982) saw the period as helping to generate a *modern* culture that was based upon the writing, reading and circulation of the printed word to a growingly populous and literate public sphere.

The temporality of the graphosphere was given precision and predictability in its rhythm by the clock, and the clock in its turn gradually regulated and disciplined society as a whole in its business, its industry and its cultures. It created what Paul Virilio (2012:23) termed 'the administration of duration'. Of course politics and the political process were not exempt from this. And so as Western industrialising societies rose and developed to this clock-based rhythmicity, a 'clock-time consciousness' as social geographer Nigel Thrift (1996: 174) termed it, gave shape and context to what he saw as 'the cognitive framework within which political knowledge is interpreted' (p.167).

All this rhythmic coordination was developed and interacted at a pace that was, broadly speaking, a human pace; one that humans more or less could cope with, react to, and reflect within. As noted above, with technological progress, the modern world seemed (has it not always?) to be accelerating—to be slipping away from human control, and given over to the power of machines and industrialisation. Trains, telegraphs, motorcars and airplanes all contributed to the growing rapidity of the world as an increasingly sophisticated communicative space. However, the graphosphere was also an *analogue sphere*. By analogue I mean that its technologies have equivalence with nature and/or correspond with nature in some recognisable way. Indeed, writing – that fundamental communication technology – is itself analogue in both these senses: the written word has an equivalence with the spoken word, and early pictographic writing corresponded to the natural world in its depiction of people, animals, tools and so on. More recent transformative technologies are recognisably analogue also in that the motorcar has its correspondence in the horse, and the airplane finds its equivalent in nature in the bird. The centrally important temporal technology of the clock of course is analogue too in that it roughly corresponds with the rotation of the Earth and its revolutions around the sun.

As Silvia Estévez puts it, for most of human history technologies can be seen as analogue in that they were equivalent to the organic, unfolding and durational processes of humans and their environments and 'whose operations simulated processes that people had seen in nature and in the functioning of their own bodies' (2009: 401). The key point here is that the worlds that humans have constructed through analogue technologies are worlds that they could *recognise* through being modelled on themselves and the environments they lived in. It is a point made famous by Marshal McLuhan in *Understanding Media*, where he argued that mechanical technologies are 'extensions of man' into time, space and nature (1964). From this it's possible to say that modernity itself, in all its diversity, and with its machine and clock-time foundations factored in, was analogue to its core. And it was so most clearly in its specific relationship to the natural world, the world that modern man tried to mimic in his technology development, and that 'industrial man' with his newly acquired modern powers, tried relentlessly to master.

The Analogue and the Digital

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Such analogising might seem to be a banal or obscure point. And it would be had it not been for the rise to domination of the antithesis of the analogue—the digital computer, and its suffusion of every register of life. For his part McLuhan was clear that digital technologies, like analogue, were recognisable in nature and part of nature. He wrote, for instance, in his 1970 *Counterblast* that ‘The new media are not bridges between man and nature – they are nature’ (p.14). For all his insights McLuhan was a philosopher, and very much an epigrammatic one at that. However, regarding the qualities of digital technology in comparison with analogue, we might consider more carefully the opinion of the experts, such as the computer scientists and neurophysiologists who participated in the Macy Conferences on Cybernetics held in New York between 1946 and 1953. At the eighth conference in 1950, Ralph Waldo Gerard, a behavioural scientist, considered the differences in a paper titled ‘Some Problems Concerning Digital Notions in the Central Nervous System’. Gerard argued that analogue and digital processes both functioned in the human brain, but that each expressed a different logic. He wrote that:

[A]n analogical system is one in which one of two variables is continuous on the other, while in a digital system the variable is discontinuous and quantized. The prototype of the analogue is the slide rule, where a number is represented as a distance and there is continuity between greater distance and greater number. The prototype [of the digital] is the abacus, where the bead on one half of the wire is not counted at all, while that on the other half is counted as a full unit. [...] In the analogical system there are continuity relations; in the digital, discontinuity relations (1953: 172).

‘Discontinuity’ is the key point when we speak of technologically metered time and the effects of this upon the individual and society. Clock time is unfolding and continuous and corresponds to nature and to the phenomenology of ‘becoming’. Clock time, throughout modernity, has given analogue shape to our understanding of ‘cause and effect’, which is important in the political process: ‘Why do things happen? And what stems from certain causes?’ Digital (network) time, by contrast is discontinuous and it is much more difficult for us to discern the ‘unfolding’ of events, especially at high speed, and likewise to discern cause and effect. Macy experts such as Gerard saw ‘discontinuity relations’ as little more than an interesting characteristic of digital logic. In the 1950s very few thought that computing would become what it became, and still less could many have anticipated, beyond science fiction writers, that digital computing would dominate society so comprehensively through its capacity to transform technology and network communications.

Since the 1980s this *different category* of techno-logic, one that was subordinate to analogue, has become dominant—with effects we have yet to fully understand. As Arthur C. Clarke (1973: 21) speculated in the early 1970s, the computer is perceived by humans at some level of consciousness as a kind of ‘magic’, so different is it from any previous technology. It transforms (or consigns to obsolescence) existing technologies, and it creates whole new (virtual) realms of human experience. This is a radical qualitative change that we do not appreciate enough in terms of its pervasive temporal and political effects.

The networked computer’s key effects are acceleration and automaticity. The former functions at rates far beyond human cognitive and physical capacities in the communicative process; and the latter is a conscious *engineering out* of the human element from computer processes, a more recent flowering of the cybernetic discoveries that began in the 1940s. Both logics serve to de-link humans from the process of making and communicating—from the ‘material forms and processes’ through which humans functioned in a world they could recognise. The virtual worlds of acceleration and automation create worlds through means we cannot see, through functions we do not control, and through effects that are increasingly unanticipated.

Such has been the rapidity and extensiveness of computerisation, and such has been our collective faith in their problem-solving capacities and life-enhancing potentials, that not only have we not realised that an analogue world was being eclipsed by a digital logic that infiltrates almost every aspect of economy, culture and society, but we have missed something important about ourselves: *that we are analogue people who are becoming trapped in a digital world*. And it is only now with the domination of digital processes in our lives that we have cause to reflect upon and consider the contrast between two competing technological and ontological states.

What does it mean to be analogue creatures in a digital world? And more importantly how do analogue institutions

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such as the processes of liberal democracy function in such a context? As we will see, the nature of time can provide answers to what still might seem to many a bizarre couple of questions. Yet the premise to the questions is not bizarre at all if you think about it—which is precisely the problem—we’ve never had occasion to contrast analogue with digital as an ontological question. Now we do. If we accept the definition of analogue having its basis in nature, and if the technologies we have created have their analogue in nature, then as part of nature we cannot easily exist outside of this interaction; we ourselves *are* nature and therefore analogue beings.

If we care to look, then many important aspects of human endeavour can be seen as analogue processes confronting the challenges of displacement or colonisation by digital logic. For example, the analogue technology of writing, and its mass migration from print to screen from primary school onwards, is a problem in respect to how we understand cognition. What we are and how we think is closely bound up with the technologies we use, and the possible consequences of the radical difference between print and digital writing has hardly been considered beyond marginal voices in remote corners of the academy.

The political process emerges from writing, and it follows that this too is (in its modern forms) irreducibly analogue. The democratic processes to which we still look to provide the means through which individuals and collectives create and enact their political rights and responsibilities within and between nations drew its philosophical energy from the 18th century Enlightenment. And these processes were enticed by the contemporaneous technologies of communication (print and machine and clock) that formed the basis of Debray’s graphosphere.

A useful way to think about the modern political process and its temporality is through the usually derogatory term ‘machine politics’. Originating in late-19th century USA, the term denoted centralised and hierarchical communicative forms, with long-standing connections of political control, and with outcomes that were planned and often predictable. Usually machine politics is considered an undemocratic corruption: think Japanese politics from the 1950s to the present day. Nonetheless to consider institutionalised political processes as *machine-like* does capture its essential elements—elements that can be democratic, or at the very least have affects that may be seen and recognised and have their own unfolding in time and space—for good or ill, or something in between.

We see the rhythms of the political machine still at work in what are the relatively *slow motion* processes within the institutional spheres, from parliaments and congresses, to council chambers and constituency meetings. We see it in the workings of a modern system of control and of planned outcomes in the analogue rhythms of individuals convening to speak and discuss, of voting cycles, of calendar-driven parliamentary and congressional sessions, of research departments that gather information with which to reflect and project, of committee meetings, of published debates, of scheduled ‘hearings’ through which face-to-face and often conflictual interaction takes place, and of government bureaucracies that have set administrative procedures through which the political process is filtered and enacted.

These are the ‘forms and processes’ of Debray’s graphosphere in practice, with analogue people expressing ideas through analogue technologies (writing, print, clock and calendar) that functioned as a recognisable process through time and space—and through which people could enact politics to rhythms that (broadly speaking) reflected those of nature.

Traditionally, this machine-like activity had two specific outcomes. The first is *impact*. This is the very point of the political process—to have an effect upon its surroundings and to transform it at the local and/or global scale. The process is of course fraught and imperfect and subject to all kinds of power contestation. Moreover, the impact of politics may be more or less successful, and may be dependent upon how success is measured at the time, and this measure may change with the passage of time.

The second outcome is more interesting for our purposes. This is the creation of a political *environment*. By trying to transform its environment, the political process creates its own, one that is analogous to nature and, more, was intended to improve upon nature (improve our lives) in tangible and recognisable ways. The political environment was the sphere wherein the philosophical Enlightenment idea of *progress* was created and given practical expression in all kinds of ways since the 18th century. The political environment was thus one where an idealised

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version of the natural world, a Utopia, could be dreamed of, planned for, and sometimes made actual. This political environment unfolded in time and space through what Paddy Scannell (2007:17) called a 'common public time' and this was organised in an analogue mode that people could also recognise because it was a mode that corresponded to the natural world (more or less) and its natural rhythms.

The analogue world created by analogue beings through analogue processes and analogue technologies was so 'natural' that we have barely considered this cornerstone of modernity. However, the digital computer, the machine that David Jay Bolter (1984: 15-40) termed the new 'defining technology' of our post-modern age, has upturned these assumptions.

Preternatural Machines and an Unnatural Political Process

To consider the computer as 'non-analogue' is perforce to consider it *preternatural*, that is to say it's 'beyond nature'. And if it is, then the computer is unprecedented in its importance and is a machine possessed almost of the magical properties to which our species has always been in awe of and susceptible to.

Today we bow before and offer propitiations to a logic we don't really understand and to processes (such as acceleration and automation) that do not exist in nature. The computer's preternatural power stems from the fact that its digital immediacy (as an effect) transcends and makes obsolete the mechanical speed that comprised the speed limit of modernity and the institutional political processes it gave rhythm to.

The networked computer pulls us sharply away from the outmoded modern sphere and its forms and processes. For the digital natives this old world is an increasingly sepia-toned one anyway. But it is a world where the analogue institutions and processes of politics continue to function as though its impact and environment-creation capacity is unchanged. Nonetheless, analogue political time has found itself 'out of synch', as Sheldon Wolin (1997: 47) predicted it would be, with the high-speed temporality of the digital network. This has created a profound temporal contradiction. Politics, in its deep-level forms and processes—if not at its surface level of networked communications—continues as if the world were still analogue, as if it were still 1972; a world prior to the computer revolution and where Zhou Enlai's *longue durée* could still shape the political process, and it could do so because analogue was all there was.

To understand the scale of the contradiction between political time and network time, the concepts of mechanical speed and digital speed need to be delineated. The former is analogue, as we have seen, and has speed limits; its processes can be accelerated only so far before they begin to break down. The latter has no inherent temporal limitations, and is constrained only by the current state of technological capacity, which continues to increase exponentially. Social acceleration and democracy don't mesh particularly well. And as digital communication becomes the basis for the articulation of essentially analogue processes, then the ideas expressed in the political process, and of the democratic process in particular, become both *displaced* and *deformed*. It is the negative effects of this asynchronicity that gives form and content to the preternatural political process that rises to dominance in our post-modernity.

Perhaps the most consequential displacement occurs in the realm of political ideas and their mediation. With the ascendancy of neoliberal thought in the late-1970s, political ideas have become increasingly refracted through the logic of capital. And as Marx recognised a long time ago, capitalism thrives upon growing acceleration, and that technological development gets its dynamism from capitalist competition (time is money). The growing dominion of digital acceleration means that those ideas able to synchronise with the ever-faster pace of economy and society are those that find currency most easily.

Jodi Dean sees the displacement of the traditional political realm by digital capitalism as an expression of the power of 'communicative capitalism', where 'the market becomes the site of democratic aspirations' (2005:54). Ideas that look to the longer term, or reach back reflectively to the past for guidance, or ideas that simply need time to articulate and develop properly in order to reflect the inherent need of the idea itself, become marginalised as they literally take too much time. When time becomes oriented towards instrumental 'efficiency' and when the mantra of 'faster is

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better' is largely unquestioned, then analogue politics becomes increasingly ineffective. It is no longer able to create its own environment wherein it can create and act upon a world that is equivalent to its own analogue capacities.

The machine and clock based 'cognitive framework' that was the diverse and agonistic framework that formed modern political ideas has been captured by the singular ideology of the marketplace logic and the temporal acceleration that is valorised within it. It is in this context of displacement that we can now perhaps understand Perry Anderson's lament that we live in a monopolitical world, where for the first time since the Reformation 'there are no longer any significant oppositions—that is, systematic rival outlooks—within the thought-world of the West' (2000:17).

The politics of modernity—where political forms and processes have recognisable aims and objectives, recognisable as analogues of nature to be worked upon in the creation of a world made better—are being eclipsed. As the analogue political process becomes displaced and marginalised though the negative political power of digital acceleration, *deformations* of the modern political project fan out and proliferate to construct the unnatural politics of our digital post-modernity.

Post-modern Deformities

A post-modern political reality is that social acceleration through digital communication has meant that power percolates up to the level of the corporate boardroom and the political executive. Corporate capital is more powerful than ever before, and CEOs and senior executives need to respond rapidly to economic challenges and opportunities. This much is clear. Less apparent is that in our fast-paced globalised economy and society, the same time-pressures confront political institutions, and their analogue pace is not up to the task. Slow-paced political processes continue in their daily work, of course. Institutions with their committees and legislatures and party structures carry on grinding out platforms and policies and laws. At this level and at this analogue rhythm, politics carries some social meaning still and can function within a recognisable analogue context.

But at the executive level, at the level of the 1% where politics, capital and power intersect, politics essentially flies blind. Political crises and economic imperatives are confronted in hasty and improvised and unrepresentative fashion. The executive is able to act with dispatch—but only to make rapid (and often poorly thought-out) decisions on our behalf. Alexander Hamilton, US founding father, recognised the innate folly in rushing the political process when he wrote that, a 'promptitude of decision is oftener an evil than a benefit' (Hamilton 1788).

An example of this was observed in the opening phase of the 2008 global financial crisis where stock market time pressure for governments to act rapidly was extreme. In September of that year, as the US economy seemed to be spiraling down, the U.S. Senate considered the first of its 'stimulus packages' for its stricken economy. The prevalent feeling was that officials had *only had a weekend* (before the stock exchange reopened) to fix the problem. Senator Lindsay Graham, a Republican representing South Carolina, and present at the crisis meetings declared to a Fox News journalist afterwards that: 'The process that's led to this bill stinks. There is no negotiating going on here! Nobody is negotiating! We're making this up as we go!' (Graham, 2009). When markets are waiting impatiently for signals, and when individuals are not in possession of all the facts nor the necessary time to comprehend them, then 'making it up' is all that can be done.

This is politics conducted in post-modern network time. It occurs in a world of acceleration wherein immediacy governs, not reflection, debate and reasoned decision-making. Power is abstracted and constantly shifts and dissipates and then concentrates and dissipates again, mirroring the random forces of the marketplace where nothing is certain and nothing can be held to proper political and democratic scrutiny. Paul Virilio (1995) termed such a context, a 'dictatorship of speed'.

Perhaps most ominously the alienated and inauthentic politics of network time flourishes among the 99% also. The 'masses' have reached out to information technologies as substitute means of political communication because the analogue political parties and institutions of class based organisation are either dependent upon the neoliberal consensus or are depleted of political power and/or credibility. The 99% no longer have a recognisable 'other'

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against whom struggles may be conducted, nor political institutions in which they can invest.

The buds of the 2011 Arab Spring, for instance, seemed to portend a political flowering through social media, a Facebook revolution where the digital was adapted for democracy. But its millions of activists were thrust into an accelerated sphere where their Enlightenment-derived aspirations were too far out of synch with both the temporality of the ideas and the political realities of the region. The political analogue of nature's 'grassroots' could not find the soil in which to strike, nor the time for their cultivation. There were in fact no buds because there is no analogue for soil in the network. Here as in all putative 'digital politics' there is, as Moisés Naím (2014) observes:

a powerful political engine running in the streets of many cities. It turns at high speed and produces a lot of political energy. But the engine is not connected to wheels, and so the 'movement' doesn't move. Achieving that motion requires organisations capable of *old-fashioned* and permanent political work that can leverage street demonstrations into political change and policy reforms. In most cases, that means political parties.

Political parties that aspire to be democratic and connected to the people are indeed 'old-fashioned'. They are also, necessarily, analogue. Old-fashioned parties can be reactionary, too, of course, and those that were organised, as in Egypt, and were disciplined with intact institutions of economic, cultural, political and military power, were able to sweep aside forms of digital organisation that dissipated as rapidly as they formed.

Analogue Epilogue?

Like many artists, Václav Havel saw society at a slightly different angle from the rest of us. Often the artist's insights are perspicacious. Also a democrat and philosopher living in Stalinist Czechoslovakia, Havel was acutely aware of the political role of temporality and of communication technologies. Time in prison, time in waiting and organising, perhaps confident that such a system could not endure over the *longue durée*, was an Enlightenment relationship with time that was analogue. In the pre-1989 Czech graphosphere communication between dissidents was fully analogue also: *samizdat*-based that was conducive to thought, debate, reflection, planning and establishing and nurturing political roots within the idealised environment that Havel and others created.

Havel did not naively imagine a Utopia in the West, however. In the late 1970s, time and distance from the West had enabled him to see where western 'post-totalitarian' societies were headed through emergent information-based technologies. And he could recognise the coming inability, though 'planetary technology' that is 'out of control', for humans to recognise themselves in nature:

What we call the consumer and industrial (or post-industrial) society...is perhaps merely an aspect of the deep crisis in which humanity, dragged helplessly along by the automatism of global technological civilisation, finds itself (Havel 1978:55).

And post-industrial (or what I've termed post-modern) politics give no protection against the onslaught of digital automatism. Havel continues:

It would appear that the traditional parliamentary democracies can offer no fundamental opposition to the automatism of technological civilisation and the industrial-consumer society, for they, too, are being dragged helplessly along by it (pp.55-56).

Havel could see clearly the symptoms but not the cause. How could he? The dualism of analogue and digital is only now emerging with the latter's ascendancy. But he could see the threat of technology upon the political process. Looking back it is possible to see that Havel and millions of other thinking, reflective people, West and East, were living in *authentic analogue time* and in an analogue political process in its end phase. We have the contrasting force of digitality to enable us to see that now—and to understand what knowledge of it allows us to see. We are now able to see the value of the analogue relationship with time, and to consider ourselves as analogue creatures that are part of nature. And we can also appreciate, at least vaguely, what the digital universe deprives us of—an authentic (at least in terms of analogue time) relationship with political process so deeply shaped by technology. Even the

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Stalinism that Havel fought against was temporally authentic, in its way, as was social democracy or old-fashioned conservatism.

Salutary to consider that unless we make the temporal within the political salient—and make efforts to give it back over to human and analogue agency—then the modern political process will slip further towards a state of acceleration and automation, and thence from any potential for democratic control. It would be a terrible and ignominious end for a modern political process (and project) to be eclipsed by technological speed and market imperatives. But, to quote the poet Lawrence Joseph from his 'Visions of Labour', this would be a mistake of our own manufacture: 'Makers, we, of perfectly contemplated machines' (Joseph, 2015:17) who will have become unable through lack of time to contemplate what we have actually made.

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