

Review Feature – Temporality in International Relations

Written by Asli Calkivik

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ASLI CALKIVIK, DEC 9 2021

War Time: Temporality and the Decline of Western Military Power
Edited by Sten Rynning, Olivier Schmitt, and Amelie Theussen
Brookings Institution Press, 2021

International Relations and the Problem of Time
By Andrew Hom
Oxford University Press, 2020

The books under review speak closely to the “temporal turn” in IR as time and temporality take center stage both as crucial factors in the making of world politics and concepts to be reckoned with. There is a growing literature that explicitly engages with time and temporality such as (to name only a few) Kimberly Hutchings’s *Time and World Politics*, Michael Shapiro’s *Time of the City*, Anna Agathangelou and Kyle Killian’s edited volume *Time, Temporality and Violence in International Relations*, Tom Lundborg’s *Politics of the Event*, Rahul Rao’s *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality* and E-IR’s open-access publication *Time, Temporality and Global Politics* edited by Andrew Hom et.al.

Rynning and colleagues’ *War Time* is predominantly a policy-oriented book that incorporates temporality as an analytical category to shed light on the past, present and future of “Western military power.” By contrast, Andrew Hom’s theoretically informed analysis in *International Relations and the Problem of Time* tackles broader question of time, or more precisely, practices of timing to explore forms of writing world politics. Reading the two books with and against each other is productive to the extent that it helps the reader reflect more closely on the stakes entailed in the temporality of world politics, and what it means to take seriously the problem of time. As discussed below, Hom’s sophisticated theoretical account of time provides important clues about *how not* to study “war time” as it is elaborated by Rynning et.al.

The main aim of *War Time* is articulated clearly in the opening pages of the edited volume: “to take a fresh look at why ‘the West’ is overwhelmingly powerful on the battlefield yet also strategically fragile” (p.1). The starting point for the book is the observation that the “Western ‘victory’ in the Cold War” and the liberal triumphalism in its aftermath has given way over the past decade to questions about the fate of the West as a force in world politics and the fortunes of the international liberal order. Rather than seeking to provide a definitive answer to these questions, the edited volume aims to provide new insights regarding the past and future Western military hegemony by introducing temporality as an “anchoring concept” (p.2). There is very limited theoretical discussion and conceptual elaboration of time and temporality and almost no engagement with the existing literature. The editors merely note their broad usage of the concept of temporality, understood as the relations between past, present and future in the “experience and thought among actors” (p.2). The main questions animating the chapters are summarized as follows: “How Western political and military institutions carry certain perceptions of time; how perceptions of time shape Western conduct in war; and what it means for the future of Western military power” (p.11).

The dynamic inter-relation and tensions between the military—“the warring part of society”—and its more civil, political side is a thread that weaves various chapters and the concerns of the editors together. A working hypothesis about the trials and travails of Western military power is that the possible decline and potential come back of Western

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military power is closely tied up with the fate of “civic militarism”. Regarded as “uniquely Western”, civic militarism is “defined as self-governing citizens committed to both martial values and the defense of their public” (p.19). The authors suggest that this civic – or, alternatively, liberal – militarism rests upon “transcendent and progressive,” rather than “cyclical and pragmatic” understandings of time. The book then asks whether these understandings are fading in Western institutions, which thus weakens the fundamentals of Western military power (p.20).

War Time is divided into three main sections: the first explores the institutional context of the foundations of Western military power by focusing on both its domestic (such as the relation between state development and financing of war) and international aspects (i.e., NATO as an institutional site of inter-state cooperation as well as military strategic culture). The second section approaches the same theme by elaborating on the normative context as a foundation of Western military power. The third and final section attends to how new information and communication technologies change the character of war and impact the West’s ability to generate military power as new technologies impose an ever-faster pace on modern warfare. Each of these three sections close with a hypothetical scenario chapter where the authors tell a fictive story to narrate what they see as possible ways in which the issues raised could come together to diminish Western military power.

The assertion in *War Time* to anchor analyses in time relies less on conceptual clarification and theoretical elaboration and more upon empirical observations about the increasing speed of new military technologies and what that might mean for military strategic thought and practice. Working with a binary conception that pits the West against the non-West, militarism against liberal values, the volume is wanting in its understanding of war, states, and armies, as it is caught up in the “territorial trap” and Eurocentric imaginaries. Reading *War Time* along with Hom’s engagement with *The Problem of Time* lends credence to the latter’s observation that “time remains a cottage industry in IR rather than a basic topic of reflection in theory development and refinement or conceptual and political foundation in its own right” (p.8). Especially pertinent in this regard is Hom’s observation that accelerationist discourse—a guiding theme in *War Time*—is reifying and deterministic, resting on a narrow understanding of the relation between time and technology.

Hom considers time as fundamental to international politics and its disciplinary study. The book provides an in-depth analysis of time as a philosophical and political problem. One of the main propositions of the book is that we need to shift our focus from the ontological *question of time* per se to the historical, sociological, political *question of timing practices*. Hom premises the theoretical and conceptual framework of his analyses on Norbert Elias’s sociological account, which reveals timing as “an act of intellectual and practical synthesis, a basic means of establishing relationships between events, processes and people” (p.35). Practices of timing are enmeshed with relations of power since they organize processes of change hierarchically, thereby producing certain dominant discourses of temporal sequences of social change, which preclude others. Hom proposes that we read all references to time and temporality as “timing indexicals, or symbolic discursive markers of underlying timing efforts” (p.47). An important conclusion ensuing from this observation is that the “will to time” is concomitant with the “will to power”, since practices of timing entail hierarchy and imposition. This argument becomes all the more pertinent when thought along with Rynning et al.’s volume. It incites questions about the extent to which the latter’s project to rein in the problems associated with the practices of timing (will to time) pertaining to West’s overwhelming military power and its increasing fragility could be read as a similar expression of a will to power.

The second part of Hom’s book investigates the timing practices undergirding International Relations as a scholarly discourse. Hom explores “whose or which will to time is implied and reproduced by a particular IR theory and whether this accommodates or does interpretative violence to a given situation” (p.52). The opening chapter of the section attends to three moments of timing crisis in world politics that are also key in the discipline’s narrative of itself: World War I, the invention of thermonuclear weapons, and the end of the Cold War. Hom investigates how the experience of “discordant change” disrupts the narratives and how scholars respond to it through narrative rectification. The subsequent chapters excavate the narrative timing techniques of IR methodologies and exposes “neopositivism as a science fiction predicted on time travel, critical realism as a brand of theology, and interpretivism as a more empirical and realistic approach to social scientific inquiry” (p.21). This analysis provides an important addition to Hutchings’s discussion in her *Time and World Politics*, where she investigates narratives of world politics as always and inescapably undergirded by presumptions about time and temporality.

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Hom's intervention is conceptually rich, theoretically sound, and, just as importantly, "timely" in terms of ongoing conversations about time in IR because of its insistence on moving questions of time and temporality from the register of ontology (the question of time) to the question over power and politics (question of timing practices). Although a concept—change—that is central to the overall thesis is left undertheorized, as rightfully pointed out by Hutchings, Hom nevertheless succeeds in persuading the reader to his initial assertion that time is indeed fundamental to international politics and IR through his theoretically sound, very detailed and comprehensive account.

Given their strengths and weaknesses, what these two books ultimately reveal is the extent to which the turn to time is a much needed and important move in theorizing world politics. Further, they show how and why not all turns to time provide the conceptual and theoretical openings that are urgently needed to re-think world politics at the end of times.

About the author:

Dr. Asli Calkivik is an Associate Professor at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Istanbul Technical University. Dr. Çalkivik's research focuses on political violence and international security, politics of time and international hierarchies, epistemological issues pertaining to disciplinary knowledge production. Her research has been published in international journals such as *International Politics*, *Cultural Critique*, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, *International Political Sociology*, *International Studies Review*.