

Revolutionary Temporalities: A Programmatic Reflection on Xu and Reed (2023)

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I. INTRODUCTION¹

It's particularly meaningful to me to engage with this *specific* article, because it gives me a chance to continue an ongoing conversation that Xiaohong and I had been having about time and temporality in recent years, and hopefully also a chance to carry that conversation into the future with the help of all of you—his students, other graduate students, and the rest of us gathered here today.

The charge that I gave myself for today was twofold: first, as I just suggested, to continue my ongoing conversation with Xiaohong (knowing that he wouldn't want me to shy away from critical points!); and second, to highlight and draw out some key themes and avenues for future work that might encourage others to pick up Xiaohong's mantle and run with it. I want to do this by suggesting three ways in which I think we can further open up the implications of the article's argument. These are: (1) by moving beyond the contentious temporality of the present; (2) by transcending dualistic (or triadic) conceptions of time; and (3) by disentangling temporal experience from performance.

These points shouldn't be read as criticisms of the article per se. First off, I'm no China expert. Secondly, as I'm not engaging here with the explanatory argument per se, I'm not suggesting that any of these points undercut it. Third, the seeds of many—if not all—of these points can be found in the article itself. Rather, I'm raising and elaborating on these points to help the article along in its effort to catalyze *new* scholarship on time and temporality in revolutionary contexts (something that was clearly very important to Xiaohong).

II. BEYOND THE CONTENTIOUS TEMPORALITY OF THE PRESENT

Let me begin with my first point, which is that, while in some senses the article is about temporality broadly construed, it really focuses on the contentious temporality of the *present*. Or, to put it a little differently, it focuses on political struggles *in* the present over what *kind* of time we're living through. I think the article could do more to consider how this interpretation of the present relates to conceptions of the past and the future—and to temporal continuities and discontinuities more generally.

¹ I dedicate these remarks to the memory of my friend and colleague, Xiaohong Xu. May the many seeds he has planted through his thought, actions, and relations continue to grow, bear fruit, and flourish for many years to come.

The article does a great job of demonstrating how the temporality of the present moment can become an object of *interpretive contestation*. Specifically, it poses the questions of how political actors frame moments as being expressions of revolutionary “*new time*”? How and when they might cast (or recast) these same episodes as “*carnival time*”? And what’s at stake in this distinction?² In this way, the article—especially in its empirical analysis—is more about framing the temporality of the present than it is about working through the full implications of the sociology of time and temporalities for the study of revolutions. (This is no fault of the article—that would be a tall order!)

But I do want to introduce a minor point of critique here about the practical implications of this narrower focus: it can be all too easy to slip from a focus on various actors’ claims about *time* to a focus on their claims about *one another* (about their legitimate “revolutionary-ness,” in a more ideological sense).³ This line became a bit fuzzy for me in the empirical analysis. Don’t get me wrong—the framing of actors and their actions matters, too. But this article is gesturing toward a *lot* more than just a traditional frame analysis of revolutionary claims-making. And I think that the slippage I was feeling was partly an artifact of focusing on framings of the present, without focusing enough on framings of the past and future—and *how these relate* to framings of the present. That is, while the framing of the present *matters*, it’s inseparable from the framing of the past and future.

It seems to me that the real question for the historical actors here is not so much about the character of the present moment as it is about the relationship of the past to the future, and the meaning that the answer to this question confers *upon* action in the present. Fortunately, there’s a robust literature out there on collective memory, much of which focuses on revolutions and other forms of contentious politics. And there an emerging literature—drawing largely on phenomenological and pragmatist traditions—on how visions and anticipations of the *future* shape understandings *of* and actions *in* the present. (And I’d flag for the political sociologists in the room that there’s still a lot of work to be done to link this with the work on collective memory and contentious politics.)

Further, it strikes me that at the crux of the matter of how actors interpret the present—and in particular, of whether they understand it as “carnival” time or “new” time—is the question of historical continuity and discontinuity. The article is clear about this, of course. “Carnival time” implies an inevitable return to the status quo ante, which is projected to continue well into the future (or something like arrow #1 in Figure 1), whereas “new time” posits a radical discontinuity between the past and the present—a present that’s expected to extend forward in time (or something like arrow #3). But I think more might be done with this down the road, if for no other reason than the simple fact that asking about continuity and discontinuity implies the question: “continuity and discontinuity *with what?*” –which compels us to engage more systematically with issues of collective memory and imagined futures. This shifts our focus from

² *Author’s Note:* The accompanying slide, not included here, summarized the question thusly: “Is the present moment one of revolutionary ‘new’ time or just ‘carnival’ time?”

³ *Author’s Note:* The accompanying slide, not included here, attempted to clarify by introducing the question: “Are the actors and organizations doing things in the present ‘revolutionary’ in the correct sense, to the right degree, and in alignment with the appropriate authorities?”

a narrower research agenda on contestation over the character of the present, to a broader one about how claims regarding the past and future figure into claims about the present.

Let me pause here to flag a few suggestions for future research (and I'm directing these especially toward the grad students in the room): (1) continue pushing on the agenda laid out here, on the contested temporalities of the present; (2) work toward a more systematic integration of the scholarship on collective memory and imagined futures—as these are integral to the politics of time in the present; (3) pay attention to how the framing of the present involves claims as much about the past, future, and continuities and discontinuities with these, as it does with the “kind” of time the present moment represents (i.e., new vs. carnival).

III. TRANSCENDING DUALISTIC (OR TRIADIC) CONCEPTIONS OF TIME

To make my next point, I want to telescope out a bit and consider why the article's way of engaging with the temporality of revolution is so focused on characterizing historical periods.

It seems to me that it's because of the Durkheimian conception of time that it takes as its jumping off point. The article begins by establishing the ubiquity of what the authors call “dualistic” conceptions of time in historical sociology (see Figure 2). They make important critiques of this conception that I largely agree with. They then attempt to transcend this dichotomy by introducing a third category—that of revolutionary “new” time (see Figure 3). It's what the authors call the “ambiguity of unsettledness” of the present moment that opens the door for contentious performances. This ambiguity is regarding whether the moment should be thought of as carnival time (after which one should expect a return to routine) or new time (which should mark a decisive break with the past—a possibility that modernity opens up).

But I wonder if modernity presents more possibilities for the contestation of temporalities than the article acknowledges (see Figure 4). I wonder if, behind the dualistic conception of time (on which they build their triadic conception) there is a conflation of traditional and modern temporalities (or rather, an occlusion of the complexities of modern temporalities)? Another way of putting this: Is there a difference between the balance between ordinary time and carnival time in traditional societies and the analogous balance in modern societies (a difference beyond the possibility that the article introduces—that in modernity, periods of carnival time might be constructed and understood as “new” revolutionary time)? My point is that modernity opens up a wider range of possibilities for temporal experience; and this introduces more room for other interpretive ambiguities (analogous to the carnival/new time distinction); and this paves the way for other forms of temporal contestation. But recognizing this may require transcending the Durkheimian dualistic framing, and perhaps even this article's triadic framing.

Let me pause again here to flag a couple *more* suggestions for future research: (1) continue to wrestle with the dualistic conception of time, as there are reasons why so many have found it compelling, and reasons why it remains deeply flawed (or at least very partial); and (2) attend to how modern temporalities may create more, or different, opportunities for contestation over the interpretation of time (beyond introducing the possibility of revolutionary new time).

IV. DISENTANGLING TEMPORAL EXPERIENCE FROM PERFORMANCE

I don't have another arrow for you here, just one more distinction to introduce: that between the *experience* of time and its contentious *performance*.

The article's approach to temporality is broadly subjectivist, in the sense of recognizing the many ways in which time, its perception, and its meanings are socially and culturally constructed. But under this umbrella are a range of approaches that lead us to ask different sorts of questions. Specifically, I felt some conflation in the article between approaches highlighting the phenomenological *experience* of time with approaches highlighting how the meaning of time can be contested and used strategically through political *performance*. (And to be clear in my critique, here: It's especially in the empirical section that I felt the focus shift heavily in the direction of performance, whereas the theoretical setup did a better job of incorporating phenomenological and pragmatist approaches.)

So let me just take a second to draw out this distinction (see Figure 5). Whereas approaches highlighting the political performance of temporality focus their attention on how political leaders frame and contest the interpretation of time, approaches highlighting the phenomenological experience of time focus their attention on how leaders' and followers' interpretations of time shapes their contentious action. The former approaches tend toward questions like, "How do leaders contest and perform the interpretation of time that favors them (and that they're hoping to bring about through their very performance)?" The latter approaches tend toward questions like, "How do leaders' and followers' experiences and consequent interpretations of time (including their views of the past, present, and future, as well as understandings of existing stability/change dynamics) motivate, inform, or otherwise shape their actions in the present?" To be clear, I'm not implying that there's a theoretical contradiction here—indeed, I think these are deeply complementary questions. But keeping them analytically distinct seems useful insofar as it makes it possible to investigate how these processes relate to one another.

And so here's a final set of suggestions for future research: (1) continue to mine performativity and speech act theory, but also (2) dig deeper into the rich phenomenological and pragmatist work out there; and (3) work toward a better *integration* of these approaches—which promises a better understanding of how the experience of temporality (amongst leaders *and* followers) relates to the performance of contentious temporal interpretations, in ways that shape revolutionary outcomes.

V. CONCLUSION

Let me end where I began: with an invitation—and hopefully a little *provocation*—to continue the conversation that Xiaohong and Isaac initiated with their creative, sophisticated, and intellectually inspiring article. It stands ready to spark a new wave of revolution studies that are particularly sensitized to questions of time, temporality, and "newness."

It's been my deepest privilege and honor to call Xiaohong my friend and colleague. I'll miss him dearly. But I'll rest assured knowing how generative his work is destined to be for future scholars struggling to understand contentious politics in its many manifestations.

FIGURES

I. Beyond the Contentious Temporality of the Present

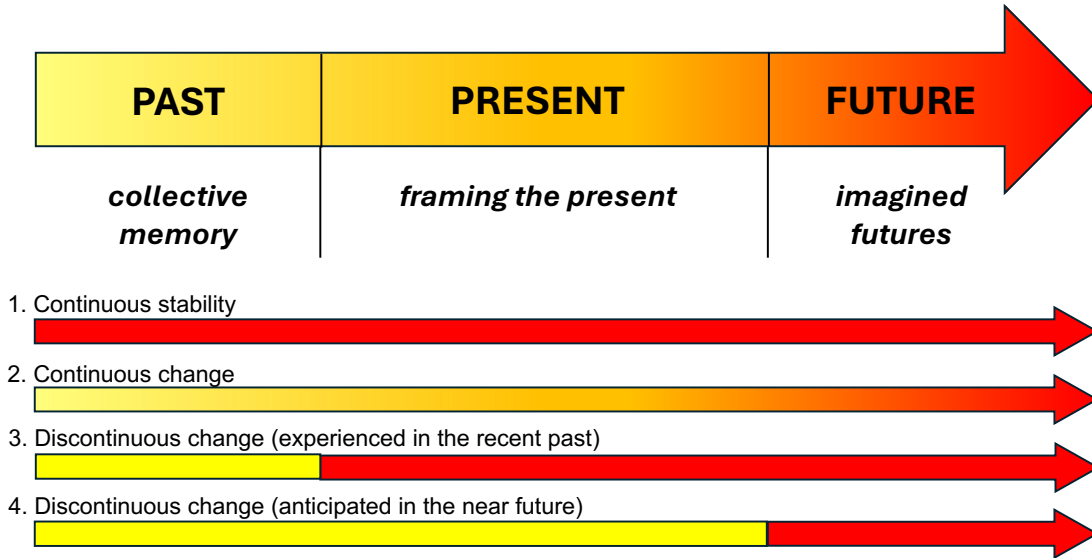


Figure 1: Representations of Continuity and Discontinuity in the Relationship Between Stability and Change

II. Transcending Dualistic (or Triadic) Conceptions of Time

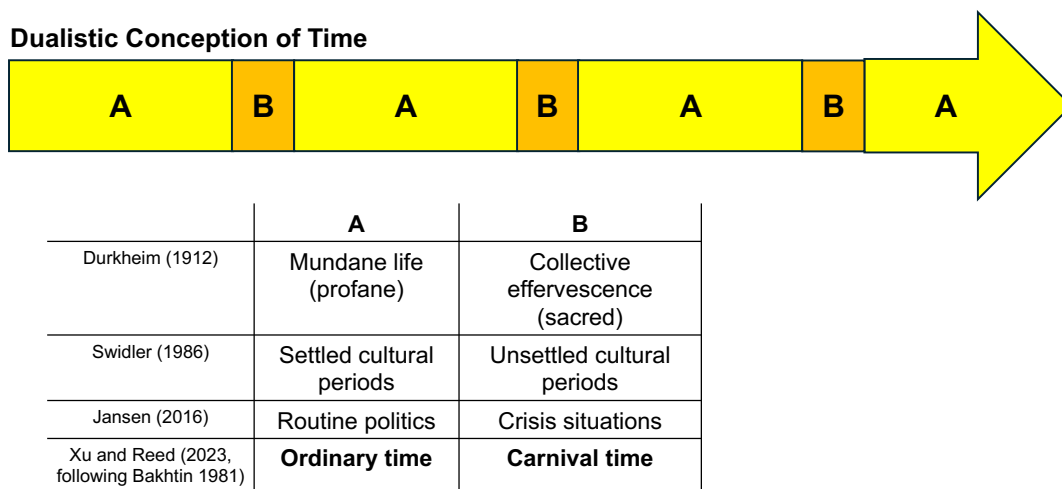


Figure 2: The (Durkheimian) Dualistic Conception of Time

II. Transcending Dualistic (or Triadic) Conceptions of Time

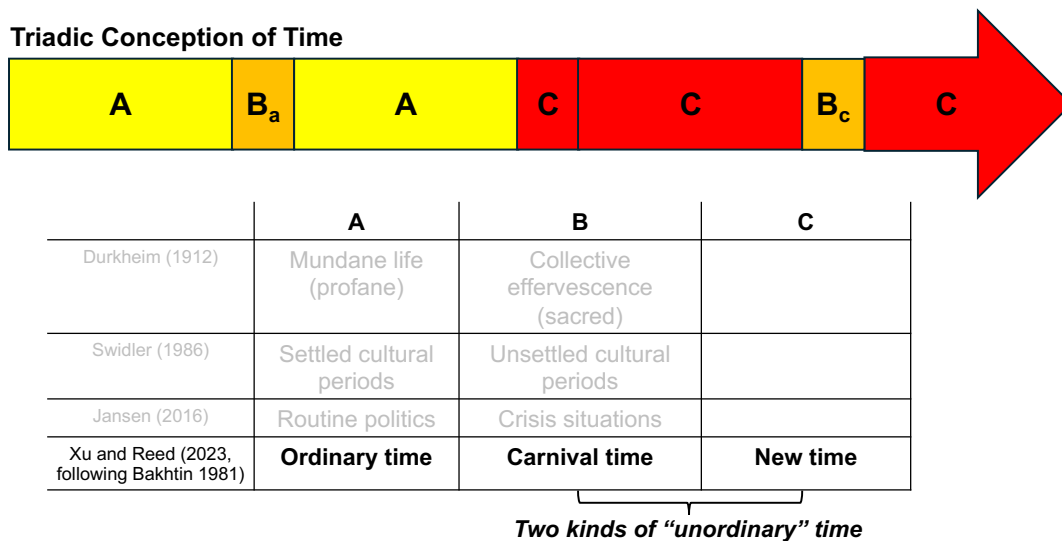


Figure 3: The Triadic Conception of Time

II. Transcending Dualistic (or Triadic) Conceptions of Time

	Traditional Temporalities	Modern Temporalities
Ordinary Time	<p>Cyclical Continuous stability</p>	<p>Dynamic Continuous change</p> <p><i>Potential for ambiguity / contestation over...</i></p> <p><u>Direction</u> of change <u>Reversals</u> in direction <u>Pace</u> of change <u>Rhythms</u> of change</p>
Carnival Time	<p>Extra-ordinary</p> <p>Meaning is relative to ordinary time (as disruption or inversion of traditional hierarchies)</p>	<p>Extra-ordinary</p> <p>Meaningful for what it implies about ongoing and dynamic change processes</p> <p><i>Potential for ambiguity / contestation over...</i></p> <p>Historical <u>continuity/discontinuity</u> (New Time) "Crisis" v. predictable "<u>punctuation</u>" (of "equilibrium") Whether moment represents a <u>change in change dynamics</u></p>

Figure 4: Ordinary and Carnival Time in “Traditional” vs. “Modern” Societies

III. Disentangling Temporal Experience from Performance

Performance of Temporality	Experience of Temporality
<p>Performativity & Speech Act Theory Strategic Framing</p> <p><i>Contestation <u>over</u> interpretation of time</i></p> <p><i>Focuses attention on leaders</i></p> <p>Q: How do leaders contest and perform the interpretation of time that favors them—and that they’re hoping to bring about through that very performance?</p>	<p>Phenomenology & Pragmatism Experiential Understanding</p> <p><i>Interpretation of time <u>shapes</u> contentious action</i></p> <p><i>Focuses attention on leaders and followers</i></p> <p>Q: How do leaders’ and followers’ experiences and consequent interpretations of time (including their views of the past, present, and future, as well as understandings of existing stability/change dynamics) motivate, inform, or otherwise shape their actions in the present?</p>

Figure 5: Disentangling Temporal Experience from Performance

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