

Gender, Time and Biographical Narrative

Contents

1. Through the Lens of Time and Gender
2. Social Change, Gender and New Time Perspectives
3. Young Women and the Multiplicity of Life Times
4. Conclusion
5. Bibliography

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1. Through the Lens of Time and Gender

The topics for reflection in these pages are time and gender. From the perspective of the social sciences, both dimensions can be considered cultural constructs as well as forms of experience, each shaped historically and socially. Both constantly run the risk of reification: of becoming seen as “things” in the Durkheimian sense – “concrete” dimensions, independent from the ways in which men, women and social groups live them and conceptually process them¹. In the case of time, one tends to forget that it is people, individually and collectively, in their reciprocal relations and relation to events, who create the time that social universes will subsequently structure. In the case of gender, the tendency is often to “naturalize” it, simply making it a different name for biological sex, above all after the recent diffusion of the term in social analysis². In this way it is deprived of its specific trait: being the expression of how power relations between men and women have been articulated through time, and of the discursive justification created for this purpose.

Through time we give order to our flow of experience, structuring it on the basis of significant sequential relations. Through gender, taken as a system of cultural meanings interwoven with asymmetries in male/female relationships throughout history, we open the road to a subjectivity conscious of its social and material origins. If we combine the two visual angles – the temporal and that of gender (more specifically, if we read time *through* gender) – we are able to look at dimensions of experience formerly immersed in a shadow cone. In particular, placing the relations between men and women at the center of a reflection about time has a profound impact on its conceptualization. Through this perspective emerge new figures of time, while consolidated analytical itineraries³ give way to new perspectives. Thus, for example, a “polychronal” view of

time where several meanings coexist within the same temporal unit, can replace a “monochronal”⁴ view; or the inseparability of nature and culture within human experience of time (Adam 1995, 1998) can take the place of a view that is counter to it.

Taking a gender viewpoint in studying ways of constructing temporal experience, we become aware, among other things, of the processes through which some forms of temporal representation, taken as socio-historic constructs, have been devalued and rendered marginal. For example, indicating them as dimensions associated with “natural” or “cyclical” aspects of time through reference to women. The centuries-old hegemony of industrial time has certainly deprived of strength, while not totally obscured, those temporal experiences extraneous to the logic of quantitative, abstract and linear time. On the contrary, attention to the gender dimension may make it possible to bring these experiences back from the periphery to the center of analysis.

Today, in a period of transition toward other frontiers of time (Bauman 2000) and work (Beck 1999), a “decentralized” look at time, such as derives from assuming gender as an analytic reference point, can be a highly valuable resource. It enables us to sketch a scenario in which the figure of “plural times” – which directly refer to the multiplicity of times-of-life and has the task of conceptually representing them – plays a starring role. In this article, I will focus on this multiplicity taken as a reference point to analyze the ways in which young women face the transition to adulthood and construct their biographies. Before doing that, it is useful to briefly reflect upon the ways in which the conceptualization of time as a multiple, non-hierarchical dimension has come to the fore in recent decades.

2. Social Change, Gender and New Time Perspectives

Starting at end of the sixties, together with other social movements, the feminist movement directly contributed to undermining a mechanical conception of time, conceived as an “external,” “objective” dimension, and highlighted alternative conceptualizations of time (Irigaray Luce 1989; Kristeva 1981). Notwithstanding the heterogeneity of its approaches, the women’s movement emphasized the wealth of temporal aspects of the human existence and called into question the dominance of the formulation of “time as quantity”. Within this analytical framework, historical, social and corporeal times interpenetrate as sources of meaning - an approach that points to the need for a different representation of time, shaped by a non-hierarchical conception.

On a different analytical level, it is important to take into consideration the role played in the modification of the Newtonian image of time as homogeneous, linear and rigid by the crisis in the Fordist model in contemporary Western societies. Built on a very formalized and temporally quite

rigid production system “conceding almost negligible control to the worker over the design, pace and scheduling of the production process” (Harvey 1990, 128), Fordism also emphasized an idea of social time constructed around the dominant role of long and routine labor hours, strictly separated from other existential times. In a regime of mass production and standardized mass consumption, no space was left to the subjective perception of time: the mechanical time of the clock dominated both work time and leisure time. Thus, a “non-temporal time” (Adam 1995, 91) ended up enveloping in a compact way both work and life.

Within the Fordist system, gender membership was a factor that produced above all social and economic marginality for many women. If industrial society transformed the open character of human time into a system of abstract temporal units, rigidly compartmentalized and synchronized by the clock (as well as unified by standardization), Fordism gave further legitimacy to this representation. In its framework, work is conceived as “a linear, unidirectional, binding career”; it “tends to be tailored to the biography of the father/family head, who devotes himself full time to his work which, in turn, is placed at the top of the hierarchy of temporal allocations and presupposes flexibility in the care-time provided by women working ‘behind the scenes’” (Paolucci 1996, 156, own translation).

The crisis of Fordism that takes shape starting halfway through the Sixties marks, as is known, a real, true “second industrial divide” (Piore and Sabel 1984). The production systems are restructured and become flexible on the basis of the new role assumed within their structure by knowledge and communication together with new information technologies. Consequently, the rigidity of work gives way to a growing differentiation, fragmentation and individualization of work. The transformations that this crisis produces not only on the production level, but also socially and culturally, appear profound (Amin 1994; Hall and Jacques 1989; Kumar 1995). The institutions lose strength in their ability to make rules; life styles and values multiply, processes of individualization in all existential spheres increase; social ties are redefined; the private sphere of life gains new centrality.

Gender relationships also profoundly change. Women, thanks to new levels of education, enter the job market as protagonists and make their exclusive identification with the universe of reproductive work obsolete. The male and female biographies become more similar, while care-taking takes on new visibility - also in relationship to the new centrality that in the productive processes come to assume immaterial dimensions linked to knowledge and the sphere of relationships.

Radical transformations in the organization and representation of time distinguish these processes. While in business, time passes from being a criterion for measuring to a criterion of organization, in social life, speed and promptness but also discontinuity and temporal fragmentation take on an

unprecedented importance. In particular, simultaneousness as a reference parameter not only for economic transactions, but also for everyday social and communicative interaction transforms in a profound way the ways of constructing and transmitting experience. With the spread of what has been correctly defined as the new “cult of urgency” (Aubert 2003), the temporal pressure exerted on subjects in turn intensifies while the new “short term” mentality replaces the “long term” one (Bauman 2001, 23). As a side effect, nevertheless, this true crisis of temporal experience also produces new spaces for creativity, for elaboration and definition of time.

The indisputable protagonists of this process of restructuring temporal categories appear to be women involved in daily “temporal experiments” linked to the re-definition of their self-identity. An incessant building of bridges between private life and public life, between the world of paid work and the family/love life universe, between concrete and abstract existential dimensions in fact characterizes their biographies. As a result, they mature both a special familiarity with the conflicts and ambivalences as well as a special consciousness of the heterogeneity and plurality of times-of-life (Balbo 1991). In an age characterized by relevant structural and cultural changes, their experience therefore plays a primary role in honing new models of relationship with time. In effect, the “disenchantment of time” (Pronovost 1996, 65) that accompanies the end of the hegemony of work-tied temporal norms of the “first modernity”, starting with a full-employment policy⁵, basically spurs us to question ourselves about the definition of different *units of meaning*. Through them we must be able to reconstruct a significant nexus between time, work and life. At stake is the need to break down rigid dichotomies, such as productive versus reproductive time, or instrumental versus expressive time, upon which the temporal edifice of modernity (and of the Fordist regime) rests. The temporal experiences of young women that I will now focus upon, is intended to contribute toward the charting of this framework.

3. Young Women and the Multiplicity of Life Times

Is it possible to identify gender-related differences in the way individuals face problems associated with the transition toward adulthood in our “society of uncertainty”⁶? The answer must be found on the basis of an analysis of the accelerated transformations that have characterized women’s biographic construction in the last forty years of the 20th century (Duby and Perrot 1992). The higher level of education and the consequent newly acquired economic independence of women; the construction of an identity unrelated to univocal itineraries exclusively centered on the private sphere of life; the possibility or necessity to count more and more on oneself when defining the different biographic steps: from a subjective point of view these processes imply that

“women today increasingly develop, and must develop, expectations, wishes and life projects which relate not only to the family but also to their own persons. They can no longer think of themselves just as an ‘appendage’ of the family, but must increasingly come forward as individuals with their own interests and rights, plans and choices” (Beck-Gernsheim 2003, 90).

However, this transformation of the existential horizons of women has been only partly accompanied by a complementary modification of men’s horizons, toward an assumption of responsibility in the management of the family time. The “double burden” still remains a specific characteristic of women’s biographic construction. The biographic narration that the great majority of young women choose to develop, projecting themselves in the future, is organized around this double burden. However, this narration – and this is the thesis I wish to assert here – not only anticipates existential contradictions which are, as such, unlikely to be solved and which only may be negotiated as they surface; nor just aspects of time overload, of burn-out, in the management of everyday life. It also makes it possible, in a positive sense, to conceptualize the particular richness of the time experience of many women, the ways and forms through which they synchronize different times, creating *ex novo*, from a multiplicity of existential times, a unitary time system. More generally speaking, by analyzing the characteristics of this narration, we may reflect on the ways a large number of young women face, and in some aspects overturn, the social uncertainty characterizing their transition to adulthood. To fully appreciate the innovative traits of these ways, it is however appropriate to make a brief digression into the specifically gender-related nature of time experience.

Feminist literature has in recent years cast light on different aspects of this experience (see Adam 1995; Davies 1990; Jurczyk 1998; Odih 1999; Saraceno 1987). With reference to our theme, it is above all important to underscore the *plural and interdependent* traits of the representation of time surfacing from an analysis of the double responsibility, in the family sphere and in the world of paid work, of adult women with family responsibilities. The metaphor of the net, where each stitch makes the same contribution to composing the overall pattern, is well-suited to illustrate this trait. Not only do public time, family time, subjective time, biological time and cosmic time⁷ co-exist in their experience, but they contribute *as a whole*, through mutual interconnections, to create meaning and build the symbolic universe of these women.

In this sense, according to some feminist analyses (cf. Balbo 1991) the plural dimension of the existential time of women – the *life times* – is consciously adopted, along with the ambivalence it generates, as a trait to value in a specific sense. In fact, it makes it possible to reveal what the predominance of an economic vision of time on the contrary tends to conceal: the fact that one’s life

time is non-determined and capable of self-generation, and the natural co-existence, within it, of time for oneself and time for others. The subject it delineates is not the Universal subject – as such unrelated to time and space – but a gendered and concrete subject (cf. Benhabib 1994), which may, thanks to the multiplicity of the *concrete times* of everyday life, be closely observed along with her/his contradictions. The "workday" aspect of everyday time is consequently ennobled, while the inconsistency of a vision according to which this time is simply repeated, cyclically and identically, becomes evident. At the same time, the intrinsically creative traits of everyday time, and the contents it actually conveys which are continually differentiated, are accentuated.

Characteristically, this gendered experience of time is associated with the crossing of several existential and temporal territories without ever considering any of them as the final destination. Thus, life times acquire meaning as the outcome of the weaving together of various public and private territories, and thanks to the hybridization of codes of meaning of which each of these is the bearer. While not yet subject to the changes associated with the double responsibilities of family and work, the frontier position of the life period of young women, the fact of being at the same time inside and outside several time spheres, all considered equally important, becomes evident when analyzing their biographic construction strategies. Some research that has studied these strategies with special attention to the dimension of planning⁸ has clearly accentuated this trait. Despite the highly uncertain scenario in which young women make their choices, the studies reveal their firm determination to control their own future in some way. A survey on the condition of youth in Italy (Buzzi, Cavalli and de Lillo 1997) confirms this active orientation toward an uncertain future on the part of young women. In fact, it has been observed (Cavalli 1997, 30) that in thinking about the future, young women appear particularly absorbed, more than men of their own age, in the definition of strategies capable of guaranteeing the greatest possible level of self-determination. However, it appears that they do not seem to suffer from feelings of omnipotence; in other words, they do not have the idea that "everything depends on me", that everything can be kept under control. The ability to face the dimension of uncertainty and limits in a flexible and reflexive manner appears as one of the most interesting aspects of their relationship with the future (Leccardi 1998).

However, one has to take into account the fact that, for young women, the future appears uncertain also from a more specifically gender-related point of view. The uncertainty associated with the imagining of the maternity period – a biographic period that is as central as the professional one – is, for instance, clearly present on their horizon. Young women are in fact well aware that maternity calls for a complex reorganization of their existential priorities, and that it often makes it necessary to give up other life projects. This aspect consequently makes a significant contribution to molding

a central dimension in the biographic construction of young women: the anticipation, at the present time, of a probable, future biographic discontinuity. For greater clarification: while for young men the continuity between the two temporal orders of the private sphere (love life, family life) and public sphere (studies, work, social and political commitments) appear not to be problematic in and of themselves, the situation is different for young women. For the former, in fact, the biography remains built around the centrality of paid work in the time of life.

Biographic continuity as a result appears strictly associated with the hierarchy of the various existential temporal orders, at the top of which is paid work. Despite the current flexibilization and increasing precariousness in work, this situation does not change. For young women on the other hand, the imagining of a future biographic discontinuity is the fruit of the knowledge that the (uncertain) order of relationships may in any moment “contaminate” existential projects built around the public sphere. Between the two orders in fact it is not possible to build any kind of stable hierarchy. This characteristic plurality and interdependence appear strictly linked as has been said to the established ambivalence of “women’s time.”

The ambivalence shows in a visible way, for example, if one looks at the space that maternity takes within women’s life. While maternity represents to an increasing extent a matter of conscious choice, its time remains essentially indeterminable and incommensurable. On the one hand, it becomes more essential than ever for young women to formulate a life plan, an important instrument to control the uncertainties of the future. On the other, however, maternity is not something which may be “planned” in a proper sense: in fact, it leaves room for the unexpected, the unpredictable, the indeterminate. It is a dimension that cannot be confined only within a frame of choice and rationality.

From this point of view, one of the strategies shared by a large number of young women seems to be that of abandoning the idea of considering the future on a medium-long term basis, which entails the expectation of discontinuities in biographic time. On the contrary, they try to concentrate energy and creativity on the dimension of the *extended present*, the time area which borders on the present without, however, coinciding with the “simultaneous present”⁹. Cottle (1976), who was the first to perceive the centrality of this dimension in the experience of time of a significant number of women, defines it as the time space which is extended for the length of a particular activity (usually of an institutional character), and which comes to an end along with that activity. The self-determined nature of the extended present, associated with the time field of intentionality, immediately strikes the eye. In fact, it is the individual who decides the activities to engage in and through which to express herself. It is always and only the individual who answers for their execution and results. Everyone is both responsible for, and skilled in, what happens within this

time area. The extended present is also the reign of predictability – the personal efforts produce predictable effects within a predictable time – of self-government and continuity. The dimension of the plan, understood as result of the interconnections between the two axes of time and personal goals, does not completely disappear from the horizon; rather, it is re-defined in the light of the new conditions brought by historical time (Leccardi 1996b).

If we consider the matter carefully, the link between the biographic construction characterized by adopting without resignation the idea of a “short future”, and the awareness of the multiplicity of life times, becomes clearer than it may appear at first sight. The biographic discontinuity that this special way of planning intends to face is in fact directly connected to the impossibility of tracing clear and fixed hierarchies between the different levels of experience to which the plurality of life times refers. In fact, *all* these times contribute, as a whole, to the definition of women’s identity and above all this interconnection is recognized as one of its central characteristics.

Most young women’s biographic time is constructed from these inter-weavings and interconnections of different, often contradictory, times; it is “contaminated” by different cultural codes and temporal orders. This acknowledged plurality of life times delineates the future everyday life time as a polycentric time, enriched by meaning systems that may be contradictory, but which are nevertheless considered subjectively controllable. Finally, as their “short future” represents a redefinition of the ways and forms of planning in a period characterized by collective disenchantment towards the idea of an “open” and controllable future, the awareness of the multiplicity of life times may also be considered as an antidote to the specific anxieties of contemporary societies.

4. Conclusion

Through the “lens of time” we can then become aware of the interdependencies between nature and culture, observer and observed, social and inner worlds, body and thought. We can also reflect upon the ways in which concrete subjects, men and women, use their time to “make sense of their lives” and “to try to relate their own story to a broader cultural and historical narrative” (Stephenson 2000, 117). Through the “gender lens” we can further develop this awareness and relate these narratives to power relations and their development through the course of history. Thanks to this latter lens, which restores a sexed identity to individuals, it is therefore possible to go from a more abstract conceptualization of time to its concrete, daily dimension in the public and private space. Here the ambivalence generated by the new freedom of self-expression women enjoy, but also by the new - and old - responsibilities they have to assume appear to be a trait to value in a specific sense.

Through this ambivalence, in fact, may be seen what the predominant, commodity-oriented vision of time tried to conceal: the plural and open character of times-of-life; their never exclusively quantitative traits; their numerous facets, in themselves not ordered in a hierarchal sense, each of which strictly tied to one another and impossible to analyze separately; the contradictory coexistence within them of individual, inter-subjective and social registers.

This experience, it should be underscored, challenges the concept that is still dominant of social time, on the basis of which a pre-set symbolic hierarchy of times governs the entire social life and single biographies. In making the borderlines of each time precarious, this “crossing-through” also reveals reciprocal cross-influences. The bulkheads between the different times are by no means watertight; daily times, exactly like the identities that they contribute to forming, appear to be continually hybridized. Through this experience the interdependence and circularity of public and private spheres, neither of which could be conceived of without the other, of paid and unpaid jobs is emphasized. This kind of awareness introduces, for example, elements of uncertainty into the idea of allocating just one value to single portions of time. Since existential times are, we could say, “chained” to one another, the single-value use of each portion can only partially cover their close interdependence on the significance plane. Although many studies shed light on the growing importance, material and symbolic, of paid-work time in the present lives of women (with its after-effects of speeding up and striving for efficiency in family life – cf. e.g. Hochschild 1997)¹⁰ the outcome is in any case non-adherence to a one-dimensional view of time.

In conclusion, combining the two lenses, we are able to bring out of the shadows and give voice to dimensions of human existence that are otherwise being silenced by the power of commodity exchange. In the context of capitalistic production, time has been transformed into a ‘thing’ separate from subjects and placed externally to them, a dimension that ‘runs’ in an autonomous way and dominates them with its own power (Adam 1995). Parallel to this, its social structuring (in which Fordism played a significant role) has certified the rigid separation of sexual roles and contributed to consolidating patriarchal power.

Today, keeping together a reflection on time and gender, and tying this to the reflection on transformations in contemporary biographies linked also to the crisis of the Fordist regime, we are able to give visibility to strategies that the subjects elaborate to contrast and contain these processes. In other words, the present crisis of the Fordist regime not only creates a growing de-standardization and fragmentation of time, that annihilates control over it. It also allows alternative representations of time and of biographical narratives to take shape, pointing to a different conception of the relationship between life and time. For both women and men.

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Notes

¹ In regard to time, Elias (1992) and Jaques (1982) insisted particularly on this aspect.

² From this standpoint, it is interesting to note the recently widespread use of the term "gender" instead of "sex" in statistical table presentation. About the conceptualization of "gender" in Anglo-American tradition cf. in particular Rubin (1975) and Scott (1988). For a reading of gender as process, fruit of discourse and cultural narratives, cf. de Lauretis (1987). For a conceptualization of sex as a socially constructed dimension (instead of a foundational one), cf. Laqueur (1990).

³ For instance, the hierarchy of social and existential times. Cf. Leccardi (1996a).

⁴ The concepts of "monochronal" and "polychronal" time were first worked out by Hall (1984) in reference to two different types of approach to time. The first is based on planning, on the precise measurement and allocation of time

and on the separation between different spheres of activity, on the basis of the principle of *one thing at a time*. The second, extraneous to criteria of rigid allocation, more “experienced” than measured, instead emphasizes personal involvement and relations, as well as foreseeing the possibility of going from one activity to the next in the same space of time.

⁵ Besides that, as Bauman points out (2001, 23), during the first (“heavy”) modernity the workers’ horizons “were drawn by the prospect of lifelong employment inside a company which might not be immortal but whose lifespan stretched well beyond the life expectations of its workers”. Today the declining predictability of ways and forms of working for the market strongly influences the life course, increasing its destandardization (cf. Heinz 2001).

⁶ The term “society of uncertainty” is borrowed from the title of a recent Italian collection of essays by Zygmunt Bauman (1999).

⁷ “The rhythms which govern the life of the female body are directed by an astral time which connects them, through invisible consonances, with the cycle of the seasons, the phases of the moon, the changing tides, the alternation of day and night” (Vegetti Finzi 1990, 214).

⁸ The reference is to different bits of research (of a qualitative character) carried out in Italy (Leccardi 1996b) and in Germany (Geissler and Oechsle 1996) respectively, between the late Eighties and the early Nineties. The more recent results (2003) of research on the transformations of temporal experiences among the young (both young women and young men) in which the author has taken part have also been considered (Crespi in print).

⁹ On the “extended present” as result of the reconceptualization of the future required by transformations in contemporary time, with particular reference to the role played by the new electronic technologies, cf. Nowotny (1994).

¹⁰ It should be underscored that this happens within a framework that continues to be unequal from the standpoint of the use of time linked to men’s and women’s handling of family responsibilities, even though women are increasingly involved not only generically in remunerated work but specifically in high-value jobs. However, utilizing multinational longitudinal data on 25 countries, Gershuny (2002) emphasizes how, in the period running from the 1960’s to 1990’s, there began to be delineated a gender convergence in regard to the sharing of unpaid domestic work.