

AAA 2018 Retro Tensions, Future Tense

I'm tired all of the time. Maybe it's that I recently turned 42, and it's all downhill from here. Maybe it's taking care of two small children who wake up too early and go to bed too late. Maybe it's my students, too many faculty meetings, and my seemingly ever-growing set of professional commitments. Maybe it's the news cycle in our Trumpian era, in which, beyond presidential stupidities, gun violence and natural disasters compound one another. Maybe it's all of that stuff, taken together, making demands on my attention that leave me feeling simultaneously overstimulated by its rhythm and too bored by the sheer predictability and redundancy of it all.

Here are two little nuggets of wisdom: "You get tired from the things you care about; you get exhausted from the stuff you don't." And: "One [is] tired of something, but one is exhausted by nothing" (Deleuze 1997:153). One is from a friend's dad. The other is from Gilles Deleuze's reading of Samuel Beckett's plays for television in an essay entitled "The Exhausted." Both seem to point to a similar problem – and a problem that is becoming particularly acute in this historical moment of anthropogenic climate disasters, receding liberalism, nationalist xenophobia, bewildering hypocrisy, toxic exposures, globalizing epidemics, states of sovereign emergency – and the list goes on. All might be seen as functions of an intensifying time, the apotheosis of postmodernity's time-space compression, setting us on the brink of total collapse or sudden mutation. Or maybe that's just the view from the North Atlantic, the view of a once relatively protected white, urbane, and suburban community that had invested in making a particular kind of duration possible. That is, through institutionalization, they were able

to make a slow temporality possible, one that embraced Theodore Parker's long arc of the moral universe and Francis Fukuyama's end of history over the revolutionary moment. Meanwhile, revolutionaries – anti-colonial movements, abolitionists and suffragettes, the American Indian Movement and the Black Panthers, and more and more – seek to make this long, slow duration into an executable moment, and one that changes everything, including the time of history.

In this paper, I want to put together a set of terms: tiredness, exhaustion, boredom, time, and history. Their connective tissue is duration, and in thinking about duration, I specifically want to think about Henri Bergson's use of the term in thinking about temporality, consciousness, and free will. For years, Bergson's use of duration and "homogenous time" have simultaneously intrigued and stumped me, but in this moment of crisis, I see a way to engage with Bergson as a way to conceptualize what a renewed anthropology of time might look like – and how this anthropology of time might engage with anthropological historiography (which I hope resonates across the papers in this panel).

Here's Bergson on "pure duration,"

Pure duration is the form which the succession of our conscious states assume when our ego lets itself *live*, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states. For this purpose it need not be entirely absorbed in the passing sensation or idea; for then, on the contrary, it would no longer *endure*. (Bergson 2001:100)

Pure duration is juxtaposed to succession, and across his work, Bergson provides a wide variety of examples to try and get this across. One can live through a Saturday. Reflecting on the day, one might recall this or that – a chance meeting, a meal, hearing a favorite song, a missed phone call. In the end Saturday's event recede into the background of consciousness, laying the foundation for subjective experience. But one might also try and recreate that particular Saturday in all of its exacting details. Accounting for the day in this way is exhausting – the details are so overwhelming as to destroy the possibility of possibility, and the act of successive accounting of events, of people, of interactions, takes more time than the original experience of the day. Succession depends upon a homogenous medium of time that allows one to order memory in this way (Bergson 2001:104), and this introduces a spatial logic to temporality, removing the individual from pure duration and instead creating a homogenous experience of the world and the self. Succession leads to exhaustion.

This is a problem – for Bergson, for Deleuze, for my friend's dad, for me, and maybe for the anthropology of time – because exhaustion serves as a limit to potentiality. Here's Deleuze on what's so exhausting: "Forming exhaustive series of things; drying up the flow of voices; extenuating the potentialities of space; dissipating the power of the image" (Deleuze 1997:161). He might as well be talking about the contemporary news cycle, capturing, as he does, the relentless exhaustion of possibility through the sheer volume of events that we are exposed to, the need to be constantly vigilant, the result being that exhaustion becomes the norm, battered as we are by the barrage of affronts to sensibility and livelihood. Instead of the allure of the possible, we become stunted by the succession of events, the need to put it all into order, to recover from the disorderly and

make some kind of sense of things. Here's the last bit of Bergson on the matter: "If there are actions that are really *free*, or at least partially indeterminate, they can only belong to beings able to fix, at long intervals, that becoming to which their own becoming clings, able to solidify it into distinct moments" (Bergson 1991:210). That sounds obtuse, but consider this: Bergson suggests the need to be able to take a succession of events and make of them a "moment." These moments become foundations against which to experience "pure duration," a becoming into possibility.

This might all be a little on the obtuse side. If there's difficulty in anthropology coming to terms with Deleuze's anti-empirical philosophy of immanence, the idea that duration is unevenly experienced might just seem impossible to reckon with. But here I want to make an argument for anthropological historiography as a historiography of emergence that actively seeks the counter-genealogical. Rather than the straight line of succession, of homogenous time, which can lend itself to unilineal and teleological histories, counter-genealogies seek to unsettle the present and produce another moment to inhabit. At their best, counter-genealogical histories create new possibilities for interpretation, moving against exhaustion and towards new possibilities. They also seek to situate duration as a foundational experience of the world, with attention to its unevenness and disruptions.

Here's an example, combining a recent project of mine on the history of psychiatry and subjectivity and our contemporary political moment. The Trump administration's family separation policy has been widely reported on, and, by all

accounts, seems to stem from Stephen Miller.¹ Interpretations of the policy highlight the root of the policy in Miller's and Trump's nationalist xenophobia, and suggest that the public outcry associated with the policy is "a feature, not a bug." Accounts of detention centers highlighted their "barbaric," "dystopian," and "inhumane" practices,² and the most knowing analyses suggest that it was not rote incompetence, lack of human feeling, or pure ideology that guided the implementation of the policy, but calculating political maneuvering on Miller's part. As explanatory as that claim might be, it also exhausts the possibilities that the explanation might be otherwise; the virtual becomes the actual, the story becomes boring. Only once in all the coverage³ does the specter of Harry Harlow appear and his legacy is one that haunts contemporary Trumpian policies.

Here is Harlow's experiments at their worst, what he refers to as "partial" and "total" social isolation, which, with family separation policies in mind, might sound familiar. "Partial social isolation" is the "raising of infants from birth onward in bare wire cages without companions."⁴ Monkeys in partial social isolation could see other monkeys – similarly raised in cages – but they could not physically interact with them: there was no possibility to play or to comfort one another. These monkeys could also see laboratory staff as they went about their daily activities. Despite not being able to interact with other individuals, the knowledge that other creatures exist in the world ensured that they were not as "disturbed" as those raised in total social isolation. Beginning life in partial

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/06/stephen-miller-family-separation/563132/>

² <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/06/19/papa-papa-audio-of-children-stokes-rage-over-trumps-family-separation-policy.html>

³ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/darwins-subterranean-world/201806/separating-kids-families-psychological-disaster>

⁴ Harlow and Mears, *The Human Model: Primate Perspectives*, 286.

isolation resulted in these monkeys being both detached from other monkeys, but also impassive in relation to their environment – and, for some extreme cases, it meant a detachment from their own bodies. Those raised in total social isolation fared worse.

The ability to raise monkeys in total social isolation was a more complicated procedure and required technological experimentation. Over time, what was developed was an opaque cage with walls on each side, except for a one-way mirror that allowed the researchers to observe the monkey.⁵ The monkey's only knowledge of the outside world was the appearance of a laboratory assistant's hand, which helped the baby feed during the first fifteen days of life. Harlow writes that "Monkeys reared in total social isolation for 90 days were enormously disturbed when admitted to the great wide world of wonder, and two of them actually died of self-induced anorexia before we recognized the syndrome and instituted forced-feeding."⁶ For those raised in total social isolation for six months, this was not the case:

They spent their time primarily engrossed in autistic-like self-clasping, self-mouthing, and rocking and huddling.

The isolates never interacted successfully with normal peers over an 8-month period, although pairs of isolate monkeys did show limited recovery in terms of exploration and even play with each other.⁷

⁵ Harlow and Mears, *The Human Model: Primate Perspectives*, 287.

⁶ Harlow and Mears, *The Human Model: Primate Perspectives*, 287.

⁷ Harlow and Mears, *The Human Model: Primate Perspectives*, 287-8.

Total social isolation would seem to prove Harlow's overarching point that a lack of even the barest social contact profoundly impacts an individual's ability to interact in the most rudimentary ways. Damaged monkeys may be able to play with one another – their shared early life of total social isolation makes them more similar to one another than to other, “normal” monkeys – but they never fully socially recover. That, too, proves another of Harlow's points, namely that societies can exist that are fundamentally socially askew in their structures of attachment and emotional connection.

There isn't a straight line between Harlow's experiments and Trump's policies, as imagined by Miller. The point in this kind of emergent historiography isn't to connect the dots necessarily, but instead to produce a way of seeing the events differently – at least from the outside – that open up possibilities for understanding the moment, to inhabit time differently, to resist exhaustion. For Trump and Miller, exhaustion is the point; fleshing out this moment with another history of inhumanity, of dystopian subjectivities, might not feel good, but it renders boring explanations only one possibility among many.

Additionally there's the question of a disparity in the experience of duration and succession. Harlow's experiments – like Trump's policies – are about creating a particular experience of time. This may not be Bergson's homogenous experience of time in the strict sense but it is clearly not the pure duration that allows for a freedom of becoming into the world. Instead this manipulated and artificial experimental time is producing subjects through an inhuman machine that stretches times for the monkeys and children raised in isolation rendering their experience of time more exhausting if not totally so.

The danger of this exhausting moment is that our scholarly attention succumbs to the homogenous rhythm of succession; the danger is that boredom becomes our response to anything too slow allowing it to become subsumed in the need for something immediate, something that appears revolutionary and able to break through monotony. Instead, we might think about how the experience (or non-experience) of pure duration might offer a way to reconsider time and its production for us, as scholars, and for our interlocutors. How can we reclaim the revolutionary potential of the long moment? How can the experience of time – and attention to its uneven application across individuals and populations – attune an anthropological historiography that takes time and temporality as processes that disrupt received empiricisms? There is work to be done and time enough to do it.