

## **Learning to tell time again**

**Dr Warwick Tie**

**Social and Cultural Studies Seminar Series**

**College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Albany**

**28 March 2018**

Beginnings, the British legal scholar Peter Fitzpatrick once noted, are always desperate places. The desperation comes not simply because we don't know where to begin. The problem runs deeper. Desperation enters because the justification for the place of starting cannot be said at the outset, in the moment of beginning: instead it can only be made later on and, then, only retroactively can understanding form as to the reasons for which the opening came as it had. By way of a second beginning, now that the hard part is out of the way – this seminar is motivated by a question as to how Pākehā subjectivities might form that are capable of collaborating with indigenous projects without the proclivity to control. As we will see, I seek that kind of subjectivity in a particular kind of hope: one that Mark Fisher and Nina Power have identified as a hope that haunts. This is a hope that no longer promises: it doesn't suggest a subject who can promise, who can enter agreements and hold to them; neither does it suggest a subject who has promise, of one who is learning from their mistakes and, on that basis, can be considered again as being a potential agent of progressive change. It is a hope that comes from the return of things repressed.

The reasons for the inquiry lie in the an observation that the reasons for which that control reasserts itself run, at best, askew to good intentions. It is not enough that we wish not to control or, even, that we act decidedly to act in ways that prevent such from occurring. Intent and desire are insufficient because the proclivity to control comes from the ways in which western thought forms through two forms of fetishism. Here I'm following the insights of Kiarina Kordela – of commodity fetishism and categorical fetishism. As with all fetishes, the significant element is the innocent fulcrum of the 'as if' moment: it is 'as if' one object corresponds to another. The man goes out in the hope of meeting a women with whom intimate relations might grow and he comes back, Freud notes, with a shoe. The shoe becomes the object of desire as if it were the women of his desires. With regard to commodity fetishism, Marx noted, in this same vein that, under capitalism, the field of social relations comes to assume the fantastic form of a set of relationships between things. It is as if we have access to the world of social relations through the act of possessing things made. For our purposes of distilling a hope that haunts, Althusser's disagreement with Marx on commodity fetishism becomes important. For Althusser, there is no preformed network of social relations that becomes visible when the veil of commodity fetishism is torn away. Such is the fantasy of an immature, humanist Marxism. Rather, what comes to the fore is the grotesque of objects that simultaneously sit within their own genus which being, also, the standard by which equivalence between members of that set is established. The abject nature of such objects come from their projection of an interminable state of surplus, of an excess that can not seemingly be contained. Here, I have the sculpture by xxx used by xxx to speak to the

simultaneous deployment of the body in Biopolitics and disavowal by the bodies thereby deployed in their subjectivisation. In Marx, however, the exemplar is the money form. On the one hand, it is the mechanism elevated to the role of establishing formal equivalence between commodities: on the other it takes the very form of a tradeable commodity. The money form becomes a fantasy object: neither this nor that but, instead both together. It is only as if it exists in the two separate forms, at different times and places.

A deep assumption upon which this present work turns is that the construction of knowledge – including the production of knowledge between members of different cultures – always involves a fantasy object. In the absence of fantasy objects, thought would be taken into a proximity to the thing-in-itself that would overwhelm the psychical powers of the one speaking. So, when Lacan suggests that we must ‘traverse the fantasy’, the act of traversal is also of a specific fantasy figure that creates an obstacle. The injunction is not to traverse fantasy per se. To this end, the purpose of this piece is to understand how the work of commodity fetishism might be made to work differently, through a shift in the fantasy object – the element by which the ‘as if’ moment produces traction.

I wish to approach this matter by way of a case study. That case concerns the 14 year collaborative project between ecologists at Otago University and members of Rakiura to save the sooty shearwater (mutton bird). Priming the project was a state of threat posed to the species by an oil spill from a sunken tanker off America around 20 years ago. A migratory bird, the sooty shearwater then had to fly the length of the Pacific to breed in the South Island. Complicating the situation is the role that the mutton bird has played for the people of Rakiura as a food source. Significant North American money was pumped into the project with the aim of engaging ecologists and Maori in the rescuing of the species in the context of these two pressures. In 20xx the ecological results of that collaboration were published in the journal *Zoology*. Shortly thereafter, a series of reflections were published on the collaboration itself, on the issues which the episode raised with regard to the cross-cultural production of knowledge. Those reflections ended up being published in the journal of the Royal Society. My interest lie with the contributions by Pākehā, in the content of their reflections on the collaboration.

One issue in particular recurs across the Pākehā contributions, and this is the matter of causality. It forms as a problem within cross-cultural work, for the authors. At stake are questions about how relations between cause and effect can be ascertained such that plans can be developed capable of ensuring the sustainability of the species. Almost without exception across the archive, the position is held that it is the scientific method alone that is capable of delivering the proofs required for such plans. Maori forms of knowing sensitise science to problems, and may propose useful hypotheses to be tested, but they are unable to secure the gold-standard of replicable proof. The recurring strategy used in this regard is to order the two forms of knowing – of ‘science’ and ‘tradition’ – to either systematise their relationship in terms of function or to determine a hierarchy of analytical significance between approaches.

In this register, the field of collaboration feels ready to collapse into dispute, given the manner in which the tone of this flies in the face of the emphasis given by Maori contributions to the role of non-scientific forms of analysis. Such can be skirted around,

however, when causality is interpreted not simply in terms of the relations between objects but, rather, in terms of the temporalities within whose reach objects are understood to interact.

Two temporalities emerge in relation to the models of causality associated with scientific and Maori forms of thought. In relation to the former, time is understood in terms of its linearity, such that effects follow causes in observable sequences. The time periods are necessarily of relatively short durations, and the experimental method produces snapshots of the relations involved between generative mechanisms and objects affected. In relation to the latter, time functions in its abductive idiom, wherein an effect of any given event is the retroactive production of its own cause 'after the fact': the cause never exists autonomously of the effects within which it has materialised.

The analytically significant element of this archive is the reappearance 'out of place' of the latter, retroactive temporality notwithstanding the persistence attempts to 'put it in place'. That site is, of course, in an outright analytically subordinate position to the linear time either of the experimental method or in a state of functional utility to the end game of cause-effect reasoning. Paradoxically, each and every narrative is structured by the very same retroactive temporality being disciplined. What is 'put in place' consistently appears, simultaneously, 'out of place'.

Examples.

Across the archive, then, a persistent point of trauma reveals itself. That point isn't the recurrence of retroactive temporality, as if it's persistent reappearance signals the unambiguous truth of itself. Rather, the traumatic point is the absence of a gap between the two temporalities. The traumatic kernel is the non-existence of any moment within which the sliding between the temporalities takes a form amenable to observation or experience. From reading the reflections, we know that temporalities are being moved between but, however, absolutely no point announces itself so as to say 'here it is ... it happens *now!*' The effect of that absence of the anticipated instant isn't silence. Nor is it nihilistic rambling. Rather, it becomes incessant talk, of knowledge in a state of formation,. Deleuze coined a term for this absence of a gap – that of 'empty time', of a 'time that is [always, only, ever] in-between ....'.

Confronted with this dynamism of the archive, a question emerges as to how it might be used to inform the field of political ecology, broadly conceived. My political ecology I'm meaning any approach to the study of ecological processes which engage with the role played by politics in the constitution of that knowledge. Three options, at least, emerge in relation to this particular archive. A first represents a point of possible colonial reinvestment. It becomes a site in which attempts are made to stem the endless profusion of movement, to avoid the abyss of infinite multiplicity and the Other as a steady stream of signification. In a word, it becomes a site in which to install ideological closure in keeping with the system of one's own community of thought. Indeed, the archive is characterised by which response. Viewed a positively as possible, the archive sets up a dialectic which anticipates that a productive tractive force will be produced by discussion between the positions involved. Indeed, this appears to have been the anticipation of those who set up the special issue of the Royal Society Journal: there is a dialectic between

traditional and science modes of knowledge production: let's see what comes of a discussion staged between them on a very specific ecological case study. What the archive suggests is that, from the Pākehā positions represented, the staging of a dialectical exchange becomes an opportunity for the installation of ideological closure in ways that normalise methodological scientism. Any knowledge system that privileges methodologies other than those that can establish clearly delineated processes of cause and effect become, when applied to issues of species survival, irresponsible xxxx

Our discussion thus far gives reasons to pause for thought here, however, insofar as such the making of a demand of this kind requires denial as to the complexity of one's own position. Only linear time counts, and all awareness as to the role played by other forms in the performance of a demand is disavowed. It is upon the basis of renunciation that the voice can sound with such assurance, for it silences the internal contradictions of its own constitution. Welcome to the university's versions of the war of all against all (Bourdieu).

A second option sees the field presented as a complex network of actants whose multiple pathways gives rise to a state of causal indeterminacy. Possibilities for new configurations always lie latent, as emergent properties, within the dynamism of the micro-politics played out between actants. Though this approach, it appears always-already possible to rebuild an assemblage, amplifying new elements and marginalising prior points which had previously operated as nodal centres. Examples .... The Preface.

Our focus upon the role of fetish in the construction of truth claims also gives reason to pause, here. The social conditions required for the process of reconstruction are not politically neutral. They are, following Foucault, heavily dependent upon the normalisation of a type of knowledge which functions through the position of the expert. To reconstruct assumes socio-political processes of ascription with regard to this state of expertise – to processes of induction and display – such that particular individuals become licenced to reconstruct assemblages of social importance. Here the fetishistic element of knowledge comes into play. Insofar as it is 'as if' the domain of expertise corresponds with the field of historically contingent ideas drawn upon for those processes of reconstruction, the cultural biases of those ideas falls from view and, instead, come to appear as socio-politically neutral descriptions of situations. In the process, colonialism is reconstructed anew.

A third option that can be suggested from the archive is that stream within political ecology that seeks to draw directly from situations of profusion (as emerge with the disavowal of simultaneously operating temporalities). Within political ecology, that stream is marked by the presences of two neo-Spinozian philosophers, Alain Badiou and Gilles Deleuze. In general terms, this stream seeks to apply Spinoza's insight into the infinite multiplicity of being to the state of being itself. It constitutes an 'ontological turn', to the truth of being, in which profusion itself cannot, however, be ontologised. The persistence of a traumatic kernel within the archive, around the absence of a gap between the two temporalities, is what recommends this form of dialectical analysis.

The archive of political ecology animated by this neo-Spinozian current remains, for the time being confronted by a limitation. That limitation comes from the practice of giving proper-names to the dynamism of profusion expressed by Spinoza's work (nominalism).

Indeed, Deleuze's presentation of the name 'empty time' for the dynamism present in the Pakeha reflections on the case study exemplifies the action. In works inspired by Badiou, the notion of 'the Event' plays the same role. The mistake, noted by commentators, is the such an approach all too easily leads to unexpected and new forms of disciplinary power upon those who take up the challenge. Emblematic in this regard is the requirement which Badiou notes around the 'event' for courage and strict personal discipline. Similar could be expected around fidelity to empty time, of a training of the body to apprehend and work with a quizzical object. A reassertion of bio-politics.

Despite such problems, the neo-Spinozian strand within political ecology holds a key to such archives such as the one discussed here, and to the question of colonial subjectivities able to hold at bay their proclivities to control. That key can be fashioned with the application of an insight from Žižek, that any attempt to engage with the profusion of infinite multiplicity can only occur through fantasy figures. The approaches of Badiou and Deleuze seemingly anticipate direct engagement and this results in demands for a disciplining of the body. So, what kinds of fantasy figures does Žižek anticipate, and which of these might relate to this particular archive.

The fantasy figures Žižek has in mind are those that present to the subject the operation of that state of total profusion. In the terminological of Lacan, this is the Other – the entire network of symbolisation. In this vein, Žižek credits Hitchcock with the genius of working out how to present this with regard to the Other in a spatial register. Hitchcock developed the art of presenting a gaze that was completely disembodied from anything considered living. The house is his archetype. He would house present the house as exhibiting a gaze which would turn out to be completely neutral in form: it wouldn't project horror or dread. To the extent to which it projected horror, it was that we could never locate the agency of the gaze. The gaze simply is. Hitchcock's innovation becomes important, for Žižek, because it demonstrates that the human can create fantasy-figures enabling the subject to engage with the infinitacy of being without finding themselves disciplined.

With regard to the material given by the archive, the act of staging the Other in a spatial register wouldn't work, however, and a temporal idiom is required. Again, film shows itself to be useful, at the very least for indicating the ability of the species to create fantasy-figures capable of enabling engagement with the infinity of that which escapes symbolisation. Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* is a case in point. Famously, the film moves through a loop in which the final scene repeats the opening scene but, because of shifts along with way, produces a reiteration whose consequences differ from those presented by the linear element of the narrative.

The innovation to be found within fantasy-figures such as Hitchcock's house or Tarantino's temporal loops isn't that they can be applied to an archive in political ecology. They work only with regard to the textual situation in which they have been applied. The place of the disembodied gaze or of empty time are successfully staged. Rather, the innovation lies with the recognition that they can be staged. The Other, endless profusion shows itself to be beyond the human condition and, at the same time, an effect of

knowledgeable human action. Like the ancient Greeks, we become able to understand that the gods are indeed divine while fully creatures of our own imaginations.

Returning, then, to the question regarding a subject position that is able to engage with indigenous projects in ways that hold at bay our colonial proclivities, we can see the following. The archive suggests the advantage of a neo-Spinozian form of political ecology, for three reasons. It forestalls the collapse of knowledge production into a fraught Master/hysteric contest. Second, it forestalls the installation of the figure of the 'expert' and the smuggling into knowledge production of unreflective assumptions from the dominant culture. Thirdly, it brings to our attention the role that is played by fantasy figures – by the 'as if's – in the mediation of fields of knowledge with the infinite multiplicity within which the production of knowledge operates. In terms of the latter, the archive brings to the fore the need for fantasy figures that can mediate between temporalities. The construction of such as would be meaningful to political ecology becomes a pressing task for the field. It is, however, possible, just as the world of film demonstrates that it is possible for narrative in general. The lesson to take from that world of film for political ecology is that the Other is fully – always remaining the horizon setting what can be presently thought – while also always the effect of human thought. The hope that haunts with regard to the Other, appearing now as such, isn't so much as a state of mourning, as if in the installation of the mediating mechanism we have just lost god. It is, rather, a haunting by the uncanny, by which the Other, once well known, also now appears out of place. With regard to this as a challenging new point of beginning, desperation may court the imagination. So too, however, might intrigue.

# Learning to Tell Time Again

Tie, W

---

*19/12/2018 - Downloaded from MASSEY RESEARCH ONLINE*