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Chronotopic identities

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Abstract

Bakhtin coined the term “chronotope” to point towards the inseparability of time and space in human social action and the effects of this inseparability *on* social action (Bakhtin 1981: 84-258). Bourdieu and Passeron provided us with one of the most precise empirical descriptions, and in a more contemporary and applied vocabulary, we would say that chronotopes invoke orders of indexicality valid in a specific timespace frame (cf. Blommaert 2005: 73). This paper elaborates on the idea that we can see and describe much of what we observe as contemporary identity work as being *chronotopically organized*; it is organized in, or at least with reference to, specific timespace configurations which are nonrandom and compelling as “contexts”, and a shorthand term such as “chronotope” enables us to avoid an analytical separation of behavior and context which is not matched by the experiences of people engaged in such activities. The actual practices performed in our identity work often demand specific timespace conditions, and a change in timespace arrangements triggers a complex and massive change in roles, discourses, modes of interaction, dress, codes of conduct and criteria for judgment of appropriate versus inappropriate behavior, and so forth.

In their seminal study on the unequally accessible cultural capital of French university students, Bourdieu and Passeron made the following remark:

“Sans doute, les étudiants vivent et entendent vivre dans un temps et un espace originaux” [“Undoubtedly, students live and expect to live in an original time and space”] (Bourdieu & Passeron 1964: 48)

The specific time they live in is measured by the academic year, with its semesters, lecturing times and exam sessions. And the way they live it is relaxed, slightly anarchic and down to themselves when it comes to organizing their days, weeks and months – “le temps flottant de la vie universitaire” [“the fluid time of university life”] (id: 51). The specific spaces include, of course, the university campus, its buildings, lecture halls and staff offices; but also “des quartiers, des cafés, des chambres ‘d’étudiants’” [“‘student’ neighborhoods, cafés and rooms”], cinemas, dance halls, libraries, theaters and so forth; the Parisian Quartier Latin, of course, serves as a textbook example here (id.: 51). It is no miracle, then, that a walk through the Quartier Latin during the academic year would reveal a specific demographic pattern – a dense concentration of young people who would be students and middle-aged men who would be senior academics – different from, say, people shopping along the fashion stores on the Champs Elysées or taking the commuter trains out of Paris at 5PM.

According to Bourdieu and Passeron, due these specific timespace givens, students acquire a sense of shared experience which, invariably, becomes an important part of their autobiographies later in life – “in my student days”, “we met when we were students...” The specific timespace of student life involves specific activities, discourses and interaction patterns, role relationships and identity formation modes, particular ways of conduct and consumption, of taste development and so forth, most of which are new, demand procedures of discovery and learning, and involve the mobilization of existing cultural and social capital in the (differential) process of acquiring new capital. References to similar timespace elements (a charismatic or dramatically incompetent lecturer, a particular café or a then-popular movie or piece of music) create a shared sense of cohort belonging with others, which

co-exists with pre-existing belongings to social groups and which enters into posterior forms of belonging. In that sense, our student days do not compensate for or replace pre-existing class memberships (which the book documents at length), and neither is it the sole bedrock for posterior identity formation – it is, in Bourdieu & Passeron’s view, a relatively superficial phenomenon, “[p]lus proche de l’agrégat sans consistance que du groupe professionnel” [“closer to an aggregate without consistency than to a professional group”] (56), let alone “un groupe social homogène, indépendant et intégré” [a homogenous, autonomous and integrated social group”] (49), which reproduces underlying (class) differences while constructing one new layer of shared biographical experience. Thus, while students share almost identical experiences and develop particular, and similar, identities during their days at the university, the meanings and effects of these shared experiences will differ according to the more fundamental social and cultural identity profiles they “brought along” to university life.

Probably without being aware of it, Bourdieu and Passeron provided us with one of the most precise empirical descriptions of what Bakhtin called a “chronotope” (Bakhtin 1981: 84-258). Bakhtin coined this term to point towards the inseparability of time and space in human social action and the effects of this inseparability *on* social action; in his work he identified the “literary artistic chronotope” where “spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole”, such that the chronotope could be seen as “a formally constitutive category of literature” (1981: 84). By means of chronotopes Bakhtin could address the co-occurrence of events from different times and places in novels, the fact that shifts between chronotopes involved shifts of an entire range of features and generated specific effects. He saw the interplay of different chronotopes as an important aspect of the novel’s heteroglossia, part of the different “verbal-ideological belief systems” that were in dialogue in a novel, because every chronotope referred to socially shared, and differential, complexes of value attributed to specific forms of identity, as expressed (in a novel for example) in the description of the looks, behavior, actions and speech of certain characters, enacted in specific timespace frames. Bakhtin, importantly, assumed that chronotopes involve specific forms of agency, identity: specific patterns of social behavior “belong”, so to speak, to particular timespace configurations; and when they “fit” they respond to existing frames of recognizable identity, while when they don’t they are “out of place”, “out of order” or transgressive (see Blommaert 2015 for a discussion).

In a more contemporary and applied vocabulary, we would say that chronotopes invoke orders of indexicality valid in a specific timespace frame (cf. Blommaert 2005: 73). Specific timespace configurations enable, allow and sanction specific modes of behavior as positive, desired or compulsory (and disqualify deviations from that order in negative terms), and this happens through the deployment and appraisal of chronotopically relevant indexicals (i.e. indexicals that acquire a specific recognizable value in a specific timespace configuration). Thus, one can read Goffman’s *Behavior in Public Spaces* as a study of the orders of indexicality operating in public spaces and not elsewhere, while his description of poker players in *Encounters* can be read as a study of the orders of indexicality valid in places such as the poker rooms of Atlantic City or Las Vegas (Goffman 1963, 1961). Obviously, Howard Becker’s (1963) *Outsiders* also operate the way they do in clearly demarcated timespace configurations such as the nighttime jazz club, as much as studies of doctor-patient interaction typically are set in the timespace configuration of medical centers and consultation times therein (Cicourel 2002).

In such timespace configurations, Goffman situated specific actors enacting specific roles (poker players can never have met each other elsewhere, and they gather just to play poker and do that competently), enacting specific, relatively strict “rules of engagement” and normative assumptions (focus on the game, play the game by its rules), as well as identity judgments (a “superb” poker player). Goffman, like Bourdieu & Passeron, Becker and others, described the indexical organization of specific chronotopes: the ways in which specific socially ratified behavior depends on timespace configurations, or more broadly, the ways in which specific forms of identity enactment are conditioned by the timespace configurations in which they occur. The “gatherings” described in *Behavior in Public Places* are such timespace configurations, and the specific modes of behavior Goffman describes and analyzes are the ones that “fit” this specific configuration. The careful description of such nonrandom chronotopic connections, by the way, bears a well-known academic label: ethnography.¹

This is the central idea that I wish to elaborate in what follows: we can see and describe much of what we observe as contemporary identity work as being *chronotopically organized*; it is organized in, or at least with reference to, specific timespace configurations which are nonrandom and compelling as “contexts”, and a shorthand term such as “chronotope” enables us to avoid an analytical separation of behavior and context which is not matched by the experiences of people engaged in such activities. In its most simple formulation, the idea I’m attempting to develop here is that *the actual practices performed in our identity work often demand specific timespace conditions*; a change in timespace arrangements triggers a complex and massive change in roles, discourses, modes of interaction, dress, codes of conduct and criteria for judgment of appropriate versus inappropriate behavior, and so forth. I see this factor as a *constraint* on what is possible in the way of identity work – a constraint not always accurately identified in studies on identity work.

Take a pretty simple example: a group of colleagues who share their 9-5 daytime in the same office; all of them have mutually known names and roles, often hierarchically layered, and specific shared codes of conduct govern their interactions (the shortcut term for such codes is often “professionalism”). Men are dressed in suits and neckties, ladies wear similar formal-professional dress. The group, however, has developed a weekly tradition of “happy hour”. Every Thursday after work, they jointly leave the office and walk to a nearby pub for a drink or two. The moment they leave their office building, men take off their neckties, and the tone, topics and genres of talk they engage in with each other change dramatically. “Professional” and job-focused talk may be exchanged for banter, small talk about family life, joke-cracking or flirting. And the roles and relationships change as well: the office “boss” may no longer be the “coolest” person, and a very competent worker may turn into a very incompetent drinker or joke-teller. We see the same people engaging in entirely different social practices and relationships, embodying entirely different roles and identities – due to a change in the timespace configuration in which they move. “Happy hour” behavior is intolerable during office hours, and office behavior is intolerable in the pub (“no job talk!!”) – timespace reordering involves a complete reordering of the normative codes of conduct and redefines the space of what is possible and allowable in performing identity work..

¹ Or ethnomethodology and related disciplinary labels. In a similar vein, one can see the structuralist attempts at generalization and universalization as dechronotopicalizing attempts trying to transcend the levels of chronotopic situatedness inherent in all social behavior. Durkheim’s definition of “social fact” is an obvious and extremely influential case in point (Durkheim 1895: 99-113; see also Lukes 1973: 8-15). Saussure’s concept of “Langue” is a domain-specific application of Durkheim’s “social fact”.

Such phenomena, once we start looking for them, occur constantly. In fact, one may be hard pressed to come up with modes of social conduct that are *not* conditioned by nonrandom timespace arrangements. My suggestion here is to take this kind of “context” seriously – that is, let us address it in a systematic and meticulous way and see what purchase it has. Doing so may increase the accuracy of our analyses of the dynamic and changing nature of social life and of the groups that organize it. And as to these groups, identifying chronotopically organized identity work might contribute to a clearer understanding of the “light” communities we witness in so much contemporary work (see Blommaert & Varis 2015). Let me now try to outline some aspects of this issue.

At the most basic level, it is good to point out that the chronotopic nature of specific forms of identity is already entrenched in our everyday vocabularies. Thus, when we speak of “youth culture”, we obviously speak (be it with perplexing vagueness even in published work) about a complex of recognizable cultural phenomena attributed to a specific period in human lives – “youth” – which is often also specific to a place or a region. Talcott Parsons’ (1964: 155-182) discussion of American youth culture, thus, differs from that of French youth offered at the same time by Bourdieu and Passeron. “Youth culture”, therefore, is always a chronotopically conditioned object of study.

Let us take this commonsense observation as our point of departure. Identifying something as “youth culture” in terms of its chronotopic conditions involves and explains certain things. I shall first look at what it involves.

It involves *generalizability*. If specific forms of cultural practice mark specific periods of life, *all* such periods must have their own forms of cultural practices. In other words, a chronotopic qualification such as “youth culture” could (and perhaps must) be extended to any other form of cultural practices describable as tied to and conditioned by specific timespace configurations. In fact, there is nothing more special to “youth culture” than to, say, the culture of young parents, mature professionals or retired senior citizens. In each case we shall see specific forms of practice and identity construction conditioned by the specific stage of life of the ones who enact them, and usually also involving trajectories through specific places (think of schools for teenagers, banks for young people taking their first mortgage, kindergarten for young parents). And just as youth cultures typically set themselves apart by specific forms of jargon and slang (now both in spoken and written forms), other age groups similarly display such discursive and sociolinguistic characteristics.

Generalizability, in turn, implies *fractality*. There is no reason why chronotopic cultural practices would be confined to the “big” stages of life only, because even within narrower timespans we can see nonrandom co-occurrences of timespace configurations and forms of cultural practice and identity enactment. Think of the timeframe of a week, for instance, in which specific days would be reserved for “work” (involving specific trajectories through time and space) and others for, say, religious services, family meetings, shopping and leisure activities. The timeframe of a single day in such a week, in turn, can be broken down into smaller chronotopic units, with activities such as “breakfast”, “dropping kids off at school”, “going to work”, “being at work”, “returning from work” and eventually “watching TV in bed” all marked by nonrandom collocations of time, space and behavioral modes. The rules of macroscopic conduct also apply to microscopic behavior.

And if we take this second implication through to analytical strategy, we can see that in actual analysis, *different chronotopes interact*. The macroscopic chronotopes intersect and co-occur

together with the microscopic ones, and the different chronotopes need to be constantly balanced against each other. To be more precise, the chronotope of youth culture, when looked at in practice, is composed of a large quantity of more specific chronotopic arrangements. Students, for instance, can perform much of their student practices from Monday till Friday in a university town, but perform their practices of friendship, family life, love relationships, entertainment and local community involvement during the weekend in their home town. And this is dynamic as well: the freshman student will organize his/her life differently from the senior and more experienced student, just as the junior professional will act differently from the “old hands” (and note that the transition from newcomer to old hand can happen very quickly – the literature on the experiences of frontline soldiers in the Great War is replete with stories of “aging” overnight during their first battle).

Different chronotopes interact also in ways that may shed light on contemporary forms of cultural globalization in which local and global resources are blended in complex packages of indexically super-rich stuff. Hip Hop is a prime example, of course (Pennycook 2007, Westinen 2014), where the global AAVE templates of Hip Hop are blended with deep sociolinguistic locality – often strictly local dialects – and lyrics that bespeak the (chronotopic) condition of local youth-in-the-margins. Chronotopes, thus, also involve *scalar* distinctions, and such scalar distinctions can be seen as the features that enable relatively unproblematic co-occurrences rather than conflictual ones.

The chronotopic nature of cultural practices *explains* a number of things as well. It explains *generations, anachronisms* and *obsolete cultural practices*, for instance.

Except for census sociology, generations are notoriously fuzzy and puzzling units of sociocultural analysis. As Bourdieu and Passeron pointed out, the joint experience, several years long, of being a student in the same university and program does not cancel the power of reproduction of inequalities across “generations”. Thus upper-class and working-class people may have attended the same schools, the same lectures and movie or theater performances, and spent time in the same cafés and neighborhoods – none of that would reshuffle the transgenerational cards of social class difference, for the same experiences have different meanings and effects depending on this slower process of transmission and social dynamics. The “generation” of social class, therefore, is a slower and longer one than that of, say, “intellectuals”, “engineers” or “jazz lovers”.

I would suggest that we can get a more precise grip on “generations” when we consider what was said above: that at any point in time, we organize our lives within interacting macroscopic and microscopic chronotopes. This means that at any point, our cultural repertoires might contain obsolete elements that no longer “fit” into the social order we now incorporate. Middle-aged people typically still have (and upon request, can perform) a vocabulary of slang obscenities developed during adolescence and hugely functional at that stage of life as symbolic capital for “cool” or “streetwise” peer group identities, but for the deployment of which very little occasion can be found in life at present. Similarly, many people still know small bits of mathematics jargon, of Latin and Ancient Greek, learned in high school but never used again since the last day of school. Such resources remain in the repertoire and can, perhaps, be invoked on nostalgic storytelling occasions, but would have very little other function or value. As we move through “generations”, the cultural stuff that defined the chronotopic arrangements of earlier stages remains in our repertoire, but becomes obsolete.

Such forms of obsolescence, I would propose, might be of interest if we wish to get a precise understanding of sociocultural change. Entirely new phenomena are often tackled by means of very old and obsolete cultural resources – they are often tackled by means of *anachronisms*, in other words. Thus, the key social identifier on Facebook – something entirely new, see further – is “friends” – one of the oldest notions in the vocabulary of social relations anywhere. The entirely new social community configuration of Facebook “friends” is thus anachronistically addressed and molded in the terms of an entirely different social community configuration. The example can be infinitely multiplied: new events, processes and phenomena can be normal for a younger generation and simultaneously abnormal for an older one, while it is the older one that holds, in many social domains, the power to define, regulate and judge these new things, and will typically do this by taking refuge in old, obsolete concepts or discourses. Such anachronisms are often the stuff of public debate and social conflict, as when the “Baby Boomers” are blamed for the creation of economic bubbles and overspending, the “Woodstock generation” is getting crucified for their tolerance of soft drugs, or the *soixante-huitards* (those who were students in May 1968) are coming under attack for a lofty leftism or the “decay” of the moral order.

It is this layered (heteroglossic) co-presence of chronotopically organized practices, in a sometimes unbalanced and anachronistic way, that may lead us towards the finer grain of social order and social conflict. *What exactly is contested* across generations? And *how exactly* does this contestation operate? Those are questions we might begin to explore now.

Similarly, an awareness of the layered co-presence of such practices may enable us to get a more precise understanding of the complex balance between “thick” and “light” communities and forms of membership therein. In earlier work, we pointed towards the – in our view growing – importance of “light” communities on social media (Blommaert & Varis 2015), where people gather and jointly act while focusing on lifestyle objects, meanings and practices. Such “light” groups were never really privileged by sociology: the Durkheimian and Parsonian tradition had a marked preference, precisely, for the mechanisms of cohesion and integration that brought multiple disparate “light” communities together into a “thick” community (the nation, the tribe, the region, the family, the religious community etc.). And we have seen above how Bourdieu and Passeron disqualified students as an “aggregate without consistency” which could surely not qualify as a “real” social group.

Bourdieu and Passeron argued that in decent sociological study of students, due to the ephemeral character of this community, should not address the student community in isolation, for it could never be seen as entirely autonomous with respect to the larger, deeper forces of social class distinction (Bourdieu & Passeron 1964: 56). Thus, while students could be studied as a group, they could not be studied as a group *in itself*; the “groupness” of students must, rather, be constantly checked as to its features and characteristics against the “thick” community structures upon which it was grafted. I suggest that we can considerably refine Bourdieu and Passeron’s relatively rough base-superstructure model by paying attention to the specific chronotopic organization of behavior judged to be characteristic of specific groups. It would enable us, perhaps, to see that the “thick” structures, while perhaps determining, are not necessarily dominant in explaining the social valuation of cultural practices typical of “light” communities – the precise mode of valuation will be an effect of the specific chronotopic arrangements we address.

The largest social space on earth these days is the *virtual* space. And it is entirely new as a sociological and anthropological fact. I already mentioned how entirely new social environments such as social media are often approached from within anachronistic modes of social imagination; and the world of social analysis does not differ too much from that of lay practices in this respect.

I can only point towards the possibility of an extraordinarily interesting line of research in the vein sketched here. There are specific timespace challenges raised by online culture: contrary to the social imagination of classical sociology and anthropology, the social practices developed online involve no physical copresence but a copresence in a shared “virtual” space of unknown scale-dimensions, involve often an unknown number of participants (also often of unknown identity), combined with a stretchable timeframe in which temporal copresence is not absent but complemented by an almost unlimited archivability of online communicative material.

Thus, determining the specific chronotopic nature of cultural practices in a virtual cultural sphere promises to be a stimulating and thought-provoking exercise. Issues of scale – the internet is an *immense* social space – will call for ethnographic precision in analysis, so as to avoid rapid but unfounded generalizations of the kind “Facebook is a family of 2 billion people”. Using a far more refined research tool, directed with great precision at the specific context-situatedness of *any* form of social practice, must help us ditch such sociological (as well as political) illusions and replace them with a more complex, but also far more accurate, image of what really goes on in that colossal social space, what exactly contributes to modes of social organization there, and how patterns of organization change over time.

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