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Challenging neoliberal time: Creating space for radical praxis in geography

Jenny Pickerill

School of Geography and Planning, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

Correspondence
Jenny Pickerill, School of Geography and Planning, Winter Street, University of Sheffield, Sheffield S10 2TN, UK.
Email: j.m.pickerill@sheffield.ac.uk

Abstract

There is something particularly depressing about the current moment—when the possibility of thriving as a geography academic in British academia seems incompatible with anything else, be that a life outside work, a family, activism, or even sleep. What connects these multiple intensifications of demands on academics, and many of the external crises we are living through (the climate emergency, wage deflation, cost of living, the COVID pandemic etc.) is how we value, use and understand time. The non-linearity of time is a useful way to understand how we work in academia. In this paper, I explore how can we change how we use our time. I propose three responses, which each play with time as non-linear, multiple rhythms, and as having a lack of balance or stability. First, the possibility of working with the delight of shifting pace in helping us to enjoy our working time more. Second, in acting in collaboration, solidarity, and being alongside each other in ways where shared time is more expansive than individual time. Finally, in how we can collectively and structurally re-order our time together.

KEYWORDS

Britain, collaboration, delight, non-linearity, work-life balance

1 | INTRODUCTION

There is a crisis of time in neoliberal academia. Working in a British university, there are elements of this which might be nationally specific—such as long-running trade union disputes and the increasing power of the governance body Office for Students—but other elements of contemporary academic life like casualisation, unsustainable workloads, consistently increasing expectations of grant capture and publication rates, and shortening timelines for marking alongside demands for more detailed feedback to students, all contribute to a broader unsustainable intensity of work demands which is leading to academic exhaustion and burnout.

I summarise this as a starting point because while separately many of these things are not in themselves new to those of us who have been working in academia in the last few decades, rarely have they coalesced and overlapped so explicitly. While Neil Smith (2000) was famously concerned about the neoliberalisation of the university and subsequent 'sausage

factory' of using mechanisms like research assessment tools (RAE, REF, ERA etc.) to measure, value and quantify our research, at that time geographers were not simultaneously struggling for secure employment and liveable wages. We have not made the gains we might have hoped for and expected, especially given the growth of 'radical geography', and instead it feels like we are going backwards. There is, therefore, something particularly depressing about the current moment—a moment when the possibility of thriving as a geography academic in British academia seems incompatible with anything else, be that a life outside work, a family, activism, or even sleep. Of course, this intensification of work and its demands are replicated around the world. The resulting sacrificing of basics such as sleep is a design, rather than an unintended consequence, of late capitalism (Crary, 2013; Sharma, 2014). The more we are awake, the more we can produce and consume. Simultaneously our experience of the present moment is, according to Rosa (2013), shrinking. The apparent acceleration of time and pace of life makes time feel like it is flowing ever faster, complicating our relationships with each other and the world. The world is moving so fast that Rosa argues we are in a perpetual state of 'frenetic standstill', where paradoxically everything is changing so quickly that social change feels stalled with institutions unable to keep up with the pace. The living present is not static, but a moment stretching between the past and what is yet to become (Loewen Walker, 2014). Our ability to standstill, focus and notice the present moment, however, is an increasing struggle, contributing to the rise of stress and burnout. What connects these multiple intensifications of demands on academics, and many of the external crises we are living through (the climate emergency, wage deflation, the cost of living crisis etc.), is how we value, use and understand time (Ho, 2021). We know that time, or the lack of it, is crucial in how we respond to the climate crisis. We know that wage deflation is also in part a lack of valuation of many people's time. The cost of living crisis is, in part, a disordering of whose time has most value, privileging landlords, supermarkets and utility companies, for example, over renters, farmers and consumers.

When I ask my colleagues what they would like to change in their job, their answers are consistently 'more time'. Even as bureaucracy expands, it is not that academics do not see value in better support systems for students, spending more time writing constructive feedback on assessments, or keeping accurate records of student progress (even though some of these expanding pressures in our jobs can be tedious and mundane). Colleagues do not say they object to doing them, but they do want time to do them properly.

The idea that our experience of time has accelerated is not new (Harvey, 1990). We know that the way we work has rapidly intensified in recent decades with various technologies used to help us manage our time, and infrastructures which have built up around our lives to help us make the best use of time, multitask, save time, and so forth (Addie, 2024; Volmar & Stine, 2021). Feminist geographers have been at the forefront of exploring how time is lived and shaped by our daily practices, and lived differently according to one's positionality, especially personal wealth (Sharma, 2014). Feminists have also critiqued the binaries employed in discussions of emerging temporalities, arguing against the valorisation of the fast, rapid and quick, and how fast and slow are co-constituted and produce multiple temporalities through often banal, mundane and intimate everyday practices (Christian & Dowler, 2019; Juelskjær & Rogowska-Stangret, 2017). This focus on often intimate spaces—such as the home—has revealed multiple and multi-layered temporal entanglements which shape how time is experienced, including migration routes, urban change, fears for the future, and resistance (Blunt et al., 2021). Understanding time as lived and complex also opens up the possibilities for living time differently.

Time is no longer considered a linear progression of the past, present and future, though we may still use these terms when we talk about temporalities (Daley & Wright, 2022). Rather, time is unstable, continuously being made and non-linear (Heidegger, 2010). As a geographer, I am particularly interested in time as social change and exploring temporalities through the lens of space and place. The non-linearity of time is a useful way to understand how we work in academia, and the potential 'of non-chronological time in opening up a transformative and unknown future' (Loewen Walker, 2014, p. 1668).

Change can be non-linear in physical systems just as much as social processes. A small change in, for example, river flow speed can become amplified to trigger a response out of proportion—a 'jump'. The whole character of an ecosystem can change if a threshold is crossed. Therefore, vulnerability to major change is dependent on where the threshold is. Non-linearity can lead to chaotic outcomes. Time can be understood, both in relation to nature and society, therefore, as multiple rhythms, continuity and moments of discontinuity, or morphologies of social time (Bastian, 2012; Taylor, 2003).

Nature's temporalities shape our understanding of time and change. Plants, seasons, light and climate all create and shape time. But nature does not have a stable equilibrium state or a moment where it is perfectly balanced, rather it has multiple stable states which nature alternates, or oscillates, between (Holling & Gunderson, 2002). For example, a grassland is stable without vegetation and just as stable with abundant vegetation. This is because temporalities are non-linear, thresholds might be hidden and so we cannot always know when major change will occur. In other words, when thinking about time it might not be that useful to strive for balance or stability, as maybe these things do not exist, and it is more

productive to work with the non-linearity and multiplicity of time. This is not a call to use time more efficiently, to do more, nor is it an advocation to do slow scholarship (Mountz et al., 2015; which as others have already asserted relies on privilege). Rather, I want to ask how can we change how we use our time? How can we retain or reclaim some joy and delight in our academic work through using our time differently? I propose three responses which each play with time differently: in shifting pace; sharing time; and collectively restructuring time.

Crucially, I am making these proposals as acts we can (hopefully) all take, regardless of our individual positionalities within the academy. While it is certainly easier for me, as an established white middle-class professor, to determine how I use my time, my intention is to seek, advocate for, and practice radical temporal praxis that is explicitly inclusionary, and create new shared norms. This further relies on those of us with privilege to create structures to enable these changes, and to ensure that our actions do not generate further work for others—especially early career scholars. As such, when I am advocating not doing some elements of our (ever expanding) roles, this is not an excuse to hand the work down to others, rather it is to ensure that the task itself is not done *at all*.

Indeed, we work in a sector of deep inequalities where numerous axes of social difference (gender, race/ethnicity, class, disability and neurodiversity) influence workloads, expectations, and the demands for 'invisible' labour. The ability not just to say 'no' to aspects of our roles, but for that 'no' to even be heard, is uneven (Gordon et al., 2022). These proposals cannot rewrite the productivist acceleration of the neoliberal academy—they are merely starting points—but they begin from a critique of these existing inequalities, which must continue to be named and made visible, and a call for all colleagues' time to be equally valued.

1.1 | Consciously changing pace

In research on what makes a comfortable indoor temperature in a house, Heschong (1979) developed the concept of 'thermal delight'; she argued that it was not the absolute temperature that mattered (i.e., there is not an internal temperature which we would all agree is ideal), but the contrast between the external and internal temperature *and* the delight we experience in that moment of contrast. For example, on an autumnal morning when we open a window and realise that the air is crisp, and we enjoy the refreshment of that crispness even if we might also feel a chill.

We can think of time in a similarly non-linear way. Indeed, we experience time non-linearly. Many of us are experts at overestimating how much time we have and underestimating how long tasks will take. I am perpetually overcommitted because despite years of evidence to the contrary I still believe I can write an article within a few weeks. We each have our own personal perception and phenomenology of time, which jars against homogenous workload accounting models, other colleagues' perceptions, or even our own common sense. Our understanding of time also shifts when we are stressed, exhausted or unwell. There is also a seasonality and rhythm to academic life when you are teaching, which can feel circular rather than linear. There are distinct seasons of teaching, marking, conferencing, fieldwork and writing, even though these rhythms are increasing flattened and blurred by pressures to simultaneously juggle multiple demands.

It is not, therefore, that we should use time more efficiently, or more intensively and then stop. I have tried this with mixed success. I tried to do more—be the best academic I could while also being an environmental activist, and I just burnt out. I also tried reducing the number of hours I worked by working very intensely. This removed all the fun and joy of work for me. I felt like a machine who could not afford to take the time to chat to colleagues, or meander back from a meeting across campus.

Instead, what if we purposefully changed pace, allowing ourselves to go fast or slow, working to the clock and then putting the clock in a drawer. What if we creatively played with time to create the space we need for the very different ways of being that are required of us as academic geographers? I am thinking here of how for me marking is a fast endurance sport. I cram my marking, doing it rapidly in long days. I try and build an adrenaline rush from how many I can do in an hour. I employ time in an intense and exhausting way. Then I will dedicate two whole days to spend with one PhD researcher. We work slowly, reading, editing and reviewing, chatting, lunching and walking. We revel in the slowness and singularity of the time we take up. Could working with the delight of shifting pace help us to enjoy our working time more?

1.2 | Creating time for what we want

Given that we have limited time, we should be thinking very carefully about who and what we create time for and what we do not. Or rather, where we put our time. This is not to suggest that we all have control over our timetables, a point

I will return to, but that in the gaps that we do, it is important that we support each other in avoiding work that is nothing more than a time sink.

I am thinking particularly here of equality, diversity and inclusion committee work, which has no intended radical outcome, or the endless meetings some colleagues like to hold, or pointless training exercises. I am thinking of anything which is an institutional box-ticking exercise. Instead, I want to create time for working with research participants, doing fieldwork, talking with colleagues I admire, participating in reading groups, listening to students, working with external community groups, and so on. I am thinking here of all the things I find fulfilling and nourishing about being a geographer, and how we need to purposefully do more of these things.

I have also noticed, after three decades in the British university system, how much actually we can get away with *not* doing. We do not have to be overly compliant; we should be a little bit disruptive and resistant; we are meant to be working in a creative profession. We cannot possibly do it all anyway. Indeed, as Berlant (2020) notes:

> People are increasingly using the time they do not have ... to refuse to maintain the vampirism of profit extraction that exhausts the body and saturates the infrastructure of even the most benign and impulsive everyday pleasures ... and, sometimes, [instead] counterabsorption in episodic refreshment, for example in sex, or spacing out, or food that is not for thought.
>
> (p. 119)

This is not the same as saying no to all administrative, service, or leadership tasks, and I say this as a previous Head of Department—a role I actively applied for—but rather in seeking to ensure what roles you take on have some utility and meaning. I always ask, when suggested that I take something else on, what is the intended outcome? What is trying to be achieved? If that cannot be answered, then it is probably a time sink to be avoided. Of course, we must guard against the burden of these time sinks being unintentionally displaced onto colleagues. We cannot act in isolation here. To operate for the collective benefit of all, we need to avoid tasks in such a way as they simply do not get done; or for those of us with greater power and job security to strategically take them on as acts of solidarity, to do our share of the labour we cannot avoid. At other times, I have agreed to do things, only to never deliver, in order to prevent others being asked. On this note, nothing irritates me more than geographers who write about radical politics, anti-capitalism or anarchist futures and then fail to practice any of that in their relations to the university, students or their colleagues. This is about how we choose to use our time and how using our time reflects our ethical praxis. Acting in collaboration, solidarity, being alongside each other is an important use of time, and in an era when time is so precious and the institution demands so much from us, it is a vital form of resistance. But more than that, shared time is more expansive than individual time. Spending time with others sharing an aim is a key nourishing part of academia. We only get that sense of hopefulness, a sense of possibilities, and future orientation when alongside others we find commonality with. One of the reasons I am a geographer is because I like so many other geographers—we are an inspiring, creative, intelligent, amazing bunch—and in your collective company I enjoy my time so much more.

1.3 | Seeking structural and collective time changes

Finally, changing how we value and use time has to be a collective and structural change. While as individuals we can change some elements of time, and resist other intrusions into our time, these changes are most powerful when collective. At Sheffield Geography we have been working hard to collectively reduce workloads—by cutting modules, giving more time to teaching preparation in the workload, and reducing assessment, admin roles, reducing dissertation supervision, and committees. Of course, we have been doing this in consultation with students, but we must also put the needs and capacities of staff as a priority in this work. No-one can do excellent teaching and research exhausted.

We have also been working on our timetabling—trying to bunch teaching so staff have teaching-free days for research, ensuring marking load is spread across semesters, encouraging more use of university mechanisms such as flexible working arrangements to help colleagues structure their time in ways that work best for them. We have removed evening events, moved seminars to mid-afternoon, try and only hold meetings between 10 am and 3 pm, and tried to collectively create a culture of going home at 5 pm. We are working on how to reduce student expectations of staff responsiveness.

I have noticed that things we have led on as a department—that we just decided to do ourselves—are actually leading to change in the broader university. I don't want to be too optimistic here, but we do have some power and autonomy at department level, and we should use this as much as possible. It takes all staff to buy into this, to create a working environment of new norms, of supporting each other when colleagues decline meetings because it is their research day, of

understanding we have three working days to reply to emails, of listening to each other, of trying not to generate work for each other, and in respecting each other when we say 'no'. This is slow change, but it feels powerful to be collectively and structurally re-ordering our time together. This is an ongoing process, just as progress is made in structuring our time differently, other challenges—such as centralised timetabling—emerge which threaten it. Constraints will persist, but opportunities remain to find time in the cracks of the neoliberal university, and if we work collectively, we are more able to make the most of the (albeit often small) opportunities. Apart from anything else, small acts of temporal subversion can bring a joy that resonates far beyond the moment itself.

2 | CONCLUSIONS

While the neoliberal university discourse is dominated by urgency and the scarcity of time—the need to produce research and teaching quickly, to always do more with less and to do it faster—we can resist this in particular spaces, moments, and in our practices. It is important not to individualise this or suggest that we should simply all slow down. Rather, we should explore how we can use time in ways that make our jobs more joyful, nourishing, fulfilling and less draining, stressful and isolating, and in so doing avoid time sinks and time wasting. Precisely because of the deep inequalities in how time is experienced and drawn upon, and whose time appears to matter most in the academy, at the very least we should be actively making our temporal realities visible. For those of us more privileged and practised at having control over our time, we need to identify what our colleagues need, and encourage each other to rework our daily experiences. All of us, though, need to listen more attentively when we hear 'no' and support acts of resistance (however small they might at first appear). It still irritates me when I have carefully declined a task to then be told that I should reconsider because 'it won't take long'. Please let's stop judging other people's time management and respect the diversity and invisibility of demands on our time. I have made three proposals, which each play with time as non-linear, multiple rhythms and a lack of balance or stability. First, the possibility of working with the delight of shifting pace in helping us to enjoy our working time more. Second, acting in collaboration, solidarity, and being alongside each other in ways where shared time is more expansive than individual time. Finally, collectively, and structurally re-ordering our time together. There are many more examples, of course, but I hope that by asking these questions, in the context of what a radical geography should and could be, and for whom and how we make time, we can continue to try and enable social change inside the university just as much as we work on broader social justice and change in our research. In other words, our working conditions are a vital political space that we must attend to if we are going to be able to sustain radical geography. To end, I ask you to reflect on what you would do with more time. I want to take time to watch the world more, to listen, and for rest. Let this be our starting point.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

ORCID

Jenny Pickerill https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2070-705X

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