



РЕЦЕНЗИИ

DOI: 10.22363/2313-2272-2022-22-1-205-210

Time as a key aspect of historical sociology*

H. Behrends

Western Technical College
400 7th Street North, La Crosse, Wisconsin 54601, United States

Abstract. This article is a review of Jiří Šubrt's book *The Sociology of Time: A Critical Overview* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan/Springer; 2021. 283 p.). The author places this work in a broader context of previous books by Šubrt in order to show that all these publications analyze the past and contemporary sociological theories, and focus on historical sociology and the conception of sociology as a science on social processes. Šubrt considers time in the context of the long-term development of knowledge, in which efforts have been made to control and master it. He also conducts a critical analysis of the views of previous generations of sociologists who developed ideas about the nature and functions of time. Šubrt examines different fields of the so-called 'sociology of time'; however, his main interest is the temporalized sociology such as theories of Niklas Luhmann and Anthony Giddens, but especially the conceptions in the field of historical comparative sociology, which combine the object of sociological research with long-term historical processes. According to Šubrt, the basic aspect of time that should be decisive for sociology is its irreversibility associated with the idea of an open future.

Key words: time; social time; temporality; sociological theory; historical sociology; temporalized sociology; structure; function; social system; action; change

Jiří Šubrt is well-known to the *RUDN Journal of Sociology* readers. His professional interests cover several interrelated topics [2] on which he published not only articles but also several books [3; 4; 5; 6; 7; 8; 9] in the last five years. N.P. Narbut emphasized Šubrt's activities in the field of historical sociology [1]. In this article, I will focus on Šubrt's book published last year by the Palgrave Macmillan, but also underlie his long-term professional interests as reflected in this latest work and his previous publications.

Šubrt has been researching several interrelated areas for many years. In addition to the issues of time and memory, Šubrt studies the history of sociology, general sociological theory and historical sociology. The field of sociology of time is differentiated depending on the paradigmatic positions. The knowledge of theoretical sociology helps Šubrt to understand the considerable plurality of opinions that we encounter here. The issues of time and memory led him to

* © H. Behrends, 2022

The article was submitted on 14.11.2021. The article was accepted on 17.12.2021.

historical sociology which he defined as ‘temporalized sociology’. In the introductory chapter of his book, Šubrť describes its research area as the ‘labyrinth of questions and answer’. With some exaggeration, one can say that his book is a kind of a guide in this labyrinth for it explains in a clear and relatively easy-to-understand way how this labyrinth was created and how it is possible not to get lost in.

The processual perspective that Šubrť develops in other works is applied in the second chapter of the book. The topic of time is related to the issue of civilization which was addressed in his books on historical sociology [3; 5; 6]. The key author for him is Norbert Elias, to whom he dedicated one of his later monographs. Elias puts the problem of time in the context of the process of civilization — as the long-term development of changes in human ideas about time — in the perspective of the sociology of knowledge. Šubrť is inspired by Elias, but he does not understand his work dogmatically, on the contrary, there is some criticism for reducing the time to ‘timekeeping’, which is insufficient for reflecting that temporality at the metatheoretical level is the very foundation of the theory of long-term social processes of Elias.

The processual perspective used in the first chapter allows to understand how human thinking about time and history has changed over the centuries, and how the cyclical notion of the eternal was replaced by a linear finalist conception of history, which was then replaced in the last century by the idea of an open future.

An important part of the implemented perspective is the study how time measurement and control have changed over the centuries. Šubrť notes the role played by medieval monasteries, discusses Max Weber’s ideas on the influence of the Protestant ethics and Karl Marx’s political economy, in which time becomes a measure of labor. The time associated with the advent of the modern society is ambivalent — it is something we want to control by intensifying its use, but it opposes our efforts as a force (a ‘modern tyrant’) that alienates itself.

The third chapter introduces the interpretation of time as a category of sociology and history. For instance, Emile Durkheim understood time as a category derived from the rhythms of collective life. Šubrť reveals the influence that the philosophical thought had on Durkheim — from Aristotle’s conception of categories as basic tools of human thought to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Another significant influence on Durkheim’s school was from Henri Bergson’s philosophy of time, which may not be regular in society and may have periods of varying qualities separated by what is referred to as critical data. A specific feature of time for Durkheim is its nature of the social fact. According to his *Rules of the Sociological Method*, social facts should be explained only through other social facts; thus, the category of time has a social origin, because it is derived from the rhythms of society, and only was associated with certain natural and astronomical phenomena. Šubrť points to a certain controversy of this Durkheim’s idea (in the history of calendar, astrology, and astronomy) — the connection between calendar systems and other time cycles has long been associated with the observation of astronomical phenomena, which greatly challenges the idea of a purely social origin of timing.

However, Durkheim's conception was important for social sciences and humanities — for the periodization of historical time, the theory of collective memory by Maurice Halbwachs, and structuralism including the theory of Fernand Braudel with three time planes: the time of short duration of individual historical episodes, the time of social cycles, and the time of long duration (*longue durée*). This Braudel's conception later became a basis for the theory of the world system created by Immanuel Wallerstein, who distinguishes five types of space-time in historical sociology (episodic-geopolitical, cyclical-ideological, structural, eternal, transformative time-space).

In one of his previous books [7], Šubrt distinguished two basic perspectives of sociological thinking, one of which is inspired by Durkheim (holistic approach — structuralism, functionalism, and systems theory), and the second perspective is individualistic (Max Weber's theory of action). And it is the interpretive sociology perspective, in which the fourth chapter considers temporal aspects of human behavior — in George Herbert Mead's and Alfred Schutz's theories. For Mead, time is not characterized by a continuous flow, but is associated with the fact that new events constantly appear, which makes us deduce from each of them, again and again, our views on the past, and at the same time we constantly create new ideas about the future. This type of reasoning leads to the somewhat surprising conclusion that the past is essentially as unpredictable as the future. Schutz criticizes Weber for, although he attaches a key importance to the meaning, he does not address the question of how this meaning is constituted. Schutz defines the issue of meaning as the issue of time, and develops a number of original ideas about the position of the individual in society and his social behavior.

Šubrt's works are interdisciplinary, which is not just about interrelationships between sociology and history. The fifth chapter returns to Durkheim's conception of time and traces how the social function of time was understood by Durkheim's followers such as cultural anthropologists Bronisław Malinowski, Edward Evans-Pritchard or Edmund Leach. Special attention is paid to Claude Lévi-Strauss' works, who distinguished the so-called 'cold' and 'hot' societies based on the way people consider historical time. He argued that contemporary 'hot' societies place the emphasis on the flow of historical time and changes associated with it, while 'cold' preliterate societies tend to ignore this flow with certain rituals.

In this chapter, special attention is paid to two sociologists with Russian roots — Pitirim Sorokin and Georges Gurvitch. During his American period, to some extent in collaboration with his student Robert Merton, Sorokin tried, being inspired by Durkheim, to introduce the concept of social time in sociology, which he later described as 'sociocultural' time with the same qualities as the Durkheim school had previously identified. It is essentially a qualitative time that does not flow evenly, cannot be divided into very small pieces, and its flow is interrupted by critical data. In their joint article, Sorokin and Merton argue that sociology should use not the timekeeping common for the astronomical research but rather this qualitative social time.

Sorokin argued that there was no one time common to all events (in addition to astronomical time, there is economic, psychological, biological, etc. time), and Gurvitch went even further, stating that social time cannot be spoken of in the singular — only in the plural. According to Gurvitch, there is a multiplicity of social times that operate at different levels of social reality and differ in their course. Gurvitch divided all these times into eight types: time of long duration and slow decline; illusive/deceptive time; irregular/erratic time; cyclical time; retarding time; alternating time; time overtaking itself; explosive time. However, Šubr is very critical of the idea of the plurality of times. He argues that time in these conceptions is confused with motion, and that different qualities of times are derived not from their distinguishable qualities, but from the different movements that take place in time, which is a logical error.

In the sixth chapter, Šubr focuses on two important representatives of contemporary sociology, who tried to incorporate the idea of time into their ambitious theoretical constructions — Niklas Luhmann and Anthony Giddens. Šubr considered Luhmann's ideas in his previous work on *The Systemic Approach in Sociology* [8], and Giddens's ideas — in the book *Individualism, Holism and the Central Dilemma of Sociological Theory* [7]. Now he returns to both thinkers' conceptions from the perspective of time. For Luhmann, temporalization is associated with one of the main tendencies of social systems — reduction of complexity. For Giddens, this issue is associated with different types of temporality (Duration — Dasein — Long duration) related to different levels of structuring. In both authors' theories, Šubr is particularly interested in the long-term historical development. Both authors — each in a different way — reject the teleological, finalist conception of the development for the idea of an open future.

In the following chapter, Šubr considers how time is understood in natural sciences, especially in astrophysics. He focuses on the phenomenon of the time arrow, which, as the two final chapters of the book show, he understands as a fundamental feature of temporality in sociology. He pays particular attention to the implications of the Brussels School of Thermodynamics led by Ilya Prigogine (who is also known as a collaborator of Immanuel Wallerstein) for understanding the time. There are explanations of some aspects of contemporary thermodynamics, of the concept of dissipative structures and chaos theory in relation to the issue of temporality, which Šubr uses in the three final chapters of his book.

In contemporary sociology, the issue of time is usually considered in the form of three basic questions: constitution of time as a social category; functioning of temporal structures at different levels of social systems; the place and role of time in general sociological theory. The eighth chapter focuses on two basic concepts that are usually connected with the issue of time — 'sociology of time' and 'temporalized sociology'. Šubr provides information on all basic directions in which time becomes the object of sociological, especially empirical, research (time perspectives and orientations, time order of society, time structures of specific social systems, etc.). However, it is clear that what attracts the author's interest the most is temporalized sociology. In this part of the chapter, Šubr supports the ideas

of Patrick Baert: temporalized sociology represents an approach that emphasizes the issue of the long-term social development as associates with the program of historical sociology [3; 5; 6] and with the concept of sociology as a science of social processes [9].

The chapter “Balance and prospects” is a critical recapitulation of those topics that Šubrt considers in the sociological thinking about time as challenging and difficult to accept. He seeks to systematically put forward arguments against claims about the qualitative nature of social time and about the plurality of times. He shows that these and similar notions are based on the fact that the changes in temporal structures caused by the changes in movement in them create the unjustifiably far-reaching conclusions about the very nature of time. Šubrt refers to Hans Reichenbach’s idea of the irreversibility of time (we cannot change the past but we can change the future) as the starting point for all reflections on time in sociology. Thus, in historical sociology, it is necessary to apply a perspective in which the teleological vision of history is rejected (we can make records of the past but not of the future) and the concept of an open future is applied. In the last short chapter “Epilogue”, Šubrt tries to formulate in a concise and systematic way the philosophical (rather metatheoretical) foundations on which the approach to time in sociology should be based.

Šubrt’s book is interesting and in some parts even fascinating reading. The author demonstrates a broader knowledge of the issues under study, the ability to think through the issues in depth, and at the same time a considerable dose of invention in developing new and non-trivial ideas. Although Russian readers have already had the opportunity to read some of Šubrt’s texts on time, this book is worth translation in Russian.

References

1. Narbut N.P. Ten years of historical sociology in Prague: A new perspective branch of Czech sociology. *RUDN Journal of Sociology*. 2019; 19 (1).
2. Šulc I. Perspektiva “duplex“ kak popytka preodoleniya klyuchevoy sotsiologicheskoy dilemmy [The ‘duplex’ perspective as an attempt to resolve the key sociological dilemma]. *RUDN Journal of Sociology*. 2020; 20 (1).
3. Šubrt I. *Istoricheskie protsessy, sotsialnye izmeneniya, modernizatsiya s tochki zreniya sotsiologii* [Historical Processes, Social Changes, Modernization in the Sociological Perspective]. Moscow; 2017. (In Russ.).
4. Šubrt I. *Antinomii, dilemmy i obsuzhdeniya v sovremennoy sotsiologicheskoy mysli: ocherki sotsialnoy teorii* [Antinomies, Dilemmas and Discussions in the Contemporary Sociological Thought: Essays on Social Theory]. Moscow; 2018. (In Russ.).
5. Šubrt J. *The Perspective of Historical Sociology: The Individual as Homo-Sociologicus through Society and History*. Bingley; 2017.
6. Šubrt J. *Historicko-sociologické reflexe*. Praha; 2018.
7. Šubrt J. *Individualism, Holism and the Central Dilemma of Sociological Theory*. Bingley; 2019.
8. Šubrt J. *The Systemic Approach in Sociology and Niklas Luhmann: Expectations, Discussions, Doubts*. Bingley; 2020.
9. Šubrt J., Kumsa A., Ruzzeddu M. *Explaining Social Processes*. Cham; 2020.

DOI: 10.22363/2313-2272-2022-22-1-205-210

Время как ключевое понятие исторической социологии*

Х. Берендс

Западный технический колледж
7-ая улица (Север), 400, Ла Кросс, Висконсин 54601, США

Аннотация. Статья представляет собой рецензию на книгу Иржи Шубрта «Социология времени: Критический обзор» (Чам: Палгрейв Максиллан/Шпрингер, 2021. 283 с.). Автор встраивает свое повествование в широкий контекст тематик, представленных в предшествующих работах Шубрта, чтобы показать, как он исследует социологические теории прошлого и настоящего, но фокусируется на исторической социологии и трактовке социологии как науки о социальных процессах. Шубрт рассматривает время в контексте длительного развития знания, поскольку для общества характерны попытки овладеть временем, контролировать его. Шубрт проводит критический анализ взглядов предшествующих поколений социологов, предложивших свои трактовки природы и функций времени. Шубрт рассматривает разные области «социологии времени», однако основной объект его интереса — темпоральная социология, представленная, например, работами Никласа Лумана и Энтони Гидденса, и, в первую очередь, подходы сравнительной исторической социологии, в которой объект социологического анализа встроен в долгосрочные исторические процессы. Согласно Шубрту, основным аспектом времени, имеющим решающее значение для социологии, является его необратимость, связанная с идеей открытого будущего.

Ключевые слова: время; социальное время; темпоральность; социологическая теория; историческая социология; темпоральная социология; структура; функция; социальная система; действие; изменение

* © Берендс Х., 2022

Статья поступила 14.11.2021 г. Статья принята к публикации 17.12.2021 г.