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Toward a Semiotics of Times: Synchronization, Crisis, and War

For a long time, I have been interested in the cultural history of time, or rather, times, in the plural form. That time is multiple is a trivial insight – by now, even in physics, for example in the Many-Worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics. From the fact that we live, indeed that everything exists in multiple times, however, follows that any kind of community, communication, or network can only come into being by means of practices of synchronization, aligning different durations, rhythms, and speeds to the same temporal standard. As we know from when we could still agree to synchronize our watches – not just leave it to our smart phones to receive updates from the nearest cell tower – temporal synchronization also involve the synchronization of actions, experiences, practices, affects, movements, even of entire lives. Communities and collectives– including both human societies, ecosystems, and cells – can only exist if their members are synchronized with each other, at least to some degree.

Synchronization is fundamentally a semiotic process, based on the use of signs. Semiotics, or rather “semiology”, as Saussure proposed to call “this general science”, which he considered to be part of “social psychology”, in his lectures on general linguistics, famously held in Geneva between 1906 and 1911, studies “the life of signs in social life” (1916, 39-40). Language is only one of the many systems of signs, by means of which something is “expressed”. Other examples he mentions are fingerspelling, formalities of politeness, symbolic rites, and military distinctions. All these sign systems have ways to represent time and perform synchronization.

The verb “synchronize” is composed by the Greek prefix *syn-*, “together”, and the word for “time”, *chronos*, and thus refers to events, actions, technologies or activities that cause something to happen together, coincide, to occur or unfold at the same time, to be in sync (Jordheim 2014, 2017). For this purpose, a diverse set of semiotic practices, rituals, and tools come into use – like calendars, clocks, watches, church bells, and various computation systems, as well as narratives and concepts (Jordheim 2018, 2022). In the following, I will give a few examples how these semiotic tools and practices – both material and linguistic – have come into use in particular historical situations to synchronize human actions and activities. My aim is to open a discussion about the semiotics of time, more specifically, the semiotics of multiple times, synchronization, and crisis.

Synchronization can be studied both as part of everyday practices, like working, eating, sleeping, and as moments of disruption, when these practices are stopped or accelerated, or in other ways brought out of sync. My examples come from the second category, illustrating how the semiotics of synchronization come into view in situations of existential instability, societal collapse, emergency, war, and death. Among the systems of signs that I will address are concepts, church bells, declarations, police discourse, and watches – in that order.

Temporal Semiotics of Concepts and Prefixes: Polycrisis

In January 2023, the British US-based historian Adam Tooze was invited to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, to talk about the concept he had brought back in circulation, “polycrisis”:

why I think the term is still useful, is this experience of not a single crisis with a single clearly defined logic. The financial crisis [for example] was about mortgage-backed securities. But this coming together at a single moment of things which, on the face of it, don't have anything to do with each other, but seem to pile each other to create a situation in the minds of policymakers, business people, families, individuals. (Tooze 2023)

Tooze did not claim to be the originator of the new buzzword “polycrisis”, which was coined the French sociologists and complexity theorists Anne Birgitte Kern and Edgar Morin in their book *Homeland Earth: A Manifesto for a New Millennium* from 1999. They used it to talk about “interwoven and overlapping crises” affecting humanity and argued that the most “vital” problem of the day was not any single threat but the “complex intersolidarity of problems, antagonisms, crises, uncontrollable processes, and the general crisis of the planet” (Morin and Kern 1999, 74).

From a historian’s point of view, there are different ways to respond to this new coinage. In her 2013 book *Anti-Crisis*, anthropologist Janet Roitman attacked the new metaphysics of crisis emerging in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, which elevated financial trickery to the level of large-scale historical change – which in the end only contributed to the survival and growth of the system of financial capitalism (Roitman 2023). Another set of responses has made reference to the “slow disasters” unfolding for example in the global south that never reaches the level of buzzwords at Davos, partly due to their more continuous and slower temporalities, as opposed to from the urgency of crisis (Baruah 2023).

Tooze’s term “polycrisis” was coined to refer to multiple interwoven crises, which belong to different fields of knowledge and practice: health, the environment, politics, economics, migration. That crisis can be used to refer to events taking place in different contexts, in order to temporally align them, and draw them together into one historical process or moment, has its own history that I will briefly sketch out.

In Early Modern knowledge cultures, “crisis” could still refer to different material contexts. One was medicine. Originating in the *Corpus Hippocraticum*, the term “crisis” referred to the moment when a doctor could tell whether a patient would live or die. In Johann Joachim Zedler’s *Universal-Lexicon*, published in 68 volumes between 1731 and 1754, the entry “crisis” distinguished between a *crisis imperfecta*, when the illness did not entirely leave the body, but gathered in a peripheral organ, where it continued to hurt the patient, and the *crisis perfecta*, when the illness left the body completely (Zedler 1733).

Another material context was law. In translations of Aristotle’s work into English and French, “crisis” was used to indicate the decisions, by which a state could wield power and

create justice. As a legal term, crisis was linked to practices of punishment, theatres of justice, appearance and behavior of judges and other officers. Furthermore, crisis also had a theological usage, closely related to the legal one, but materially different. According to the Christian concept of crisis, God is the judge, and Judgement Day is rapidly approaching; hence, the material context of the concept is the Final Judgement: some people are going down, into eternal fire or pain, at the hands of the devils, some are going up, joining God and the saints in the heavens (Koselleck 1982, 617-618).

According to the German historian Reinhart Koselleck in his entry in the lexicon on social and political concepts in the German language, the modern concept of “crisis” emerged in European discourse in the late 18th century. Between 1750 and 1850, he argues, “crisis” aggregated meanings originating within different discourses, like medicine, law, and theology, and added to them a strong temporal dimension (Koselleck 1982, 627-629). According to Koselleck, key concepts like “history”, “progress”, “development”, and “crisis” operates as *Kollektivsingulare*, “collective singulars” (Koselleck 1979, 50-58), which assembles and drew together multiple historical events, experiences, and actions. In this way, “histories”, featuring a multitude of different actors and actions, their effects, and implications, unfolding along different trajectories and paths, became “history”, or even “History”, capital H. The “progresses” of technology, art, popular emancipation, or social morality, were merged into one and the same historical movement: “Progress”, capital P. The same happened with “crisis”. In this way, the collective singular emerged as a sign of synchronization, drawing diverse historical processes together into one singular, homogenous movement or event, bringing together past, present, and future.

In a semiotic perspective, it is possible to argue that this process – the sign “crisis” drawing together, aligning, and synchronizing very different historical events and processes – is repeating itself in the present. Only the material contexts are different: the Russian attack on the Ukraine, the Israeli bombing of Gaza, extreme weather, wildfires, refugees drowning in the Mediterranean, rise of antibiotic resistance, a new increase in subprime mortgages. There is the crisis of health, the crisis of economy, the crisis of the climate, and the crisis of politics, which are drawn together, aggregated, aligned and unified into one singular concept: crisis, with a big C, or, with Tooze, “the polycrisis” – on the way to becoming a ‘unicrisis’. Instead of a distributive plural, which would keep these contexts apart, and help us deal with them separately, a “collective singular” is forming, decontextualized, without places, actors, and victims. Crisis is turning into the crisis of mankind. When crisis changes from a pluralistic concept, mobilizing different material contexts, to a collective singular, different meanings collapse into each other and give rise to a specific philosophy of history where crisis represents the break, the rupture, even the end of all things as we know them.

Temporal Semiotics of Sound: Church Bells

One of the most frequently occurring crises in history are undoubtedly the crisis of war. Since the third Hague Convention in 1907 the declaration of war, in other words, the

naming of a certain set of future actions by the name “war”, is defined according to an official international protocol. Historically, however, other sign systems than the language of the law have played a more important role in war time, literally speaking.

Since medieval times, the toll of church bells has been a sign of imminent danger, in the form of the attack of foreign troops or a fire within city walls – mostly as a warning to hide or flee the city (Arnold, Goodson 2012). Later this function has been taken over by verbal signs, like the concepts of “crisis” or “war”, whose semiotic, both illocutionary and perlocutionary effects have much in common with the church bell ritual, warning people about something that is about to happen and often helping them prepare for what is to come.

In 1456, the city of Belgrade, one of the main centers of the Habsburg empire, was the scene of one of the famous battles in the history of Christendom. After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the Ottoman Sultan Mehmet II set out on a campaign to conquer the Kingdom of Hungary. His first stop was the border town of Belgrade (in German *Kriechisch Weissenburg*, Greek White Castle, in old Hungarian *Nándorfehérvár*). The siege began on the 4 July and lasted until 22. The defense of Belgrade was organized by John Hunyadi, the Voivode, the highest ranking official of Transylvania, who had fought many battles against the Turks in the previous two decades (Mixson 2022). According to official history, the battle was decided when Hunyadi led a counterattack on the Ottoman camp, in which Mehmet II was wounded and forced to lift the siege and retreat. In this way, the southern border of Hungary was protected, and the Ottoman advance was delayed for another half century, 70 years to be exact. The day of the victory, 22 July, has been a memorial day in Hungary ever since.

The battle of Belgrade is the first time an attempt was made to synchronize the whole of Europe, or rather, the whole of Christendom – in real time, so to speak – by means of one of the most prominent time-keeping devices of the age. During the siege of Belgrade, pope Callixtus III, elected a year earlier, and tasked with organizing the defense of Christendom after the fall of Constantinople, ordered that the bells of every European church should be rung every day at noon, at 12 o’clock, to call all Christian believers to pray for the defenders of the city of Belgrade, foremost among them John Hunyadi himself (Mixson 2022). This is the origin of the noon bell ritual still undertaken in Catholic and old Protestant churches. Since Callixtus never withdrew his order, this gave rise to one of the most important synchronizing practices in early modern and modern Europe: church bells calling Christians to prayer – in the awareness, or at least the shared belief, that same ritual is being performed at the same time all over Christendom. Thus, church bells, also used in other moments of crisis, or later, to memorialize those moments, employ sound to bring about a feeling of in-synckness or even togetherness, long before the advent of the newspaper, the novel and the nation-state – which together gave rise to what Benedict Anderson famously called “imagined communities” (cf. Anderson 1983).

At a closer look, however, the origin of the Christian noon bell ritual is also a story of being out of sync, rather than in sync – at least for two reasons: partly, because in 1456 noon, twelve o’clock, did not occur at the same time all over Christendom, but with a time

difference of several hours depending on the position of the sun at this particular geographical location; partly because the papal order in many cases arrived too late, when the battle was already won, and the chiming church bells thus turned into a symbol of victory rather than sympathy and participation. Today, if we google the Siege of Belgrade and even noon bells, we quickly happen upon websites of a strongly nationalist, nativist leaning, drawing parallels from the struggle against the Ottomans in the 15th and 16th centuries to the present day.

Temporal Semiotics of Declarations: Crisis Again

To discuss the semiotic connection between church bell rituals and the concept of crisis, I will return to the present. Today, I argue, “crisis” is a term predominantly used by people in power, mostly politicians or bureaucrats, like in the 15th century pope Callixtus III, to impose a particular form of time, a particular temporal structure on a historical situation. In other words, crisis is not primarily an experiential, phenomenological category, a lifeworld-category, by means of which individuals make sense of their lives and surroundings, but something that is imposed on sets of events and occurrences by people or systems in power – it is a temporal tool for management and control. Events are synchronized, accelerated, and eventified; in other words, time – that is social, political, and historical time – is sped up, aligned, and given a distinguishable shape, including a beginning and end.

On 30 Jan 2020, when the WHO declared a “global health crisis” – more precisely “public health emergency of international concern over the global outbreak of novel coronavirus” (WHO, 2019) – things started happening very quickly. History accelerated, if you will – as if the church bells had started to toll. For the Member States, several important obligations arose immediately, both medical, legal, and regarding communication with the WHO. In more theoretical terms, the declaration made by the WHO Director-General can be understood as a speech act, by which distributed incidents are assembled, aligned, synchronized, and transformed into a singular, dramatic event: a crisis. In a temporal sense, 30 January 2020 manifested a break with the past and the beginning of something new, almost an act of creation. Before the WHO declaration, the news was filled with reports of a new influenza emerging in China, afterward we were facing a global health crisis.

But not all naming processes, in other words not all crisis declarations, are as effective as this one. Around 2016 different actors – countries, organizations, news media – started declaring “climate crisis” or “climate emergency”. Among them were the British Parliament (BBC News 2019), the Norwegian newspaper *Morgenbladet* (Jakobsen, Jenssen 2019), the German city of Konstanz (Deutschlandfunk 2019), only to mention a few. Again, the Early Modern church bells offer an interesting model for the synchronization of actions and experiences across borders and large distances. But apart from the rhetorical act itself, nothing much happened. Whereas both “global health crisis” and “climate crisis” were declared, that is, they were named by official or quasi-official bodies in top-down move to impose a specific use of language, both the speech acts and their effects differ radically from each other. “Global health crisis” came into being with immediate effect when the WHO

Director-General made his declaration; by contrast, conceptualizing “climate crisis” was – and is – a much more drawn-out, distributed, and uncertain process, based not in an institution like the WHO, consisting of committees and bureaucratic hierarchies, but in a set of communication and mobilization strategies.

Furthermore, the declaration of “climate crisis” did not unleash a set measures and regulations that all UN-member states are obliged to follow; the only thing that is unleashed, are more declarations about the reduction of carbon emission by a certain future date. In a temporal sense, naming seemingly endless assemblages of scientific facts “climate crisis”, is supposed to create a sense of urgency and immediacy, a sense of “now”. However, the concept is also invested with a vague sense of futurity, which allows those who use it to postpone any need for action into an open future. Finally, the concept also has an apocalyptic dimension locating the current inhabitants of the globe in the end of times.

Temporal Semiotics of Order: Kafka

As semiotic practices, both church bell rituals and crisis declarations mobilize large groups of people rather than singular individuals, and thus, address political and social experiences, rather than existential ones. They are examples of crises as collective practices, when national, religious, even global collectives respond to disruptive events. But “crisis” also refers to highly individualized, personal, and existential events, which might be or not be connected to the larger events of history. To explore how collective traumatic experiences have impact at the level of the individual, I am turning to another semiotic medium: a literary text.

In Franz Kafka’s parable *Gibs auf* (Give it up), written in 1922, and published by Max Brod together with other parts of the *Nachlass* in 1936, an everyday scene of temporal synchronization is turned into a scene of estrangement, alienation, and indeed, personal existential crisis. This type of scene is well-known from other works by Kafka and has given rise to the term ‘kafkaesque’: The world is transformed from something familiar and everyday into something strange, scary, and threatening, by only a small deviation from the normal – in this case the non-synchronicity of a wristwatch belonging to the narrator with the central tower clock, towering above. I reproduce it here both in the German original and the English translation by Tania and James Stern, published in 1983.

Es war sehr früh am Morgen, die Straßen rein und leer, ich ging zum Bahnhof. Als ich eine Turmuhr mit meiner Uhr verglich, sah ich, daß es schon viel später war, als ich geglaubt hatte, ich mußte mich sehr beeilen, der Schrecken über diese Entdeckung ließ mich im Weg unsicher werden, ich kannte mich in dieser Stadt noch nicht sehr gut aus, glücklicherweise war ein Schutzmann in der Nähe, ich lief zu ihm und fragte ihn atemlos nach dem Weg. Er lächelte und sagte: “Von mir willst du den Weg erfahren?” “Ja” sagte ich, “da ich ihn selbst nicht finden kann.” “Gibs auf, gib auf”, sagte er und wandte sich mit einem großen Schwunge ab, so wie Leute, die mit ihrem Lachen allein sein wollen. (Kafka 1992, 530)

It was very early in the morning, the streets clean and deserted, I was walking to the station. As I compared the tower clock with my watch I realized that it was already much later than I had thought, I had to hurry, the shock of this discovery made me unsure of the way, I did not yet know my way very well in this town; luckily, a policeman was nearby, I ran up to him and breathlessly asked him the way. He smiled and said: "From me you want to know the way?" "Yes," I said, "since I cannot find it myself." "Give it up! Give it up," he said, and turned away with a sudden jerk, like people who want to be alone with their laughter. (Kafka, 1971, 505)

As in *The Trial*, *The Penal Colony* and other better-known stories, this shift from familiar to frightening takes places in – is even incarnated by the representative of law and order, another semiotic system. The policeman is the one who could have brought – and was expected to bring – order and meaning back into the world, more specifically, back into the urban surroundings of a city, but instead he refuses, even entirely rejects the idea, with a gesture that seems to express ridicule, even spite, and thus plunges the poor protagonist into an abyss of confusion and eventually fear – a moment of existential crisis.

The experience, the observation on the part of the I that disrupts reality and triggers this spiraling fall into utter confusion is described in the following terms: "As I compared the tower clock with my watch I realized that it was already much later than I had thought". The time piece referred to as *meine Uhr*, in English "my watch", works as a semiotic reference to individual time, and thus illustrates how social time is a collective product, brought about by practices of synchronization, in which all members of society take part, such as getting up in the morning, going to work, taking a lunch break etc., regulated by the use of a time piece. If this temporal standard is lost, or proves to be less absolute, stable, homogenous, and unchanging than expected, society is out of sync with itself – or, as in Kafka's case, someone is out of sync with society: "I had to hurry, the shock of this discovery made me unsure of the way". At this point, everything starts to unravel. At first glance, only the two clocks, the tower clock and the watch, are out of sync – but then, already in the next sentence, we are made aware that more hangs on this. Existence, the world itself has come out of sync.

The experience can be compared to what many people experienced when the Covid-19 pandemic hit: The rhythms of the everyday, which had been so meticulously aligned, by means of semiotic time-keepers and rhythm-spenders like watches and clocks, balked, faltered, and came to a halt. The rhythms of our individual lives – which in Kafka's text are represented by the watch – came out of sync with the social and political rhythms of the collectives we are part of. We got out of bed, but there was nowhere to go. Lunch breaks turned into individualized and thus random events, as opposed to moments of synchronization with colleagues and friends. The Covid-19 crisis was also a crisis of time.

Since the first mechanical clocks were mounted in clock towers in the early 13th century, to make room for the large and heavy escapement mechanisms, they have semiotically dominated their surroundings, demanding of the inhabitants to look up if they wanted to know the correct time (Cipolla 2003, 30-31). Thus, the clocks – some of which had bells and were built in connection with churches – set a temporal standard, with which every other time-keeping device, and thus every citizen aligned themselves (Landes 1983,

114-131). Deviating from that time, which was symbolized, but also kept by the tower clock, meant deviating from one of the most fundamental standards of society, and thus falling outside, either impassively, or as part of a more or less violent struggle. Later, this standard will turn into the homogenous, singular, uniform time that Walter Benjamin and others associate with modernity. This temporal standard was semiotically implemented by means of the Greenwich Meridian and the global system of time zones, introduced at the International Meridian Conference in Washington in 1884. That was also the year when the African continent was divided into colonies at the Berlin conference, with disastrous consequences. In other words, between these two attempts at imposing a new spatio-temporal order on the world, at the hands of the colonial powers, there exists a particular form of synchrony (Ogle 2015).

In Kafka's story, the first element of reality that starts to semiotically unravel is space, that is, the ability of the protagonist to orient himself in the spatial order of the city – "he is unsure of the way". Then, as by some devilish logic, the same is happening to all other kinds of order, or rather, to order itself, to the very ontology of order. The social order is represented by the policeman, or in the German original, the *Schutzmann*, which means literally "protector" and which Kafka chose ahead of the more precise and even technical *Polizist*. But the protector is both unwilling and unable to protect, or to restore order, when someone has fallen out of sync with the hegemonial time of the state.

Scaling up from the fictional space of a Central European city to the real space of the globe, and at the same time moving from the beginning of the 20th century to the present, we become aware of a haunting parallel. The encounters that refugees who arrived in Europe during the so-called 'refugee' or 'migration crisis' had – and still have – with EU police remind of the paranoid situation that Kafka describes in his parable. In 2015, a record 1.3 million migrants applied for asylum in the 28 member states of the European Union, Norway and Switzerland, fleeing from wars in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Like in Kafka's story, however, the plea for help was rejected by the protectors of European political order and ontological security.

Temporal Semiotics of War: The Trench Watch

This brings us back Kafka's parable and to the watch, *meine Uhr*. We are not told if it is a pocket watch, or a wristwatch, but the parable genre invites us to speculate. Kafka wrote the text in 1922, when a lot of soldiers were returning to their homes from prison camps around Europe, wearing that fashionable combination of practical instrument and ornament that was referred to as a "trench watch", also called "wristlet", first developed to be used by soldiers in WWI. In a piece published in the New York Times in July 1916, the reporter wonders about "the changed status of the wristwatch":

Much has been printed in European papers on the subject of strap watches as a part of military equipment. This has attracted good deal of attention, since modern warfare has demonstrated its necessity for officers and soldiers to know the time. The telephone and signal service, which play important parts in modern warfare,

have made the wearing of watches by soldiers obligatory. The only practical way in which they can wear them is on the wrist, where the time can be ascertained readily, an impossibility with the old style pocket watch. (NYT, 1916)

He goes on to reference European reports showing that so-called “strap watches” have been “adopted for use in the army and navy, and that civilians are also wearing them in preference to the pocket watch”. Another striking feature of this report is how the writer links the use of the pocket watch to other tools of temporal synchronization – such as the telephone and the signal service – both of which are listed among the causes for the emergence of the wristwatch. The one creates a need for the other. Both aviators and soldiers in the trenches strapped on watches produced by companies like Omega and Longines to synchronize their movements and actions according to orders they were given from their officers. Such a moment of synchronization is described by the English war correspondent Phillip Gibbs:

The watch hands [on the officers’ wrists] pointed to the second which had been given for the assault to begin, and instantly, to the tick, the guns lifted and made a curtain of fire round the Chateau of Hooge, beyond the Menin road, six hundred yards away.

“Time!”

The company officers blew their whistles, and there was a sudden clatter from trench-spades slung to rifle-barrels, and from men girdled with hand-grenades, as the advancing companies deployed and made their first rush forward. (Gibbs 1920, 106)

In her book on the history of clocks, Alexis McCrossen, explains how by the end of the war manufacturers were designing wristwatches to capitalize on the aura of heroism and manliness that they had acquired from their continuous presence on the battlefields of Europe (McCrossen 2013, 9). In only a decade wristwatch production had eclipsed pocket-watch production and by WWII pocket watches were obsolete. From this point on, people – civilians, not soldiers – on the streets of the big cities in Europe coordinated and synchronized their movements, to and from work, to and from stores and homes, by glancing at their left wrists, without stopping, without even skipping a step.

But what if the *Uhr* in Kafka’s parable is not a copy, sold to men who wanted to appear masculine and identify with the soldiers in the trenches, but a real one, worn by the very same man, who also wore it in the trenches? What if the ‘parable’, as the literary critics like to call it, is not a parable at all, but a story with a specific historical reference – namely, soldiers returning to their hometowns, after the most terrifying and bloody war in human history, just to discover that they are not their homes anymore? That time ticks differently for them now?

My point here is not to contribute to Kafka philology by offering a new interpretation of *Gibbs auf*, rather I am interested how this parable can be used to illustrate and discuss the relationship between time, or rather times in plural, synchronization, and crisis – and

indeed, that crises can be both moments of absolute synchronization, for example in times of war, and moments of absolute desynchronization, when the temporal orders of society are disrupted. Kafka's parable also illustrates how the semiotic distinctions between clock-time and phenomenological time, or between natural time or social time are always relative to historical contexts and are products of intricate, work-intensive and competing semiotic practices of synchronization, always collective and thus political.

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