

Financial Times: Economic Temporalities in U.S. Culture

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About

We live in financial times. Since the latest financial crisis of 2007/08 that triggered the “Great Recession,” banking practices, the gyrations of the financial markets, and private as well as state indebtedness have dominated our political, economic, and social debates. The great interest in recently published books like Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2013), David Graeber’s *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (2011), Maurizio Lazzarato’s *The Making of the Indebted Man* (2011), Joseph Vogl’s *Gespenst des Kapitals* (2010), or the behind-the-scenes reporting by financial journalist Michael Lewis indicates the urgent need to newly understand the logic of a globalized and digitized financial system. Focusing on its impact on our social and cultural lives, works such as Randy Martin’s *Financialization of Daily Life* (2001), Richard Sennett’s *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (2004) and Elena Esposito’s *The Future of Futures* (2011) have drawn attention to a transformation in our experience of time in terms of unpredictability, risk, or acceleration. “Financial Times” aims at interrogating financialization’s influence on temporal experience in a U.S. context and, following Reinhart Koselleck’s work on temporality, asks to what degree the economic field has replaced the political field in shaping the conditions of possibility for managing an open future.

Financialization broadly refers to the increasing predominance of financial markets in Western economies, the dramatically growing trade volume of financial instruments, as well as the power of financial actors to shape the management of corporations and to greatly influence political decision-making. After the abandonment of the Bretton Woods monetary regime in 1971, as Jonathan Levy and others have argued, the American economy moved away from a “financial system that serviced production and consumption, to one organized around financial activity qua financial activity” (Levy). Greta R. Krippner has defined financialization as a “pattern of accumulation in which profits accrue primarily through financial channels rather than through trade and commodity production,” and she goes on to clarify that “‘financial’ here refers to activities relating to the provision (or transfer) of liquid capital in expectation of future interest, dividends, or capital gains” (174-75). Consequently, what lies at the heart of present financial activity is the management and the exploitation of the risk and the uncertainty of the future. Financial markets, writes Elena Esposito, “play” with future possibilities and “deal with and trade in tomorrow’s uncertainty” and thereby “produce present profits out of the unpredictability of the future.” In her widely

acclaimed book *The Future of Futures: The Time of Money in Financing and Society* (2011), she also reminds us that without a study of how financial markets deploy time and structure the future, the complex “movements of finance seem purely virtual, inconsistent, and often led by an incomprehensible irrationality” despite the use of significant computing power and sophisticated economic models and formalized techniques (2). Risk, unpredictability, and acceleration are not, however, entirely new phenomena. For Reinhart Koselleck the advent of modernity must be understood as a shift from one experience of time and history to another: from history as a homogeneous, unchanging space to history as an indefinite and unstoppable movement or process. “[H]ere occurs a temporalization [Verzeitlichung] of history, at the end of which there is the peculiar form of acceleration which characterizes modernity“ (Koselleck 11). In this process, the state’s preference for prognosis replaces the church’s eschatology, while the rise of the bourgeoisie replaces prognosis by progress: an unknown and accelerated future. “Modernity,” in terms of a historical period spanning from the eighteenth century until today, became characterized by a discontinuous relationship to the past and simultaneously by a heightened interest in the future. Financialization’s impact on this process has, however, contributed to a new experience of the future, one which leads to short-term planning or “situationalism” (Rosa 19) and thereby impacts political and social institutions as well as individual life narratives.

At our conference, we intend to study how the financial markets deploy time, structure the future, and interact with actors and institutions who may function according to very different temporalities. We interrogate the production and dissemination of agency in this financial age and ask how the temporality inscribed in financial transactions emerges from and simultaneously shapes individual and social practice, thereby changing non-economic economies and their logic of practice (cf. Bourdieu). What kind of subjectivities, what ideas of selfhood can be said to be representative of these financial times? Is it the self-managing, individual agent who navigates a risky, yet exciting financial world? Or is it rather Lazzarato’s “indebted man,” who is caught between an individual, social subjection through the mobilization of conscience and a presubjective machinic subjugation through socio-technological apparatuses of control? Finally, can we expect the tensions between financial, economic, and non-economic temporalities to produce alternative futures to the ones produced by finance?

On another level, “Financial Times” aims at historicizing the rise of finance and its attendant temporal forms within the specific social and cultural contexts of the United States. One key component of the American cultural self-imaginary has always been the open-ended character of its national experiment as well as a belief in progress through individual and collective risk-taking. The persistent orientation towards the future even

among those who did not seem to have a future has for long served as one of the United States' fundamental narrative "usable pasts." We therefore raise the question how this specifically American cultural bet on the future relates to the desires and anxieties unleashed in financial speculation. Does this nexus factor into the history of how the United States moved from a "proprietary democracy" to an "investors' democracy" in the early twentieth century (cf. Ott)? How has the regulation and deregulation of equity and debt markets by various U.S. administrations accelerated the time of finance, and how has this come back to haunt the political process? Is the United States perhaps uniquely equipped to trade in global financial futures due to its historical legacies of dealing with time – which includes the ready acceptance of Benjamin Franklin's dictum that "time is money"? Or do the ongoing global financial and debt crises along with transnational protest movements mark a moment where our financial times have become independent of any locality, devoid of any cultural specificity?

Speakers & Abstracts

Elena Esposito

(Department of Sociology, University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Italy)

“The Time of Money in Finance and U.S. Society”

Traditional societies were defined by a prevalence of the past in the definition of the present. U.S. society seems to show the opposite trend: the present is defined as preparation of the future, and this is its identity. This specific temporality is expressed in phenomena like the extreme emphasis on career planning and academic education. Especially finance shows in the clearest way the present use of the future, transforming future possibilities in wealth available today. But the temporality of the future is more complex and circular, as the resulting paradoxes and financial crisis attest.

Joyce Goggin

(Department of Languages and Letters, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands)

“Failure is the New Success: Narratives of Self-Actualization and the Financialized Subject”
& The Future of Financial Times: Discussant

Christian Kloeckner

(North American Studies Program, University of Bonn, Germany)

“Nostalgic Bonds: The Materiality and Temporality of Debt”

Finance and nostalgia involve overlapping issues of temporality, aesthetics, materiality, and affect. Both are concerned with the uncertainties of the present from which they project backward and forward to generate future value. Therefore the financialization of our economies is a major source of nostalgia, which helps the subject to negotiate the rapid changes and increasing immateriality of credit culture. Investigating the evolving aesthetics and material culture of bonds, my presentation will highlight the connections between materiality, temporality, and nostalgia.

Simone Knewitz

(North American Studies Program, University of Bonn, Germany)

A “monstrous cheat”: Paper Money, Land Speculation, and the Antebellum National Reform Movement

The National Reform Movement, founded in 1844, believed that the rising inequality between rich and poor could be leveled if the large public lands in the west were distributed freely to settlers, and workers of the eastern cities became farmers in the west. They criticized financial speculation, land monopolies, and the institution of paper money as the root cause of the country’s economic troubles. Their wariness of paper currency signifies their suspicion of capitalism’s abstractions and accelerated temporality. This paper will delineate and contextualize the movement’s critique of paper money and land speculation by analyzing the movement’s publications and its representations in the contemporary newspaper press.

Andreas Langenohl

(Department of Sociology, Justus-Liebig-University Gießen, Germany)

“Withdrawing Futurity: Hayek, the Chicago School, and Mathematical Finance”

Current theorizing about financial markets and financial economics in the social sciences and the humanities argues that financial markets and financial knowledge crucially imply references to a future that has to be predicted, or alternatively, whose unknowability has to be transformed

into risk categories that can be traded on financial markets. In contrast to this theorization, the proposed paper argues that futurity as a temporal reference point has been questioned, and partly abandoned, in many sectors of contemporary financial economics.

Julia Leyda

(Department of English Literature, Sophia University, Tokyo, Japan)

“Demon Digital: Gender, Finance, and Temporality in the Paranormal Activity Films”

This talk interprets *Paranormal Activity* as a post-cinematic allegory of debtor capitalism in which representations of gender relations and the financialization of domestic space track along with developments in analog and then digital imaging technologies from 1988 to 2012. Female characters and their roles range from the late 80s white middle-class career woman Julie to the more assertive digital native girls in the 21st century. Running parallel to the franchise’s representations of gendered, financialized domestic space, “found footage” films are post-cinematic in their interest in the themes, technologies, aesthetics, and affects of the digital age. They repurpose the horror convention of de-familiarizing the home to make it a site of terror.

Dennis Mischke

(Department of Literature, American Studies, University of Stuttgart, Germany)

“Insurance, Fraud and Slavery: the Black Atlantic in the Cycles of Capital Accumulation.”

The Zong massacre of 1781 represents an unimaginably brutal case of insurance fraud that is emblematic of the inhumanity of the transatlantic slave trade. It also demarcates a shift in capital accumulation in the 18th and 19th century. The abstraction and monetarization of human beings that accompanied this case of insurance fraud and early form of financialization can be considered a colonial confidence game. I will examine the literary repercussions of credit, confidence and the concept of life insurance as it developed in the wake of the slave trade in Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative* and Melville’s *Benito Cereno* and *The Confidence Man*.

Helge Mooshammer & Peter Mörtenböck

(Department of Visual Cultures, Goldsmiths College, University of London, UK)

“Spatio-Economic Frontiers and Urban Resistance in the Global Struggle for Capital Gains”

For the modern capitalist economy of the past 200 years, progress, as measured by the establishment of new markets, has been intrinsically linked to the opening up of new spaces. Enraged by the way in which finance models have become the ruling mode of spatialising relationships, urban protest movements have sparked an open debate about the mobile, speculative and financialised formulas of urban co-existence. Looking at the temporal quality of the moment in which the Occupy movement began to unfold, this paper will discuss the different possibilities that arise from thinking the built environment as a structure of investments, financial investments being just one of many kinds.

Stefanie Mueller

(Institute for English and American Studies, Goethe-University Frankfurt am Main, Germany)

“The Incorporation of Rural America: Frank Norris’ ‘Epic of the Wheat’ and Corporate Perpetuity”

The Octopus tells of a conflict between a group of farmers and a railroad corporation over land. Through the perspective of its poet-protagonist it also explores two modes of time, represented by his attempts to write an epic poem of the West and by the new devices and tools that increase the farmers’ profits, such as the ticker, the telegraph, and the grain rates. While these innovations connect the farms in rural California to places all over the world and therefore are

explicitly connected to space, I want to argue that they also suggest that the incorporation of rural America changes the seasonal time of the agrarian community.

Sighard Neckel

(Department of Sociology, Goethe-University Frankfurt am Main, Germany)

“Money Never Sleeps: The End of Greed as ‘Calm Passion’”

In the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008, “greed” emerged as a popular interpretation pattern of the meltdown of the global financial markets. This talk considers this recourse on greed as sociological information on the ongoing change in the orientation patterns of economic action in financial market capitalism. With the banks failing to set their own boundaries against the escalatory logic of speculative gains by setting specific organizational goals, greed becomes the structural principle of economic action. As a result, greed is no longer linked with long-term economic interests and loses the civilizing ability to be transformed into a “calm passion” (David Hume).

Elisabeth Schäfer-Wünsche & Klaas Staal

(North American Studies Program, University of Bonn, Germany)

“Cultures and Economies: On the Challenges of Interdisciplinary Teaching” (Roundtable)

‘The economy’ has emerged as a highly visible focus of attention in various disciplines of the humanities. Needless to say, the approaches taken tend to differ significantly from those of economics proper. Different languages are used and different questions are asked. Our presentation will point out the challenges of interdisciplinarity on the basis of our long-term co-teaching of seminars that have brought together the knowledges and methods of our respective disciplines. Based on the challenges this has implied, we will also address the impact our collaboration has had on the general framing of our respective arguments.

Moritz Schularick (Institute of Macroeconomics and Econometrics, University of Bonn, Germany) & **Sarah Wasserman** (Dept. of Literature, John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies, Free University Berlin)

Finance is thought to be all about money, but what exactly is money in the current era of digitization? Economic history shows that the story of money is one of dematerialization: from shells and coins to credit cards and digital payment methods. But while economists have thought rigorously for decades about the role of physical currency, their observations have not yet been brought to bear on another ongoing debate about symbolically charged paper. What might the history of paper money have to tell us about the changing status of another traditionally paper-based object: namely, the book? Our interdisciplinary paper considers the lessons that economic history can offer to illuminate current debates about the ostensible death of the printed book. If the form of the book were indeed to change--becoming digital, for instance--would the nature of narrative and our reading practices also change? Or might the trajectory of money--from bills to bits--suggest that a shift away from paper entails a formal change, rather than a change in meaning?

Justin Sully

(North American Studies Program, University of Bonn, Germany)

“Fantasy Sport Leagues and the Affective Economy of Probabilistic Culture ”

In this paper, I will present some ongoing research, which attempts to understand the place of finance in within the affective economy being composed across a circuit of interdependent cultural practices (sport, gaming, electoral politics, journalism) that are being utterly transformed by new and conspicuously popular culture of probabilistic pantometry. After very briefly

introducing the broader claims and results of this ongoing research, I will focus on the case of the fantasy sport league. Fantasy sport leagues offer one of the more striking instances of a specific subjective and affective disposition being composed in what I will call popular probabilistic culture. I will argue that reading the growth of this particular practice alongside parallel analyses of the popular culture of finance might offer a route to a thicker description of the problematic of the temporality to which this conference is devoted.

Johannes Voelz

(Institute for English and American Studies, Goethe-University Frankfurt am Main, Germany)

“The Time of Risk and the Time of Security in Don DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis*”

Rather than focusing on one particular referent of security, my approach relates the concept of “security” to a distinctly modern grammar of agency, according to which rationality appears as bound up with, and conditioned by, what exceeds its reach. As such, security provides an interpretive frame for actions grounded in uncertainty. Security and risk are concepts that are related in that they are both concerned with a future that is seen as uncertain; however, they are usually kept apart because they react to this uncertainty in fundamentally different ways. In *Cosmopolis* the logic of security merges with the logic of financial risk.

Aliki Varvogli

(English Dpt., School of Humanities, University of Dundee, UK)

“The Financialization of Daily Life: Herman Melville’s ‘*Bartleby, the Scrivener*’, Joshua Ferris’s *Then We Came to the End*, and Dave Eggers’s *The Circle*”

Bartleby’s famous refusal can be understood as a refusal to follow the rhythms of work life, an indefinite postponement, and therefore as a response to a future-oriented time of the market. Joshua Ferris’s and David Eggers’s novels recontextualize the anxieties expressed by “*Bartleby*” by highlighting the effects of ‘office culture’ on the individual, and the ways in which new technologies are abolishing older space/time categories. At the same time, the notion of surveillance is used to interrogate the ways in which the demands of a growing economy erode not only individual freedom, but also the individual’s imagined relation to the economy.

Robert Wosnitzer

(Dept. of Media, Culture, and Communication, New York University, USA)

“Interval, Spreads, and Value: Financial Practices and Affective Registers of Debt Work”

Contemporary finance relies upon techniques in the production/circulation of value. While risk and uncertainty are the necessary conditions for financial action, temporalities are the transient, disruptive domains from which value is created. The “interval” refers to what Marx identified as the “realization problem” for capital, and the uncertainties associated with the generation of surplus in time. These temporal and qualitative differences cohere in the derivative as quantitative “spreads.” The social space of circulation is a framework to interrogate how the affective registers generated through proximity to financial action suggest ways that society might imagine new futures by risking together.