

**A Review of 'Vessels of Time: An
Essay on Temporal Change and
Social Transformation'**

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Vessels of Time: An Essay on Temporal Change and Social Transformation. By Akos Ostor (New York, Oxford University Press, 1994) 103 pp. \$13.95

This essay offers a “comparative, historical, and anthropological approach to time as a category and value in different societies” and assesses “the parallel changes taking place in societies and time concepts as a result of the complex industrialization process” (x, 88). It reviews selected prior anthropological and historical approaches, arguing that the dominant Western notion of measurable “clock time,” like the “seemingly natural-law-like appearance of market rationality, ” is based on cultural principles rather than preexisting universals (7, 86). Ostor argues that understanding notions of time requires a comparative approach that does not privilege Western values as absolutes. In short, as with other cultural concepts, like kinship, religion, politics, and economics, time is a social-science category that must be apprehended through specific social and historical contexts and cross-societal comparisons (90).

Earlier categorizations of time often assumed a polar contrast between Western notions of linear, measured time and non-Western ones in which time was cyclical and integrally related to religion and kinship. Ostor suggests that these contrasts define a continuum of possibilities. Even in Western settings in which an “atomized” clock time predominates, “subdominant alternative patterns of age and time” persist that lean more toward “holistic symbol and meaning” (4, 79). Oral historians, such as Studs Terkel, have made us aware that the perception of time among many working-class Americans is not the progressive linearity of the curriculum vitae, but a cyclical one of weeks, months, seasons, years, and generations.

Ostor takes his most sustained examples from the West, where he stresses the coexistence of multiple concepts of time. Thus, when work bells were installed in Amiens in 1335 to regulate the hours of crafts, duration rather than wages became the focus of workers’ struggle. The new concept of time represented by the work bells set off work from church time, paving the way incrementally for secularization and the fragmentation of spheres of social life (27). Similarly, precise clock time in early industrial England still belonged primarily to the gentry. Only with the appearance of “large-scale machine powered industry” did a precise clock time become necessary to synchronize labor with industry (29). Even in this case, the “old rhythm” of a flowing, cyclical time was not entirely swept away by the “fragmented time” made necessary by large-scale industry and the market economy (30).

For nineteenth- and twentieth-century America, Ostor traces the incremental shift to clock time as America changed from an agrarian to an urban, industrialized nation, yet preserving a “family time” that contrasted with that of the factory and workplace (39—40). In contemporary America, time is fragmented between home and work, and the experiences of time at different stages of life—for example, among the retired—suggesting the ways that “work, time, person, and society are linked together in systematic, cultural terms” (78).

Occasionally, Ostor draws too schematically the contrasts in perceptions and practices of time between advanced industrial and other societies. The bazaar economies

within India and the Muslim Middle East may be more people-centered than Western markets and more integrated into the domains of kinship and religion, but this trait does not preclude finely tuned calculations of profit, exchange, and the time value of money (82—83). Far from indicating a great divide, these “striking contrasts” in values and categories of time between advanced industrial and other societies draw attention to the complementary, albeit subordinate, possibilities inherent in each context and to the partial and overlapping symbolic structures prevalent in all societies, even those described as “holistic” (87—88).

Ostor’s argument is profoundly humanistic, emphasizing what societies can learn from one another. *Vessels* fairly assesses the work of predecessors, illustrates the cultural bases implicit in all technological change and market imperatives, and stresses how overlapping and complementary notions of time—an especially subtle and elusive cultural concept—prevail in both advanced industrial and other societies.

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