

Meredith Gill  
Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature  
University of Minnesota

**Wasting Time and the Foreground: Methodological Notes on Time, Space, and  
Action in Real Subsumption**

This presentation is part of larger project I'm working on that extends to include discussion of post-Fordist subjectivity, questions of multitude, and nihilism. However, for sake of time, I have limited my discussion here to what I identify as an emerging post-Fordist coupling of temporality and spatiality and how we might navigate this intersection to produce a politics of refusal. I would like to think about these concepts in relation to our own railroad travel, which is at once producing an ephemeral space without time and time without space that both extends and delimits these two terms. More precisely, I'm interested in ascertaining new methodological models for historical materialism in postmodern temporal and spatial practices.

---

What does it mean to "waste time" in a system whose productive capacity extends well beyond the 8-hour work day, that is, spills into all aspects of life? In other words, under the conditions of real subsumption – a system that collapses the binary between inside and outside and realizes the completion of the law of value, exposing the homogenizing mystification-machine of time-as-measure – what possibilities open up for idleness, waste, refusal, and pleasure as *antagonistic* practices? Indeed, to answer these questions we must both radically historicize and re-imagine the possibilities of

these categories as immanently productive to the present mode of production, yet productive in such a way that seeks to reach outside the limits of late capital. First and foremost, however, we must give name to the kind of time we might want to waste in our historical present.

In the opening paragraph of his 1978 essay "Time and History: Critique of the Instant and Continuum," Giorgio Agamben announces:

Every conception of history is invariably accompanied by a certain experience of time which is implicit in it, conditions it, and thereby has to be elucidated. Similarly, every culture is first and foremost a particular experience of time, and no new culture is possible without an alteration in this experience. The original task of a genuine revolution, therefore, is never merely to 'change the world', but also – and above all – to 'change time.'

By way of laying out a critical genealogy of dominant Western conceptions of time from Greco-Roman visions of circularity to Modern Christian and Capitalist notions of linearity and continuity, Agamben arrives at his main point of critique: namely, all dominant conceptions of time from Aristotle to Hegel have failed to rid themselves of the homogenous and quantifiable succession of instants whereby all instants are understood as empty, fleeting and inconsequential in and of themselves. For him, all conceptions of the instant are dangerous in that they tend towards negation and deferral, or in other words, the final act of negation that will abolish the negativity of time altogether.

However, it is not only with the usual and obvious adversaries that Agamben stages his crusade in the war between idealism and materialism. Rather, it is with what

Agamben identifies as the implicit understanding of time as an “elusive flow of instants” set alongside “the original dimension of man” as his being-in history that leaves modern man “lost in time” and “unable to take possession of his own historical nature.” The name he gives to this practice is none other than historical materialism.

Agamben’s contention lies not in the historical presumptions of Marx’s historical materialism. Indeed, he argues that Marx’s formulation of the species-being, which posits man’s original dimension as being capable of generation—in other words, the capability for man to produce himself as a social individual—is itself revolutionary. Neither does he relegate historical materialism to either an Aristotelian or Hegelian historical progression. He understands that Marx diverges greatly from these figures. His critique, however, is simple: Marx failed to elaborate a theory of time adequate to his idea of history, and “so long as this nullified experience of time remains our horizon, it is not possible to attain authentic history.” Another way to put this is: all history is a waste of time without a radically new temporal relationship to understanding ourselves in history.

What is most interesting to me about his critique is that in an entirely italicized sentence directly preceding his allegation against Marx’s failure to elaborate a theory of time, Agamben astutely describes the relationship between time and history in Marx. Regarding Marx, Agamben writes, “Man is not a historical being because he falls into time, but precisely the opposite; it is only because he is a historical being that he can fall into time, temporalizing himself.” I would argue that Agamben’s description of Marx is perceptively clear, perhaps all too clear. That is, in Agamben’s very own vocabulary,

one could argue that this description contains within it an inclusive exclusion. What I mean here is that because Marx believed that there was no time at all outside of history, there was absolutely no way that he could have elaborated a theory of time on its own. For it would ultimately refute his entire proposition—namely, that time is produced in history. It thus remains unclear to me how Agamben can, in his own words, so eloquently present Marx's philosophy of history and be sightless to its underpinning as an immanent theorization of historical time.

Rather than taking on the project of further developing Marx's inadequate formulation or of proposing a new kind of time altogether, Agamben turns to history to seize upon "the elements for a different concept of time [that] lie scattered among the folds and shadows of the Western cultural tradition."<sup>i</sup> It is in the discontinuous, heterogeneous, and buried-but-still alive times of the Gnostic and Stoic philosophies that Agamben unearths his cure in the battle against homogenous time. The cure is the temporal organization of the *cairós*—or rather, "the abrupt and sudden conjunction where decision grasps opportunity and life is fulfilled in the moment."

For Agamben, the *cairós* is the moment when infinite, quantified time is both delimited and made present. In other words, it is the time when the synchronic experiences an interruption that opens up a truth process by way of a radical refusal of past and future in the present. This is a politics of the always already unfolding of diachronic contingency within the synchronic realm. In other idioms, such as the thought of Deleuze or Badiou, the *cairós* is called The Event.

There is another writer, however, whose entire book is dedicated to finding, in Marx himself, that radical concept of time that Agamben claims is missing. This is Agamben's compatriot, Antonio Negri, and the book is entitled *Time for Revolution*. Negri's work too sets out to lay bare the belief that time is an empty, exterior force by detecting the machine that promulgates such myths. This machine is none other than our old friend capital. However, unlike Agamben, whose entire essay is a historical retreat into those forgotten but still latent times of the past, Negri focuses on the libratory times of the present—what he calls antagonistic, communist times that make themselves possible in and are made possible today by the subsumption of all economies of the globe to capitalism. In this book, he appropriates Marx's term, Real Subsumption, to designate this phenomenon. However, in his afterward, written 17 years later, he acknowledges that this moment bears another equally useful name: postmodernity. Strikingly, the name that Negri gives to revolutionary time is too the *cairós*, but rather than locating it as a lost historical possibility as does Agamben, Negri focuses on the resurfacing of the *cairós* as the revolutionary temporality par excellence of late capitalism.

Taking the form of a series of displacements and constructions, Negri's book is first and foremost an attempt to elucidate a concept of time that has production, collectivity, and constitution as its foundation. In other words, for Negri, there is no time—capitalist or communist—that is not produced. Performing his first displacement, he begins with the possible aporia of time-as-measure in the time of subsumed being. Time, he suggests, has been dialectically reduced by capital to a

homogenous substance that is at once “the medium [medietá] of labour and the overcoming of that medium [medietá].”<sup>ii</sup> With this homogenizing device at work, time becomes both the measure of labour and the determining instance of its productive power. Therefore, he writes, “in relation to labour, time is at once measure and matter, form and substance.”<sup>iii</sup> He then goes on to ask: But who measures this quantified time? And who decides how much productive power it holds within itself? The answer is the same as always: In a system based on exploitation, this measurement takes place by those outside of production—that external force that turns qualified use-value into quantified exchange-value.

But it is in postmodernity that this system of measure seems to fall apart. Specifically, because of the increase in non-quantifiable forms of labor such as intellectual and scientific pursuits that constitute a large part of the post-Fordist economy and the sudden increase of what is traditionally deemed “non-productive labor”—labors that all use time as a qualitative mechanism—it seems that capital can no longer capture and exploit the totality of time. In other words, it appears that these are the activities that defy measurement and hence cannot be denigrated to exchange-value. Furthermore, as the working day has become a global flow—one that never begins and never ends—it appears as if there is no longer any vantage point exterior to production from which to measure either labor or time.

This is all true, Negri argues, but capital has once again come up with a diversionary and dialectical mechanism to quantify time and posit itself as universal—one that no longer needs an outside to the productive circuit. Measure in real

subsumption, he writes, “is in the flow between labour and time. A continuous time. A tautological time.”<sup>iv</sup> In other words, the flow between labour and time—a mere tautology for life—is what capital now measures and homogenizes. It then follows that the disappearance of any differences or tensions between time, labour, and life bring the dialectic to its final resolution. This is the End of History where man is temporalized a priori and life loses all value as affirmatively productive. Negri thus deduces that, “If measure measures itself, it follows that the process of value concludes in that of command, in tautology and indifference.”<sup>v</sup> The time of now is the immanent command of capital.

Arriving at these frightening conclusions, Negri does not allow his labors to go undifferentiated by resigning himself to the purely negative, aporetic structure of this tautology. But rather, he seeks to find within it the liberatory potential for the creation of affirmative, divergent times that can only be constituted within such a totalizing system. He writes, “This final tautology seems to us to be extraordinarily productive from the theoretical and revolutionary standpoint. For now we know that time cannot be presented as measure, but must rather be presented as the global phenomenological fabric, as base, substance and flow of production in its entirety.”<sup>vi</sup> Now a total social system of production, life and its “unproductive” expenditures of time both count and elude measure. For there is no way—in this system, that is—that wasting time could be unproductive because all activity, be it idle or swift, is immanently productive. Indeed, now that we can see that all forms of life and activity are productive to capital, we should not be too quick to assume that they are all beneficial to it. To this extent, Negri

elucidates a concept of what he calls “constitutive time,” with its driving force being the “negative labor of self-valorization.”<sup>vii</sup> In the second part of his book, Negri calls this time the *cairós*.

The temporality of negative labor, or rather, the *cairós*, is both born within and lives against the same body as the time of command. It is only in a time such as now—one when the dialectic of inside and outside has completely breathed its last breath—that this particular kind of absolutely immanent communist time can be brought about. But this is not at all to imply that revolutionary temporalities and subjectivities did not pre-exist postmodernity. For we have already traced the ancestors of our antagonistic temporality all the way back to the Stoics. What I mean to say, instead, is that only in real subsumption, when there is no longer any trace of an outside to capitalism, can the antagonism to capital be produced fully within and by it on the synchronic plane. Antagonism, in other words, is no longer the enemy that capital can simply ignore or keep at bay by erecting borders; it is now the machine within capital, its driving force.

As we have now seen, both Agamben and Negri arrive at the *cairós* as the moment of radical politics—Agamben through a critique of Marx and Negri through Marx himself. For Agamben, the *cairós* represents the moment of history “in which man, by his initiative, grasps favorable opportunity and chooses his own freedom in the moment.” In that sense, the *cairós* is, for him, a thoroughly positive concept. However, what I find to be missing from Agamben’s characterization of the *cairós* is that he does not take into account that the temporal structure of the *cairós* very much resembles one of the most potentially destructive elements of postmodernity—namely,

the flattening of historicity into a seemingly inescapable spatial plane of a deadening eternal present without innovation. Neither does Negri explicitly approach this question. However, in Negri's conceptualization, the *cairós* is never solely equated with pleasure as it is in Agamben. Rather, it remains an ambivalent concept, yet one that stands against what he calls "the time of command."

Cairólogical time, in Agamben, is the time when man works to find and know that pleasure as immanent to his own productivity and historicity. But pleasure, of course, can take many forms and it seems that to find it, one must oftentimes forget the time that is spent in its pursuit. Otherwise, that pleasure is not pleasure at all, but simply guised asceticism. Or perhaps the time of the *cairós* is the moment when time as diachrony is forgotten. However, here again we are presented with a stopgap in producing a historical materialism with a radical temporality. For this formulation of pleasure appears inconsistent with the *cairós*' definition because forgetting time also means denying time—a denial of the primary component of the *cairós*: the radicalization of historical time. For this reason, I find Negri's somewhat ambivalent characterization of the *cairós* to come more compelling as a radical understanding of historical materialism.

In thinking through these concepts of the *cairós* in relation to our own postmodern present, I am struck with the question: How can we maintain what Negri (and Hardt) in other places have called for as "a politics of refusal and contingency" in relation to producing "unproductive expenditures" of time (such as "wasting time" or our own choice to spend six days on a train) in the new global fabric without opening

up the possibility of this practice to “waste” us by ensnarling our productive idling back into homogenous time? In other words, how can we “forget time” (i.e. waste time) in the cairollogical moment and still maintain a fidelity to diachronic contingency in this act of forgetting? How do we “waste time” without operating on an absolutely flattened spatial realm?

In order to answer these questions, we must first figure out the ground from which an event as such can occur and this is the point at which space enters the equation. What Badiou’s and Negri’s respective formulations of the event and the cairós show us is that the ground of praxis, located first of all within a void, is precisely without ground. The event, however, gives ground to the void in its very *opening*. But the event goes unnoticed, not graspable without a *background*—an earlier situation that has situated the void in question in its present location. In this formulation, the background brings to the present event a plentitude that was produced only out of the excesses of all past events.

It should be clear by now that with the term background serves as both a temporal and spatial metaphor. In my opinion, it is Paolo Virno, in his recent book *Grammar of the Multitude*, who inadvertently, but most adequately offers a model for understanding both space and time in relation to the synchronic and the diachronic. His concern lies mostly with emergent theories of multitude; however, I find his discussion of the relation between temporality and grammar to be indispensable not only for discussions of events and becomings, but also space itself. Virno understands background, or rather, history, through the structure of grammar. Grammar—defined

not only as the study of structural relationships in language or in languages, but also *that which analyses those distinctions in thought that it is the purpose of grammatical forms, more or less completely, to render in expression*—is a structure, like the event, that comprehends itself through itself. What I mean here is that grammar not only structures the very structure of language, but at the same time it seeks to comprehend—through the very form of grammar itself—the content of grammatical forms. It is a form that reads form-as-content and it is therefore that which posits itself as universal and particular.

Temporally, background, according to this grammatological methodology, is not merely historical in the traditional sense, but rather contains within it both the synchronic and the diachronic. As such, we can also think of background as a condition of possibility, a formative precursor, and a threshold. If we look at these definitions chronologically in the order that I have outlined them here, it becomes evident that background—or rather, the past—begins with a structure of possibility, in which events contingently occur as a consequence of the structure of possibility and then finally come to a stopgap, a zone of indistinction.

So far I have mostly discussed background's relation to space in a very locative manner, in terms of its culmination into an event. Now I would like to turn to the previously discussed zone of indistinction in a more totalizing, globalizing, structural manner—one that describes the inescapable space of real subsumption. I locate the generative aspects of this zone of indistinction no longer in a closed and delimited modernist underground, but rather in what I am calling foreground. I take my

definition of foreground from the etymological root of “fore” – that which denotes both the anterior, previous, former, and also that which is situated at or appearing in front, in front of something else. In other words, the foreground is a trans-spatial, and synchronic, ambivalent structure that is closest to us as viewers. Background is inherent in the foreground, and can neither be separated from the foreground, fixed nor overcome. This foreground to which I refer could just as well be called a plane of immanence, but it’s reliance on a grounding trope has helped to occasion, for me, a way to think about “non-productive” actions for the ambivalent figure multitude that operates in the open, in a world where the traditional underground is no longer concealed. It has also helped me to understand how, when, and where the multitude “acts” and, more precisely, what action might mean.

So just how does this multitude figure act in this trans-historical, trans-spatial foreground and how can it “do work” by “wasting time” without being blind to its surrounding foreground or an idle spectator? For this question, I turn to the operation of coming into an active mode of knowledge as a *figuring out* into the foreground. By this I mean to set my concept of *figuring out* against the traditional understanding of the dialectical relationship between figure and ground. In the latter, figure is defined as everything that is not ground, and ground is defined as everything that is not figure. This figure/ground relationship is, of course, both a *theory* and a *production* of space. If humanist man is to navigate this space, these designations must remain distinct and separate. For without them, there would be no depth.

I am not interested in re-theorizing modern man's space of perception in order to arrive, yet again, at some sort of artificial depth model. Instead, I am concerned with what happens when power is introduced into this relation at the scene of the political. What we find is that there is actually no power at all in this formulation. For all conceptions of power require the ability to act, to produce, and here, neither the ground nor the figure can *act*. By act I mean to say *praxis*, or, the convergence of so-called "knowledge" and "action." The figure/ground logic does not allow this convergence to take place because its terms must remain distinct or else the whole logic will collapse. When we take the ground as both the basis of being and of knowledge—*grund*—and set it apart, as distinct from the figure, the ability of the figure itself to *be* knowledge is *foreclosed*. It can only (imperfectly) represent knowledge as the dialectical other of itself.

Similarly, in this formulation the ground is only able to *be* knowledge. It can never say itself and thus has no potential to work on the figure. Therefore, the figure cannot produce knowledge and the ground cannot produce signification. And as we know, production is precisely the enaction of power. The only place power can be found here is in the absolute transcendence of this grounding operation. Our un-doing of the ground's dependence on a grounding transcendence shows us that in this formulation not only does multitude qua figure have no power, but that the sovereign qua figure has no power either.

Meanwhile, history has shown how the capture of this operation by State power forces an essentialist and transcendent link between figure and ground that is particularly dangerous. As Jean-Luc Nancy, among others, has explained, politics as

such becomes the realization of an essence in common through a figure in common: man being the first figure.<sup>1</sup> If the figure-ground relation informs the political in this way, the individual's relation to the community is mediated through figures which promise a becoming-One through the *figure* of the State. Politics then becomes a matter of producing competing figures, each attempting to be adequate to the heterogeneity of community while best representing its essence.

What interests me here is locating a temporo-spatial theory that allows for both immanent potentiality and historical contingency. Like Virno's conception of grammar, and my own conception of the foreground—both of which maintain the immanence of the particular to the universal—I see no reason why the figure should be defined in opposition to the ground and thus be separable from it. I understand a figure to always be multitudinous, but even more so (and this is the important point) to be the *expression of the relation* between background and foreground, history and immanence. The figure is always already in the foreground, but its expression of potentiality in history, the untimely in time, and the foreground as a specific location of praxis is, more precisely, the expression of a set of relations between production and the ability to produce. The question of praxis that I myself am trying to figure out is thus not one of how do we figure ourselves out of a situation, but rather: How do we figure an expression of relation out *onto* the relation between the postmodern syntopic and synchronic?

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy *Retreating the Political*, ed., Simon Sparks. (New York: Routledge, 1997), as well as Nancy, "Sharing Voices," in *Transforming the Hermeneutic Context: From Nietzsche to Nancy*, ed. Gayle L. Ormiston & Alan D. Schrift (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990) 211-259.

To be continued...

---

i	Agamben, 100.
ii	Negri, 23.
iii	Negri 24.
iv	Negri, 27.
v	Negri, 27.
vi	Negri, 29.
vii	Negri, 91.