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Carmen Leccardi's "Social Time, Women's time"

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Valerie Bryson

Discussion of Carmen Leccardi's paper: ***Social Time, Women's Time*** at the Conference on "Different Times, Life Times. Equal Opportunity Committees of Italian Universities and the Time Issue", organised by the Italian university network of Equal Opportunities Committees  
University of Venice 29/05/09

First of all, I'd like to thank Carmen Leccardi for inviting me here, Rita Biancheri for organising my visit, and Giuliana Giusti for acting as my translator.

Talking about time in a conference like this highlights a number of issues around time itself, including its gendered and problematic nature:

- the organizers of this conference have created a space and a time to meet and talk, to take 'time out' to reflect on important issues
- at an individual level, many of you will have had to 'make time' to be here – you will have to arrange for children to be looked after, shopping to be done, classes to be re-arranged and so on. As women, it is unlikely that someone else will have done this for you. In contrast, when men go to conferences, they can usually assume that someone else will take care of things at home; because there are more men in senior positions, they are also more likely to have a secretary to organise their work diary.
- And when we get together to discuss time, we find that there is so much to say, to explore, to discuss ... We find that everything is so interconnected that we need an open-ended discussion, time to talk, think, talk again, read, think ... but we are also ruled by the clock; we have a session now of 75 minutes, with just 15 minutes for my contribution here.

So all I've really got time for is to indicate some key points where I agree with Carmen Leccardi, on the basis of what I know of her work, and to raise some other issues for discussion. To summarise what follows: I strongly agree with Carmen's theoretical analysis, but I'm rather less optimistic about the prospects for the kind of change we both want.

## **I agree ...**

I absolutely agree with Carmen about the gendered nature of our relationship with time, the ways that this is linked to gendered power relations, and the need to assert the value of 'women's time' and the cultural, intellectual, ethical and social qualities associated with this. In particular, we need to assert relational, open-ended, non-dichotomous, non-hierarchical ways of thinking and being, as opposed to the 'time is money' rationality of paid employment. Here it is important that women are in positions of public power and authority (in parliament, in the media, in universities) so that these views and perspectives can be articulated and heard. We also need to recognise that the whole of society is suffering as technological changes accelerate our experience of time, and we must ensure that men too are enabled to balance their work time with the rest of their lives.

As Carmen and other feminist writers have said, the changes we need go far beyond inserting women into men's time, and giving them the right to behave like men. These changes also go beyond acknowledging that women employees have family responsibilities and making some allowance for these by way of maternity leave and so on.

Instead, we must radically challenge the 'normality' of hegemonic male time and the values and forms of organisation associated with this, and we must argue for a stance on the world that is in many ways 'better', more fully human, than that associated with men, and that does not subordinate relational time to the temporal logic of the workplace. At a practical level this stance challenges the division of both domestic and paid labour and turns our usual assumptions upside down: rather than seeing women as 'problem workers' because they have outside commitments, it sees men as 'problem parents' because they spend too much time working for their employer and not enough with their children, 'problem sons' who don't have time to provide practical help for their parents when they get old, 'problem friends' who are not there when you need someone to talk to, and 'problem neighbours' who don't know what's going on in their locality.

This challenge is part of a general tendency in feminist thought that rejects the idea that men are the model of humanity and sees them, rather than women, as the problem. At the same time, however, it moves beyond dichotomous male/female ways of thinking to suggest that there can be different ways of being a man or a woman. As Carmen says, women's lives are already answerable to a temporal logic that is distinct from the world of work, that goes 'beyond economic reason'. The task then is to make this 'normal', and available to men as well.

### **Some practical considerations ...**

In an article published in English in 1996<sup>i</sup>, Carmen has argued that we now have this chance, that we are at a time of transformation – and that profound changes in the world of paid work are opening up possibilities for challenging the dominance of work time. She also suggests that workplace changes will make employment less important for men, as their relationship with work becomes less central to their identity and their life.

This is where I'm rather less optimistic than Carmen. I'd love to think that the logic of work time was losing its hold, but in many ways I think it is extending it.

My perspective may be partly because I'm British – we work the longest hours in Europe, and have just confirmed out opt out from the European working time directive, so that UK workers can work more than 48 hours a week, and many do. Our long hours culture means that if someone wants to get on in their career they often have to work 50 or more hours a week; some people refer to this as a culture of 'presenteeism', in which workers must *appear* to be busy and committed, even if much of their time at work is not productive.

Although the economic crisis has meant that increasing numbers are unemployed or on short-time working, job insecurity has increased time discipline at work. Things have been made worse by a rise in a workplace culture that stresses targets and accountability, and that is driven by ideas of cost effectiveness and value for money. This

culture can see only quantified clock time and not the relational time that is particularly important in caring professions – nursing, teaching, social work etc. The results of this are increasingly counter-productive, as workers are too busy filling in computer records or competing for funding to do the human work that they are supposed to be employed to do. There have been a number of scandals in recent years – for example, it was found that in one hospital elderly patients were becoming severely malnourished, as nurses were spending time filling in record sheets rather than helping them eat; in another case, a child was killed at home, despite being seen by 28 different social workers, doctors and police officers who then had to sit in front of the computer rather than talking to each other.

So on the basis of recent UK experience, there certainly is a clash between the temporal imperatives of the marketplace and those of caring and intimate relations, and I think that there are similar problems in Italy. Although I'd like to think that this could be resolved in favour of women's time, there are certainly some trends against this.

There is also the **problem of men ....**

If things are to change, we have to get men interested and involved . It's no good women just talking amongst themselves, however good the resulting analysis. But there are complicated sets of issues around why or whether men might want to change, to accept the shift to a new temporal logic. And men in general are not listening – they are, for example, far fewer men than women at this conference, and none at this session.

This is not surprising, if we accept that the hegemony of work time logic is bound up with all the other dimensions of masculine power. Challenging men's time, inevitably means challenging their economic, social, political and cultural 'normality', and many men will be unwilling to see, let alone surrender, the privileges that this involves.

Nevertheless, it is not just women but also men and society as a whole that are damaged by our current relationship with time. As the

damaging effects of this become more acute, it is essential that the kind of feminist analysis of time that Carmen provides is heard, so that society as a whole comes to see that now really is the time to change time.

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<sup>i</sup> Carmen Leccardi 'Rethinking Social Time: Feminist Perspectives', *Time and Society* 5(2), 1996