

Persons who dine

THOMAS MEANEY

Vanessa Ogle

THE GLOBAL TRANSFORMATION
OF TIME
1870–1950

279pp. Harvard University Press.
£29.95 (US \$39.95).
978 0 674 28614 6

In the early 1960s, E. P. Thompson started scouring anthropological reports and journals for examples of peoples around the world with a less calculating sense of the passage of time. He was looking for temporal measures that were still deeply embedded in human action. In Madagascar, there was a word that designated “the time it takes to cook rice” and another for the moment it took to “roast a locust”. In Burma, there were monks who started the day “when there is light enough to see the veins in the hand”. In the English language, Thompson found linguistic markers closer to home: there were once such things as a “a pater noster wyle”, “a misère whyle”, and there had survived a rarefied measurement known as “a pissing while”.

For Thompson, these were all traces of a world that had been lost to the logic of modern capitalism, where time was no longer “passed” but “spent”. The replacement of “natural”, task-oriented time by abstract, capitalistic time, Thompson recognized, had been long in the making. The reorganization of time by commercial forces was another step in a secularization process that had been running since the late Middle Ages, when merchant time first entered into competition with liturgical time. Like the medieval Church, the new absolutist states of the Renaissance were determined to enforce a monopoly on time, and that most threatening form of time – the future – by suppressing apocalyptic and astrological currents in their populations. This drive to inoculate their subjects from the irruptions of eschatology was an important advance in making time more abstract and manageable. The Renaissance prince could not tolerate notions of enchanted time promoted by prophets and soothsayers, in which the supernatural could tear through the delicate temporal fabric of the state at any moment. The exigencies of the early modern state demanded something more regular and mundane – what Walter Benjamin famously called “homogeneous, empty time”. Such homogeneous, empty time, as Thompson and his fellow historians of time, Reinhart Koselleck and Jacques Le Goff, interpreted it, was the sort of raw material, or bedrock, that advanced capitalism would later require to operate. In his classic article “Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism”, Thompson wanted to determine how changes “in the inward notation of time” in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, dictated by the needs of capital, had mechanized human nature and decoupled it from the natural world.

Vanessa Ogle’s quietly revisionist history of the worldwide standardization of time extends Thompson’s story and challenges it. *The Global Transformation of Time* recounts the attempts to standardize calendars and clocks across the globe from the nineteenth century into the twentieth. Ogle’s argument is that the standardization of time zones and clocks and calendars was not nearly as neat a history, or one as directly tied to capitalist interests, as Thompson supposed. Instead, she claims a range of forces, bureaucratic and religious and cultural, combined in unanticipated ways, and invested tremendous energies into

the standardization processes, ranging from daylight saving time to the establishment of standard mean times. Contrary to Thompson’s picture of the merciless modern sweatshop, where abstract time rules over the lives of workers, Ogle argues that, well into the twentieth century, “it was tremendously difficult even for lawmakers and at least moderately educated bureaucrats to imagine time as abstract and empty”. Far from having succeeded in uprooting their populations out of the natural rhythms of the sunrise and harvest, most contemporary observers thought it would

tion. (That railways do not figure as a major capitalist interest in Ogle’s account is somewhat odd, given that the two were virtually synonymous in the minds of contemporaries. Likewise, her distinction between “capitalist” and “national” necessity may be more fungible than she lets on.)

The most successful parts of Ogle’s book recover a passion for time standardization that is difficult to appreciate today, when many take it for granted that, for instance, the entire population of China obeys a single time zone. Ogle’s account swarms with surveyors, geodesists, astronomers, internationalist propagandists, bureaucrats and associations who all got worked up over the question of time and what it meant for their societies. The ideological and political stakes of standardization were clear at the outset. In the late nineteenth century, Catholic scientists campaigned to make Jerusalem the prime meridian, while many internationalists favoured Ferro (El Hierro), the smallest of the Canary Islands, since it was thought to be untainted by nation-

thinking of the ideological use of space – but also time – when, at the start of the First World War, he coined the term “Mitteleuropa” to refer to a new geographic zone that would incorporate more peoples into, among other cultural trappings, the temporal rhythms of the German people.

Ogle moves confidently through time discussions and debates across Europe in the nineteenth century, but she scores some of her most convincing points against Thompson on his own English ground, where she shows it remained hard to imagine abstract time well into the twentieth century. British time reformers were far from convinced they would be able to control workers’ habits, or even institute something as basic as daylight-saving time. The most tireless advocate of “summer time” was William Willett, the inventor and builder, whose 1907 pamphlet *The Waste of Daylight* argued that by simply adjusting clocks to account for more daylight in the summer, more work would be done during daylight, and workers would also get more advantage out of exercise and fresh air. What is striking about the debate is how rarely the advocates sound like Gradgrinds (though Thompson collected many of those), and how often they speak of the health, even the mental health, of the working population: those against “summer hours” worried it would destroy the sleeping and waking cycles of workers, which were thought to be fixed in time. The result would be a healthier and stronger nation; time reform would “supply us with the most effective weapons with which to overcome the invader”.

The astronomer George Darwin, son of Charles, thought it “absurd to suppose that the House of Commons can, by a mere verbal artifice, change the habits of the whole community”. Ogle documents wide concern that people would simply forget to turn their clocks back. “Think of the trouble of altering every clock in the house twice if not oftener each year”, worried one member of the public, “and of the results if we forget to do so.” “It is improbable that persons who dine would alter their dinner hour to conform with Summer Season Time”, lamented the British Home Office as late as 1914. One of Ogle’s most charming vignettes in the uphill struggle to standardize time in Britain comes in the form of the Belville family. In 1835, the Astronomer Royal, John Pond, instructed his assistant, Henry Belville, to distribute the correct time to London clockmakers by means of an accurate chronometer that he carried through London on his rounds. More than a century later, his granddaughter, Ruth Belville, was still managing the family business during the Second World War, when she would travel from the Greenwich Observatory into London each Monday to sell the correct time to her customers.

Writing in the 1960s, Thompson took the view that the “new nations” of the Third World would enter into the unforgiving rhythms of capitalist time just as the West was producing enough leisure to call its acceleration into question, as an affluent, anti-establishment generation sought to escape the routines and time regime of their parents (though Thompson also believed that task-oriented time con-



“Metropolitan prize Puzzles No. 7 – To Know the Right Time at Waterloo Station”,
from *Punch*, August 18, 1883

be impossible to force an entire population to change its relation to the sun and the seasons.

Before the advent of standard time zones in the West, the church towers, town squares and train stations of Europe and America kept solar time. Noon was simply calculated as the time the sun passed through the local meridian. Towns and cities each followed their own time, and travellers crossing long distances would have to change their watches several times, sometimes in the same city, to adjust to the local pace. In the later half of the nineteenth century, Ogle shows, the need to synchronize train times was a major source of standardiza-

alism. Greenwich prevailed because of the dominance of British railway companies, which standardized time for their own use early enough in the nineteenth century that Continental companies pegged their time to London’s. Curiously, Ogle shows that the achievement of global time standardization owed as much to nationalists as internationalists. War and security were primary motivations in adopting standardization. This was particularly the case in Germany, which standardized its time in the 1870s, as part of the process of unification. The great German liberal propagandist Friedrich Naumann was

tinued to persist in the modern family, where mothers did not have the luxury of introducing babies into homogeneous, empty time). In the world of automated machines that Thompson, like so many of his generation, imagined was upon them, there would be so much leisure that people would return to the fulfilments of folk arts and task-oriented time. He may have anticipated precious hipsters knitting sweaters on the subway, but he was mistaken about the overall future of capitalist time.

Ogle's book helps us see why. When she turns her focus to the colonies, we see that various peoples and nations at first looked very sceptically at the Western time regime. To an extent, her book follows recent studies, such as Giordano Nanni's *The Colonisation of Time* (2012) and On Barak's *On Time: Technology and temporality in modern Egypt* (2013) – that have closely examined the rebellions in the colonial world of the you've-got-the-clock-but-we-have-the-time variety, in the forms of strikes and protests in which night lamps and clock towers and other imperial emblems were destroyed by local groups intent on preserving their temporal orders. In the 1860s, in the face of Westernization, the Meiji rulers of Japan briefly attempted to revert to an old Japanese system of chronology for marking time, rather than using the Gregorian calendar. When the British Empire tried to impose standard time in India, the citizens of Bombay protested politely in the letters sections about having to synchronize their lives according to the whim of a Madras imperial bureaucrat. Even in the West, there was resistance. The Mayor of Bangor, Maine, declared local-time secession when the US Congress backed standard time and daylight savings with the force of law in 1918. At the turn of the century, as Ogle notes, anarchists chose to target the symbols of time, such as the Greenwich Observatory, which may have had something to do with their antagonism towards what they took to be the wrong kind of internationalism: the imperialist internationalism of the League of Nations and the Great Powers.

But Ogle's main argument departs from the historiography of resistance in an important way. She emphasizes that time reformers in the Middle East and Asia were not just resisting the advance of standardization; they were putting time to their own uses that fit into neither the categories of abstract nor natural time. Just as Willett claimed that it would strengthen the British nation, so Islamic reformers saw that the prospects of a global Ummah of the Muslim faithful would be much enhanced by embracing time standardization. Its reconciliation with traditional practice and the Qur'an was acrobatically performed by a series of deft propagandists, such as al-Afghani, whose *Book on the Useful Lessons in Opinions on the Wire and Clocks* (1897) argued how Ramadan times could be co-ordinated using telegraphy, which was fundamentally Islamic because the Prophet himself had made use of carrier pigeons, which were simply another form of technology.

The powerful lesson of Ogle's book is how the gradual global transformation of time over the course of the twentieth century came to suit many different parties, all of whom thought they had something to gain from new modes of integration and connectivity. The process we anachronistically call "globalization", Vanessa Ogle shows, was made up of forces that often used international means to solve national or parochial problems.

BRYAN MCCANN

Misha Glenny

NEMESIS

One man and the battle for Rio

352pp. Bodley Head. £20.

978 1 84792 266 3

Erika Robb Larkins

THE SPECTACULAR FAVELA

Violence in modern Brazil

246pp. University of California Press. Paperback,

£19.95 (US \$29.95).

978 0 520 28277 9

Between 2008 and 2013, Rio de Janeiro enjoyed a brief but glimmering security bubble. Following a community policing initiative in preparation for the forthcoming World Cup and Olympic Games, homicide rates dropped sharply while investment grew exponentially in areas of the city previously dominated by violent drugs traffic. For the first time in decades, domestic and international media showered favourable attention on the city. Politicians, entrepreneurs, scholars and even traffickers invested in this bubble, proclaiming that Rio had been transformed. This investment was partly financial, as *cariocas* – residents of Rio – rushed to acquire homes within and on the borders of previously violent communities; but it was mostly emotional, taking the form of a growing sense of optimism that the city had finally broken the cycle of pervasive violence. As with any speculative bubble, voices of caution warned of shaky foundations and unsustainable expectations. But even when these voices managed to cut through the public-relations buzz, it was difficult not to get swept up in the exhilaration.

The bubble burst with the brutal murder of the construction worker Amarildo de Souza in June 2013. Police in Rocinha – Brazil's largest favela, or neighbourhood of self-built housing outside of the legal property registry – confused Amarildo with a suspected drugs trafficker of the same name. They tortured him to death and disposed of his body covertly. Only the concerted efforts of Amarildo's outraged neighbours brought the murder to light, eventually resulting in the prosecution of more than twenty officers. Amarildo's murder was perversely normal by Brazilian standards, one of thousands of murders of poor men of colour committed by police every year. But in this case, the murder happened in the heart of a favela celebrated as an iconic example of Rio's transformation, at the hands of a special police unit supposedly held to the highest standards of "pacification" through community engagement. And it happened at a moment when *cariocas* had grown increasingly frustrated by the rising costs and inequitably distributed benefits of preparations for the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympics. Amarildo's murder appeared to confirm what local Cassandras had been saying all along – that the policing initiative was a sham, intended briefly to sanitize the city while the world's media looked on, and that the Olympic rebranding glossed over violence and inequality, facilitating a

Owners of the hill



Rocinha Favela, Rio de Janeiro

land grab by real estate titans at the expense of Rio's poor.

The books under review here offer telling detail about the inflation and puncturing of Rio's security bubble. Both do so via vivid accounts of life in Rocinha – Misha Glenny's through a biography of Rocinha's imprisoned former drugs lord, and Erika Robb Larkins through the analysis of the commodified spectacle of violence in the favela. As both authors understand, Rocinha is emblematic not only of Rio, but also of Brazil. This is not because Rocinha is typical – on the contrary, it is exceptional by any standards. It is less drastically poor than nearly any other favela in Brazil, and the bubble years marked an explosion of local commerce and tourism. But it nonetheless remains on the margins, and it is certainly unlike any neighbourhood in what favela-dwellers describe as the *asfalto* – the asphalt, or formal city of registered property title, regular public services and up-to-code buildings. This is not merely because of the presence of well-armed drugs traffickers and the open sale and consumption of cocaine. It is because of a pervasive precariousness of every aspect of urban life, including public health and sanitation, education, transport and communication. And it is precisely because of this mixture of precariousness and potential for prosperity that Rocinha is emblematic, exemplifying the hopes and ultimate disappointment of Rio's bubble – one that reflected an economic boom across the country – and doing so with particular intensity. Rocinha encapsulates the promise and problems of recent Brazilian history.

Over 100,000 people live in Rocinha, but it can feel small. There are thousands of alleys but only two real roads and only two entrances, one at the bottom of the hill on which it is built,

next to the wealthy neighbourhood of São Conrado, and one at the top, beside the wealthy neighbourhood of Gávea. In between are tens of thousands of *barracos*, or self-built favela homes, cascading down the hill, cheek-by-jowl, in various states of preparedness. None is ever complete – it is a truism of favela life that the home is always in a state of becoming, as new floors are built on flat roofs and new rooms cantilevered over narrow alleys. Cable television and wifi are common, as are home computers. But in the poorest sections of the favela one finds conditions of near destitution, and even the relatively upmarket homes are connected to the favela's single overburdened and frequently clogged sewage ditch. Sooner or later everyone congregates on the main commercial drag near the bottom of the hill, or in the few oddly shaped ersatz plazas left in between clustered buildings.

Robb Larkins and Glenny were in Rocinha during the same period (for much of 2013 and part of 2014; Robb Larkins had also previously conducted field research there in 2008–09). Neither mentions the other, though this is not surprising: as one of Brazil's most accessible favelas, Rocinha welcomes dozens of foreign researchers and journalists every year (and thousands of tourists). It is also unsurprising that their accounts overlap – they talked to many of the same people and mention many of the same events. In most of the key particulars, these accounts concur. Both indicate that only a tiny fraction of the favela's residents were directly involved in the drugs trade: fewer than 150 people filled the various posts of lookout, delivery boy, manager, soldier, strategic counsellor and kingpin. But, as they agree, the tentacular reach of the operations was – and remains – extensive, suborning first and foremost corrupt police, but relying as well on the