

# Quarantime

## Lockdown and the Global Disruption of Intimacies with Routine, Clock Time, and the Intensification of Time-Space Compression

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**ABSTRACT:** Global lockdowns have resulted in a challenge to our carefully constructed notions of time, the work week and time-space compression. For the past few months, we have been living in 'Quarantime'. Quarantime moves differently than our daily lived temporalities of routine and order, and forces us to question the intimate relationship that we may have with how we structure our daily lives around a clock and timesheet. This article questions the challenges and opportunities inherent within the disruption of routine intimacies enacted through Quarantime, drawing on case studies of clock time and the work week, and through examining Quarantime's unique relationship to time-space compression. It will suggest that Quarantime opens up a space for us to question intimate attachments to enforced routine and wide institutionalised concepts of clock time.

**KEYWORDS:** clock, COVID-19, lockdown, pandemic, quarantine, Quarantime, time, time-space compression

Over the past few months, the notion that we are living through an 'unprecedented time' has been rehashed to exhaustion. Yet, as Marian Krawczyk (2020) notes, in widening our perspectives through time and space, we see that this is not the case at all: infectious disease epidemics have been co-habiting with humankind for millennia. In this article, it will be proposed that, far from advocating that we completely scrap the exacerbated and historically incorrect phrase, instead the intonation be changed and that we do away with the determiner 'an': we are living through 'unprecedented *time*': Quarantime, a specific phenomenon of time that has not been experienced before in history. Quarantime moves differently than our daily lived temporalities of routine and order, and forces us to question the intimate relationship that we may have with how we structure our daily lives around a clock and a timesheet. Importantly, this enforced

restructuring of time may incite us to revisit the relationship that we have with it – a kind of intimacy that in 'normal' times may *uncritically* permeate reality. Within anthropology, Nancy Munn argues that a problem with 'time' is that it is notoriously 'difficult to find a meta-language to conceptualize something so ordinary and transparent in everyday life' (1992: 116). This article seeks to address this issue as it pertains to the COVID-19 pandemic and the social phenomenon of global lockdown through introducing the concept of Quarantime.

As highlighted, both global infectious disease epidemics and imposed quarantine during them are *not* new to humanity. However, the COVID-19 quarantine is unique in a number of ways, making it something *other* and worthy of anthropological reflection. The first novelty is that intimacies with routine and clock time in post-industrial society have become



disrupted, opening the possibility to question notions of time discipline and time reckoning that may have been approached uncritically up until now, formed as they were largely alongside the Industrial Revolution. This fact was highlighted perhaps most satirically with the passing of daylight savings time at the start of UK lockdown.

Introduced in 1919, daylight savings were originally concerned with extending the hours of sunlight available to work in the fields; it was fundamentally about increasing and extracting as much labour as possible from agriculturalists. Nowadays, it is somewhat defunct as an influential concept in post-industrial societies; however, its appearance during a time when a population was suddenly forced to stay indoors did not go unnoticed. The Internet was flooded with sarcastic memes about the futility of changing the clocks when one would not be going anywhere anyway, perhaps a tentative preclusion to a mass realisation that clock time itself is both deeply connected to labour and profit, as well as potentially exerting an unnecessary hold over our lives, interrogating our very intimacies with clock time and routine as we know it.

Second, this quarantine is distinct from historical epidemics in the way that time-space compression has played a key role. For example, during the 1348 Black Death, the Bubonic Plague of 1665 and the 1918 Spanish Influenza pandemic, people might have been locked down at home and nursing concerns over health, just like us. However, they were not able to continue working from their computers, receive instant news updates on the disease, or video call loved ones. Their minds were in quarantine as much as their physical bodies. Indeed, these three epidemics are mentioned specifically for the great works of literature produced when their authors had moments of quiet: Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Samuel Pepys's *Plague Diary* and Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse Pale Rider*. Yet, as David Harvey notes, time-space compression's insistence on instantaneity has resulted in an 'accelerating turnover time and the rapid write-off of traditional and historically acquired values', including 'novel writing and philosophizing' (1989: 104–105). Unlike previous epidemics, then, Quarantime, with its distinctive relationship of intensification to time-space compression and resulting lack of creativity, may be more of an unproductive epidemic than its forebearers.

To address this issue, what may be called for here is a reconfiguration of routine and a modified understanding of time, a task for which anthropologists are excellently well placed to tackle. Anthropologists un-

derstand time as telic, with a defined start and end, as per research ebbs and flows (Crapanzano 2010). This is further made relevant to the specificities of Quarantime by the 'moving goals' of future research publications and network engagement: a time that is paradoxically both telic and infinite. As lockdown starts and ends, so does the return to 'normalcy' remain a 'moving goal' that may be difficult to contend with. Anthropologists, accustomed to this relationship with time, can use this understanding to not only remain productive (and sane) themselves, but advise others on how to do so as well.

### Routine Disruption: Complicating Time Discipline and Time Reckoning

Daily routine is something that may often be taken for granted, so intimately yet uncritically related to it are we. Clock time is largely accepted as the norm and passes without examination by those who work according to a set schedule that relies upon time-based, rather than task-based, output. However, the control over working and clock time has long held significant power over labour and subsequent influence on those who provide that labour, and so should not necessarily be taken lightly. It is important, then, that under Quarantime the fundamental reasoning of such routines and work schedules may come under questioning. If there is nowhere to go beside from one room to another, and one is no longer slave to strict times associated with catching the train, dropping the children off at school, or nodding to one's boss so that your presence is noted, then why cling to routine? This is not to say that work need not be done, only that Quarantime underscores the fact that it may be done at a pace that is not dictated necessarily by the strict clock. From this, can we begin to ask whether Quarantime might open the possibility for new relationships with the clock, and how we labour by it, under post-industrial capitalism?

Indeed, the idea of clock-based labour is hardly revolutionary. E. P. Thompson (1967) observed that, whereas once work would be task-based (i.e., 'I am finished when the task is done'), the commencement of the Industrial Revolution, and with it industrial capitalism, heralded the dawn of clock time (e.g. 'I start and I finish when the clock [my boss; the capitalist] tells me so'). With this development, a worker's labour could be counted in units of time instead of task units and paid for according to these time units. So, we can 'clock off' work, be 'off the clock' when

not working, and, similarly, it also became possible to 'spend time', as 'time is money'.

By and large, most individuals in capitalist societies work by the clock in one way or another, and exchange units of time worked for a salary. Time labour has a price, and the time one sells to their boss makes a profit; *time is commodified* (Munn 1992). It might come as no surprise, therefore, that, in addition to industrial capitalist ventures, the introduction (*imposition*) of clocks has also been previously discussed as a principal mechanism for control and power over labour and religion in pre-colonial societies. For example, John and Jean Comaroff (1991) highlight how Dutch missionaries sought to impose time discipline in South Africa through the introduction of church-related clock time. In this example, the people were formerly agriculturalists who completed task-based work; however, the colonial imposition of Christianity and its associated appropriate times for prayer in the church meant that people found their working days restructured around the new religion and its demands on their time. No longer able to spend all day on agricultural tasks, the Tswana people now needed to attend church according to certain hours, the clock thereby taking new control over their lives.

Although it may seem relatively harmless and even redundant now, daylight savings are also embroiled within control over time discipline and labour. It has been said that daylight savings were adopted specifically to extract more profit from labour, as they ensure the continuation of an extended working day throughout the year. Profit, it has been argued, has a grip on our time (Tokumitsu 2018), as does the clock and the person who turns the metaphorical dials.

To make sense of all this in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, what is at play here is the notion that not only a new time discipline, but a new 'time reckoning' may be possible under Quarantime. Time reckoning refers to the way that time is counted or 'told', the reference points that are held to mark the passing of time (Munn 1992). In an office space, time may be reckoned by the clock; at a school (where children may not be eagerly staring at watches), time might be reckoned by the recess bell; for agriculturalists, time may be reckoned by the position of the sun.

The latter is very much the case for Quechua farmers in the Peruvian Andes, with whom I carry out fieldwork, as it may have been for the South African Tswana before Dutch settler-colonialism. To be sure, clock time exists in the Andes, but this is not the principal method of time reckoning when the *sembranza* ('harvest') season is in full swing; one works by the sun. Although this notion risks positioning Andean

farmers as relics of pre-industrial labour, it is necessary to note that this is very much affected by the region's geography, rather than any by isolation from globally dominant capitalist work rhythms. At 3,470 metres above sea level, the rural province of Ayacucho is greatly exposed to direct and strong sunlight that can cause headaches, nausea and lethargy. In the middle of the day, the sun is simply too strong to allow for work outside, and so the majority-farming villagers must structure their day accordingly in order to complete their work. Oftentimes, this means rising well before the sun and retiring 'early' too. For example, people would often rise at 4:00 am and go to bed by 7:00 or 8:00 pm, which was a necessity if they wished to make it out to the fields and farm before the sun reached its zenith during the day. On one rather humorous occasion, I had returned to the village on the last available transport coming from the region's capital to find myself loudly admonished for 'being out so late' by a group of men who were loitering in the main square. I scurried back to my room in shame over my late-night wanderings, concerned that I had been out too late. Yet when I checked, it was only 8:00 pm.

Similar examples of varying approaches that challenge the sacredness of clock time can be found across agricultural societies, where people necessarily respond to a time other than that of the clock. This underscores the fact that the time reckoning to which we are accustomed is in no way universal, despite the ethics of routine being marked as such (Bear 2014) and is therefore amenable to challenge. However, until lockdown it may have been more difficult to properly see or acknowledge this, so wed to routine have many people been.

This has already opened up the space for discussion over post-pandemic alternatives to the pre-COVID routine. For example, the notion of a four-day work week has been (re-)raised, with New Zealand reportedly planning for this as a map out of the pandemic (Ainge Roy 2020). On an individual level, Quarantime may begin to disrupt the acceptance of industry's grasp over time routines as people become more conscious to it.

## Time-Space Compression, Quarantime and Space

Outside of the routines of the purely capitalist timescape, Quarantime has further influenced and encouraged our agency in another time curiosity: 'time-space compression'. Originally coined by Harvey

(1989), 'time-space compression' broadly refers to the destruction of spacial barriers and distance through economic and technological advancements. Importantly, time-space compression elucidates time's relationship with space and how we move through it. Thus 'time', whether it is reckoned by the clock or the task, is more than an abstract concept outside of action, it directly influences how we relate to 'space' and how we move through, experience and construct it (Munn 1992): it is spatio-temporal. In the case of Andean farmers, task time influences when they will be in the fields and when they will be sheltered from the sun in the shadows of their adobe dwellings. For the South Africa Tswana, clock time dictated whether they would be physically present in the church or labouring with their bodies in agricultural endeavours (Comaroff 1991). Outside of Quarantime, clock time might influence whether one's body is located at home or at a workplace and every movement in between those spaces, such as the daily commute on the bus or the afternoon trip to buy coffee. Time literally moves us. Except (and here is the rub), in Quarantime this is uniquely *not* the case.

A key feature of quarantine is that individuals have been unable to leave their houses at all. There has been a global government-mandated order to desist from any movement through space. Now, this may not be the case for absolutely every person, if we acknowledge the vast numbers of workers who continued to adhere to clock time's *spatio-temporalities*, such as medical staff and those in the food industry. However, for those who were quarantined, the experience of Quarantime would have likely been unique, time belonging to only one, physical space, through which one's movements were not dictated by the clock anymore. Paradoxically, just as this phenomenon has unfolded and localised spacial movements have been reduced to nought, so too has the expansive fluidity of movement through global space been experienced en masse through the increased significance of time-space compression, especially as it applies to social-interfacing technologies.

Suddenly, everyone is present online, whether for work or play. In Quarantime, time-space compression has therefore intensified, as people are now actively and continuously transcending time and space to speak to colleagues and loved ones non-stop, the *spatio-temporalities* of the office space or grandma's house no longer so significant. With time-space compression, 'everything becomes instant' (Harvey 1989: 99); it is 'an annihilation of space through time' (1989: 11). Referring specifically to mobile technology, Amber Case (2010) suggests that people are now walk-

ing around with 'wormholes' in their pockets, able to transcend spacial barriers to connect globally in a split second. This, she argues, creates an 'ambient intimacy', whereby we are able to connect to anyone we want, at any time we want. Of course, this is not new to Quarantime by any means. Both in personal and business life, time-space compression has been present for decades, enhanced through rapidly developing technologies. Increasingly, 'digital labour' has also become a feature of the capitalist market (Fuchs 2014), and one could not say that quarantine has heralded a completely new way of working and interacting socially (even if some journalists are wont to do so). No, for the majority it has not. It may have intensified time-space compression, but not introduced it. Yet, be that as it may, there is an important change that has occurred uniquely under Quarantime, and that is our relationship to space under time.

As mentioned at the start of this section, under Quarantime we have no longer been able to move through space physically but have moved through a virtual space with increasing intensity: drastically more movement in one sense, and a complete halt of movement in another. These new movements, being continuous and relentless, are far less easy to disengage from than the movement of leaving your office to go home would be. Our 'ambient intimacies' (Case 2010) and lack of escape from them may be fast becoming unwanted intrusions under Quarantime.

In a comment now filled with delicious irony, Harvey once noted how 'the home becomes a private museum to guard against the ravages of time-space compression' (1989: 105). The home, once a space of rest and removal from work time, is no longer that under Quarantime, it has 'transmuted' (Blanco Esmoris 2020) into a time prison of temporalities without spaces and into ambient intimacies without cessation. And this new reality has consequences.

Outside of Quarantime, it has already been observed how time-space compression takes its toll on people's ability to work, think, and be. Harvey has commented on how it diminished our 'capacity to grapple with the realities unfolding around us' (1989: 117), and long-term planning becomes increasingly difficult when time-space compression keeps our world in flux. Case (2010) concurs, suggesting that only when you have no external outputs and a disconnection from time-space compression can you engage in long-term planning. The inability to do so under 'normal' times makes people ill, these time tensions producing 'yuppie flu', where workers become unproductive due to stress paralysis (Harvey 1989: 100). Does any of this sound familiar? Under

Quarantime, reports of 'Zoom fatigue' and 'Zoom gloom' (feelings of becoming emotionally drained and exhausted after engaging in the Zoom virtual meeting platform) (Sklar 2020) have already begun to surface, for example. The time-space compression experienced under Quarantime, with the accompanying inability to physically move through space, could therefore be viewed as a troubling phenomenon in terms of human health, coupled as it is with a global pandemic. That said, there is an intriguing question here that deserves further attention. As both Harvey and Case suggest, time-space compression removes our ability to engage in long-term planning, as we are continuously connected to a global space and cannot exist quietly outside of it whilst doing so. Under Quarantime, with the goliath uncertainties that hang over individual freedoms and futures, long-term planning simply cannot happen. We are frozen in 'enforced presentism', unable to plan ahead (Ringel 2020). Could the time-space compression intensification under Quarantime therefore be seen as a necessary evil to help distract from people's inability for long-term planning? If so, there is a group of people who hold a somewhat relevant relationship to time and the organisation of it in their work and who could potentially assist others in coming to terms with this issue – anthropologists.

### Telic Time and Anthropologists

Anthropological work, with its focus on specific societies and issues of research concern, is not usually infinite. Though an anthropologist may maintain contacts and research interest within their field site for the duration of their career, the nature of fieldwork is such that it is an extended but definitive moment in time. As Vincent Crapanzano deftly notes: 'For the anthropologist, the time of fieldwork is no doubt differently conceived and experienced than it is by his or her informants. To put it simply: the anthropologist's sense of time, marked as it is by a beginning and an ending – an arrival and a departure – is telic' (2010: 60).

The idea of telic time could indeed be applied to a number of other disciplines and careers; however, there is something specific about anthropology that makes it relevant in the unique case of Quarantime. Although carried out with a defined start and finish in mind, fieldwork, and the subsequent production of outputs such as monographs and articles, inevitably has a 'moving goal' (2010: 61). It is not over once one has packed their bags and boarded a plane, nor

is it truly finished when a grant or a contract ends. Indeed, it is not uncommon for manuscripts to take many years to finish (Krause-Jensen 2013), stretching the concept of telic time in a way that may have become so normalised within the discipline that anthropologists themselves no longer question it critically. This mode of working is relevant in the discussion on Quarantime specifically because it is a unique way of working and has the potential to assist others who may be struggling with the lack of long-term planning abilities or the seemingly endless stretch of time. For anthropologists, telic time signifies a definitive start and finish, and this can be seen in lockdown too. For example, quarantine began on specific dates across the world, and the majority of countries had some indication of end dates and/or dates for tentatively entering second 'phases' of lockdown. However, the end of lockdown has not actually meant the end of quarantine and social distancing, nor has it meant the end of the coronavirus – we do not have an end date for that, much as when the anthropologist 'ends' their fieldwork in telic time, they continue on without a definitive end of engagement with the research subject. The moving goal of research that anthropologists understand could be likened to the moving goal of 'normalcy' under Quarantime. As Jakob Krause-Jensen (2013) has argued, the corporate world is not necessarily literate in this way of working and being, with goal-driven cultures of immediacy (exacerbated already by time-space compression) being the norm. However, if it were possible to shift ways of thinking and being in time to a more anthropological mode, perhaps those struggling with Quarantime might find some respite. Furthermore, this has health-related importance; if time-space compression already produced the flu pre-pandemic (Harvey 1989), and we are now witnessing fatigue and exhaustion from the over-use of online platforms (Sklar 2020), we may find increased health risk and the diminution of immune systems at a time when healthy bodies are a key defence against the virus. Quarantime must be reckoned with.

### The Future of Quarantime

Although the world may be slowly moving in and out of quarantine, this is by no means the end of Quarantime as a concept of lived experience. The disruptions caused in intimacies and perceptions of clock time and work routines are not necessarily poised to be immediately forgotten. Now that many have become wiser to the inherent fallibility of such constructions

of time, the trick will be not to revert back to pre-pandemic working routines. This is easier said than done, of course, and it has been acknowledged how the unique time-space compression under Quarantime may have deleterious effects on one's health and one's sense of self. A balance will need to be struck between avoiding unnecessary routines of labour that imprison workers in the clock, and not losing oneself in the frozen space of Quarantime's time-space compression. Presently, it is difficult to predict whether a more generalised temporal state of being will come as a result of Quarantime, or not, for as stated in the above at the start of this article, this is unprecedented time. However, anthropologists, with their unique relationship to time, may be well placed to assist others in beginning to think through and navigate these temporalities. This article is in no way a roadmap for that, but rather a theoretical manifesto of Quarantime and the global disruption of intimate relationships to time that will hopefully inspire a change in the wind . . . ing of the clock.

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