

# Time and Temporality in the Early Modern Low Countries

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Time is running out. Since 1947, the members of the Science and Security Board of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists have rung in the new year with the same ritual, moving the hands of the Doomsday Clock ceremoniously closer to midnight. As of January 2023, a mere ninety seconds remain before human life on earth succumbs to one or a number of threats, identified as nuclear disaster, climate change, disease, or disruptive technology.<sup>1</sup> The inadvertently farcical but nonetheless highly confrontational announcement of imminent doom is illustrative of the manner in which we relate to the world today. A sense of urgency, a race against the clock, permeates our daily perception and use of time. The immensity of the problems the world is facing leads to a hesitance or even resistance to thinking about the future, which results in the glorification of the past – primarily by far-right politicians – and various other forms of escapism. However, when the world shut down during the lockdowns that were imposed all over the globe to halt the spread of the COVID-19 virus, we were confronted with a different kind of temporal experience. Being confined to the space of our homes for an indeterminate period forced everyone to recalibrate. Isolated in our ‘bubble’, and with the usual freedom to travel unavailable, time appeared to slow down and became exceptionally personal. This experience was reinforced by its contrasts with the accelerated news cycle about the world ‘outside’ or by devastating instances in which the pandemic came very close to home.<sup>2</sup>

The examples of the Doomsday Clock statement and the experience of living through a pandemic indicate that time is not an abstract phenomenon, but defined by the relation of humans to its passing. Temporality is time- and place-specific. There is nothing new about philosophers, sociologists, and other scholars being interested in time and temporality. We do, however, appear to find ourselves at a moment of renewed interest, as experts of different stripes have warned against ‘dromospheric pollution’: a concept coined by Paul Virilio to describe the unwanted effects of the present acceleration of our daily lives

<sup>1</sup> Mecklin, ‘A time of unprecedented danger’.

<sup>2</sup> A random sample from the literature: Holman and Grisham, ‘When Time Falls Apart’; Wessels et. al., ‘Adapting to the pandemic’.

caused by highspeed trains and planes, hyperloops, high-speed elevators, lightning-fast mobile communication, fibre optic cables, and other technologies.<sup>3</sup> While these scholars portray modern-day society as a breathtakingly fast, dizzying dystopia where haste, nervousness, stress, and time pressure are rampant, they often paint a much more positive image of the slow, relaxed pace of life in early modern Europe.<sup>4</sup> It is this stark, binary distinction that has already popped up in E.P. Thompson's seminal 1969 article in *Past & Present*, which contrasted the slow task-oriented pace of premodern life in medieval and early modern Europe with the hectic, time-oriented, industrial discipline brought about by factory horns, time clocks, fines for lateness, and other coercive measures.<sup>5</sup> Following in Thompson's wake, experts have argued that the appearance of electric light, trains and steamboats, the telegraph, and the reorganization of the postal network in the nineteenth century changed society's temporal compass once and for all.<sup>6</sup> Reinhart Koselleck claimed that the political turmoil of the late eighteenth century also wreaked havoc on temporality, as the French Revolution and other cataclysmic events in the *Sattelzeit* produced totally new conceptions of the past, the present, and the future. It was also the cradle of the *Beschleunigung* – the ominous feeling that the pace of life is rapidly increasing.<sup>7</sup>

Confronted with these stimulating – though, as they would soon prove to be, highly reductionist – theories, experts set out to explore how people perceived, used, performed, and experienced time and temporality in the past. Drawing upon a variety of sources – including diaries, letters, and other life-writing, criminal and ecclesiastical court records, bans and ordinances, as well as novels, paintings, plays, and music – historians have painted a picture of the past far richer and much more dynamic than the theories of Thompson and Koselleck. The renewed interest is not only visible on a European or even global scale, but can also be seen in the Netherlands and Belgium, where a steady stream of new, trailblazing research has been carried out in the last few decades. This special issue takes stock of these new perspectives on early modern time and temporality, examining the new questions that have been posed, theories that have been debunked, sources that have been tapped, and methodologies that have been tried-and-tested. At the same time, we try to draw a genealogy of a field that is still very much in the making.

### *The Clock's Ticking: Timekeeping and Temporality*

On 16 July 1624, the Dutch portraitist David Bailly drew a delicate vanitas still life (fig. 1) in the album amicorum of the Leiden student Montigny de Glarges. It appears among entries by Constantijn and Christian Huygens, René Descartes, Jacob Cats, and many

3 Virilio, *Open Sky*, 22-23.

4 Examples include Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 60-65; Rosa, *Social Acceleration*; Wajcman, 'Life in the fast lane?'. For a critique on this binary contrast between premodern and modern time perception, see Champion, 'The History of Temporalities'.

5 Thompson, 'Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism'.

6 Classics studies are Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, 30-45; Ekirch, *At Day's Close*; Stein, 'Reflections on time'; and Zimmer, 'One Clock Fits All?'.  
7 Koselleck, *Futures past*; Koselleck and Reichardt, *Die Französische Revolution*.



Fig. 1 David Bailly, *Vanitas Still Life*, in the *album amicorum* of Cornelis de Montigny de Glarges, 16 July 1624, pen on paper, The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek.

other prominent figures. In a simple and clean composition, Bailly placed a scroll with the words *Quis evadet* ('Who will be spared?'), an hourglass, a skull, and a smoking clay pipe. Rather than appearing morbid and misplaced, the explicit reference to death and the vanity of human endeavour was apparently deemed an appropriate message for a Dutch nobleman and future diplomat in the prime of his life. While the concept of *vanitas* had a solid place in the Christian imagination from the Middle Ages onwards, its continued relevance among Dutch Protestants led painters in Leiden to follow in the footsteps of Bailly's teacher Jacques de Gheyn, turning it into a subject matter for paintings, drawings, and prints.<sup>8</sup> The success of these artworks illustrates one of the many ways in which time played a significant role in the lives and imagination of seventeenth-century Dutchmen.<sup>9</sup> Temporality and time also appeared in letters 'written in haste', in the diaries and other life-writing used by middle-class men and women to keep track of their daily lives, and in memoirs and chronicles where authors reflected on their own, personal past and that of their city.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, official decrees stipulated – often to the minute – the opening of

8 In fact, Bailly's enigmatic *Vanitas still life with portrait of a young painter*, 1651, Leiden, Museum de Lakenhal, took center stage in the 2023 exhibition *David Bailly – Time, Death and Vanity*.

9 On time and temporality in Dutch paintings, see Adams, 'Temporality'.

10 For time pressure as a spin-off of the acceleration of postal services in early modern Europe: Kuijpers and Verhoeven, 'Makelaars in kennis'. On Dutch diaries, see Baggerman and Dekker, 'Otto's horloge'; Bousard, Paklons, and Verhoeven, 'Becks bezigheden'. Key international studies include Sherman, *Telling Time*; Korhonen, "'The Several Hours of the Day'". Memoirs and chronicles are discussed in Kuijpers et al. (eds.), *Memory before Modernity*; Pollmann, 'Archiving the Present'.

the city gates, the departure of coaches and tow-boats, the opening hours of inns, coffee houses, shops, or theatres, the curfew, and so on.<sup>11</sup> In sum, temporality and time were all-pervasive in the Low Countries.<sup>12</sup>

This observation seems to contradict the commonly-assured opposition between pre-modern societies – deemed timeless, unhurried, and ultimately relaxed – and the hectic pace of our contemporary lives. Apart from the Industrial Revolution and the political turmoil of the French and Atlantic Revolutions, a new awareness of time would also have been triggered by the spread of pocket watches, longcase clocks, and other time-pieces as objects of mass consumption.<sup>13</sup> Empirical research, however, has shown that timekeeping – the most obvious dimension of time consciousness – did not change overnight in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, but evolved through a series of what Paul Glennie and Nigel Thrift have labelled as slow-burn revolutions that stretch back to the late Middle Ages. Traditional ways to keep track of time, such as references to natural and social phenomena, were slowly but surely superseded by mechanical, clock-based timekeeping.<sup>14</sup> Calendar dating only gradually displaced a more seasonal time awareness, punctuated by a proliferation of feast- and holy days.<sup>15</sup> To provide an antidote against an all-too-teleological reading of these glacial evolutions, scholars have stressed the lasting usefulness of concepts such as *Onze Vader* (paternoster), *omtrent schemeren* (around dusk), or *omtrent Pinksteren* (around Whitsun) for contemporaries. Even if they look hazy and imprecise to a modern mind jaundiced by its ‘fetish of accuracy’, they were highly practical concepts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>16</sup>

Experts focusing on temporality – that is, the way in which contemporaries dealt with the passing of the years, decades, and centuries – have also largely debunked the classic binary opposition between early modern and modern concepts of time. Due to the seminal work of Judith Pollmann, Erika Kuijpers, and others in the growing field of early modern memory studies, it has become clear that the past was also very much alive in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, when people eagerly committed their own history or that of their city or region to paper by composing memoirs and chronicles.<sup>17</sup> They also tried to quench their thirst for knowledge about the past by buying history books, prints, broadsheets, and maps, or collecting antiquities from a distant or recent past. Although early modern concepts of the past might have been slightly different from the modern memory cult that emerged after the French Revolution, a clear-cut fault-line between premodern and modern conceptions of the past seems to be an illusion.<sup>18</sup> As a result of this research, Koselleck’s model has since long been traded in for the more nuanced theory of François

11 For examples from the late Middle Ages: Stabel, ‘Labour time’.

12 For a recent overview on the topic of time in Dutch and Belgian research: Verhoeven, ‘Tijdloos’. For the medieval Low Countries: Champion, *The Fullness of Time*.

13 Landes, *Revolution in Time*. For a more critical view on technological determinism: Ogle, ‘Time’.

14 Glennie and Thrift, *Shaping the Day*. For the Low Countries, see Blondé and Verhoeven, ‘Against the Clock’.

15 Wrightson, ‘Popular senses of the past’; Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun*.

16 Hanß, ‘The Fetish of Accuracy’.

17 Pollmann, *Memory in Early Modern Europe*; Kuijpers et al. (eds.), *Memory before Modernity*. See also Woolf, *The Social Circulation*; Sweet, *Antiquaries*.

18 Pollmann and Kuijpers, ‘Introduction’; Deseure and Pollmann, ‘The Experience of Rupture’.

Hartog's historicity regimes, which advocates a more evolutionary model.<sup>19</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, early modernists have also argued against the reductionist idea that thinking about the future was an invention of the French Revolution. Letters from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth century show that early modern people fostered an exceptionally wide array of future expectations.<sup>20</sup>

### *Work, Eat, Sleep, Repeat: The Rhythms of Daily Life*

Thompson argued that the Industrial Revolution not only radically changed people's time-keeping and time awareness, but that it also had a profound effect on the balance between work, leisure, and other daily time-use. Factory horns, time clocks, fines for latecomers, and other disciplinary tools forced men, women, and children alike in a relentless rhythm and to work harder, longer, and faster than ever before. The allegedly leisurely pace of work in the *Ancien Régime* – interspersed with long breaks, truancy, Saint-Mondays, and other interruptions, which we know so well thanks to Robert Darnton's work on the *Société typographique de Neuchâtel* – was transformed by an unseen drive for acceleration.<sup>21</sup> Early modernists were quick to argue that such speeding up was anything but a nineteenth-century invention, as it also occurred (much) earlier. For instance, the economic historian Jan de Vries has argued that people had already become much more industrious at the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, as families increased their labour input to maximize the family-based income. Consumer desires – the yearning for exotic and fashionable goods – would have convinced families to put in more hours a day and to toil more days on a weekly and annual basis.<sup>22</sup> De Vries's hypothesis has inspired a whole generation of researchers, who, drawing on a wide range of sources – including wage and housekeeping books, labour regulations, newspaper advertisements, and criminal records – have tried to answer the question of whether people really started to work harder in the early modern period. It still remains an open issue, as the evidence is rarely if ever conclusive.<sup>23</sup>

The debate about the changing pace and rhythm of everyday life in early modern Europe spilled from economic history into social, cultural, and even political history, as potential changes in working habits also had ramifications for leisure, eating, sleeping, and other spheres of life.<sup>24</sup> Peter Burke claimed in another famous *Past & Present* article that leisure

19 Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity*.

20 Puttevils, 'Terug naar de toekomst'. See also the webpage of the ERC-funded project 'Back to the Future', <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/851053> (Accessed on 26 November 2023). For a broader historical perspective, see Oschema and Schneidmüller, *Zukunft im Mittelalter*.

21 Thompson, 'Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism'; Darnton, 'The Business of Enlightenment'.

22 De Vries, *The Industrious Revolution*; De Vries, 'The Industrial Revolution'.

23 Pioneering work has been done by Hans-Joachim Voth: Voth, 'Time and Work'; Voth, *Time and Work*. For the Low Countries, see Verhoeven, 'Fashionably Late?'. Even so, the debate continues, for instance in Stephenson, 'Working days'; Murphy, 'Clock-Watching'; Rosenband, 'The Industrious Revolution'; Allen and Weisdorf, 'Was there an "industrious revolution"?'. For a French perspective on long-term evolution in working rhythms, see Maitte and Terrier, *Les rythmes du labeur*.

24 For pioneering work on the rhythms of political life, see Greig and Vickery, 'The Political Day'.



was ‘invented’ in early modern Europe, as the spheres of leisure and work were gradually separated.<sup>25</sup> Experts have also found increasing evidence for the commercialization of leisure, as a sprawl of coffee houses, theatres, opera houses, auctioneers, reading clubs, and other societies emerged in the eighteenth century.<sup>26</sup> While this surge seems to corroborate Burke’s hypothesis, it is simultaneously at odds with De Vries’s industrious revolution. How did eighteenth-century people manage to work harder and, at the same time, have more leisure time? A possible solution for this conundrum is to look at other spheres of life. Craig Koslofsky, for example, has argued that the coming of modern street lighting set in motion a process of nocturnalization, whereby work, eating, and leisure moved into the night. People could remain active for longer periods through a gradual colonization of the night.<sup>27</sup> According to Roger Ekirch, the nineteenth-century spread of gas and electric light would even have sounded the death knell for traditional, premodern sleep patterns.<sup>28</sup>

### *Feeling Time: Norms, Emotions, and Bodily Experiences*

Most, if not all of these theories remain under discussion, as they suffer from a serious methodological flaw. Unlike sociologists, who can actually monitor their subjects with actigraphy and other high-tech tools, historians have to do with sources – such as wage and household books, diaries, memoirs, and criminal records – that were not designed for this type of research. The methodological flaw is even more prominent when experts try to move beyond the (already shaky) facts and figures on daily timekeeping and time-use, aiming instead to explore how time was experienced, sensed, performed, or embodied. Did early modern people experience tedium, haste, time squeeze, and other time-related emotions in a similar or even the same way to us? Was the strain of hectic life felt in every vein? For the moment, these questions remain unsolved, as the cultural history of time and temporality is still very much in the making. Three years ago, Daniel Jütte concluded that for want of more detailed research, the birth of tedium and other time-related emotions is still predominantly situated in the nineteenth century, although there is a wealth of early modern material on boredom waiting to be explored.<sup>29</sup> In a similar vein, scholars such as Oliver Zimmer, Jill Kirby, and others have traced the nineteenth- and twentieth-century history of impatience, haste, punctuality, time pressure, and other time-related emotions, norms, and ideals, but research focusing on similar topics in early modern Europe (or the Low Countries) remains thin on the ground.<sup>30</sup>

25 Burke, ‘The invention of leisure’. For a long-term of history of leisure and play, see also the pioneering study by Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*.

26 McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb (eds.), *Birth of a Consumer Society*; Borsay, ‘The English Urban Renaissance’.

27 Koslofsky, *Evening’s Empire*.

28 Ekirch, ‘The modernization of Western Sleep’. For research on sleep patterns in the Low Countries, see Verhoeven, ‘(Pre)Modern Sleep’.

29 Jütte, ‘Sleeping in church’. Interesting in this regard is also Vigarelo, *Histoire de la fatigue*.

30 Kirby, *Feeling the Strain*; Zimmer, ‘Die Ungeduld mit der Zeit’. See for an introduction to time and emotions in early modern Europe: Champion, ‘Emotions, time and narrative’.

Norms and ideals are also barely scrutinized. In a recent article, Alexis Litvine pointed to a serious flaw in Jan de Vries's industrious revolution theory, as the hypothesis is built on the assumption that new norms about industriousness emerged in the Dutch Republic – and later in Britain – that triggered a new labour culture and an increase in working hours. Yet the actual birth of such a new moral framework has never been scrutinized in depth. Drawing on economic pamphlets and educational literature, and applying a state-of-the-art digital humanities approach, Litvine argues that although industriousness was indeed on the rise, the chronology of this moral shift does not fit easily within the traditional framework of De Vries's hypothesis, as the 'industrious revolution' traced by Litvine would have happened either too late or too early to explain changes in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century consumer culture.<sup>31</sup> It is a perfect illustration of the fact that even the toughest subjects from economic history can benefit from research in cultural history. At the same time, it demonstrates that the lacunae in our knowledge of early modern time awareness, time use, and timekeeping are still substantial and that more empirical research is vital.

### *About Time: Content and Scope of this Special Issue*

Given the topicality and popularity of the subject in current research, the time is certainly ripe for a special issue on perceptions of time and temporality in the early modern Low Countries. The present issue presents a varied sample of ongoing research, testifying to the diversity of approaches being pursued. Contributions diverge widely in scale, angle, use of source material, and disciplinary orientation. The very richness of approaches in itself precludes consensus. While many authors engage with the theoretical framework cited at the beginning of this introduction, the general tendency is towards questioning and nuancing these frameworks rather than the formulation of new models. The articles in this volume therefore reflect the state of the art in a field that is busily expanding. Given that several large-scale research projects are ongoing both in Belgium and the Netherlands, we can expect more contributions that will continue to nourish the discussion in the future.

Many theories about early modern attitudes towards time share a focus on one type of source in particular: egodocuments. Femke Gordijn makes a case for testing such theories by using an entirely different kind of historical document. The resolutions of the Dutch States-General are a series of administrative sources which have been digitized and made machine readable in the context of the REPUBLIC project. Using text-mining techniques, Gordijn performs a massive analysis of the term *tyden* in the eighteenth century. In combination with a qualitative reading, Gordijn argues that references to extraordinary times both reveal perceptions of crisis and encouraged the States-General to take action. Her innovative methodology offers a promising glimpse of the analytical gains offered by digital history.

31 Litvine, 'The Industrious revolution', 531-570.



In theories about changing awareness of time, the news is often identified as a catalyst of accelerated temporality. The story map genre, in which contemporary events are illustrated using maps, stands at the crossroads of news media and cartography. Anne-Rieke van Schaik analyses a series of such maps created by the Amsterdam publisher Claes Jansz Visscher which reported on military confrontations between the Dutch Republic and Spain between 1627 and 1640. The maps went through a rapid series of revised editions in order to keep them up to date with contemporary events. Van Schaik shows how map-makers integrated various kinds of temporal information into the maps, turning them into dynamic news products while at the same time contributing to the memorialisation of the narrated events by etching them onto the spatial and narrative imagination of the readers.

Current models of time awareness draw heavily on the early modern obsession with the past, which supposedly precluded contemporaries from focusing on the present moment. Jan Blanc, Thalia Brero, Élodie Lecuppre-Desjardin, and Marije Osnabrugge contest this claim by applying François Hartog's concept of presentism to the early modern period. In their essay about late medieval and early modern experiences of time, they identify a variety of instances when the present became the main focus of attention. Citing examples from literature, poetry, theatre, painting, and news media, the authors make a case for the development of a presentist attitude in the Low Countries, which was markedly different from the orientation towards the past inherent to simultaneous intellectual and artistic movements in Renaissance Italy. As such, they posit an enticing hypothesis about the specificity of time awareness in the early modern Low Countries.

Moving from the present moment to what lies ahead, Sanne Hermans analyses a case study of romance in order to reconstruct conceptions of the future in the sixteenth century. The planned union of two scions of Antwerp's affluent merchant class, Daniel van der Meulen and Hester della Faille, has left ample traces in the epistolary correspondence between various family members. Drawing on the anthropological concept of future orientations, Hermans identifies a taxonomy of attitudes towards the future which help to make sense of early modern people's attitudes towards events that were expected but not yet realized. By introducing the notion of 'pluritemporality', she demonstrates how early modern thinking about the future was not homogenous but instead depended on the various characteristics of social interaction.<sup>32</sup>

The final article of this issue finds itself cast in the elongated shadows of a setting sun. Gerrit Verhoeven draws on court records from eighteenth-century Antwerp to tackle the question of nocturnalization. Several authors have hypothesized that the eighteenth century saw a radical change in living and working patterns. As artificial street lights were installed in many European cities, traditional patterns of day- and night-time occupation were supposedly overturned by the increasing colonization of the night. In order to test the nocturnalization hypothesis, Verhoeven analyses references to time-use and time-awareness made by ordinary Antwerpians in their statements and testimonies in court. As he retraces the late-night behaviour of working folk, upper class revellers, pub-goers, and other nighthawks, the temporality of everyday life in the eighteenth-century city comes to life.

32 For more background on this concept, see Tamm and Olivier, 'Rethinking Historical Time'.

Taken together, these articles show that the history and temporality in the early modern Low Countries has become a timely topic and touches upon key debates in cultural, economic, social, and political history. Obviously, there are still some important fields to explore. None of the authors, for instance, have looked at the links between temporal awareness and religion, which has recently developed into a new field of research in other European countries.<sup>33</sup> Nor is the material culture of time scrutinized in depth, which has also drawn the attention of many scholars lately.<sup>34</sup> The time is ripe to explore these new fields. Let's make some haste.

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