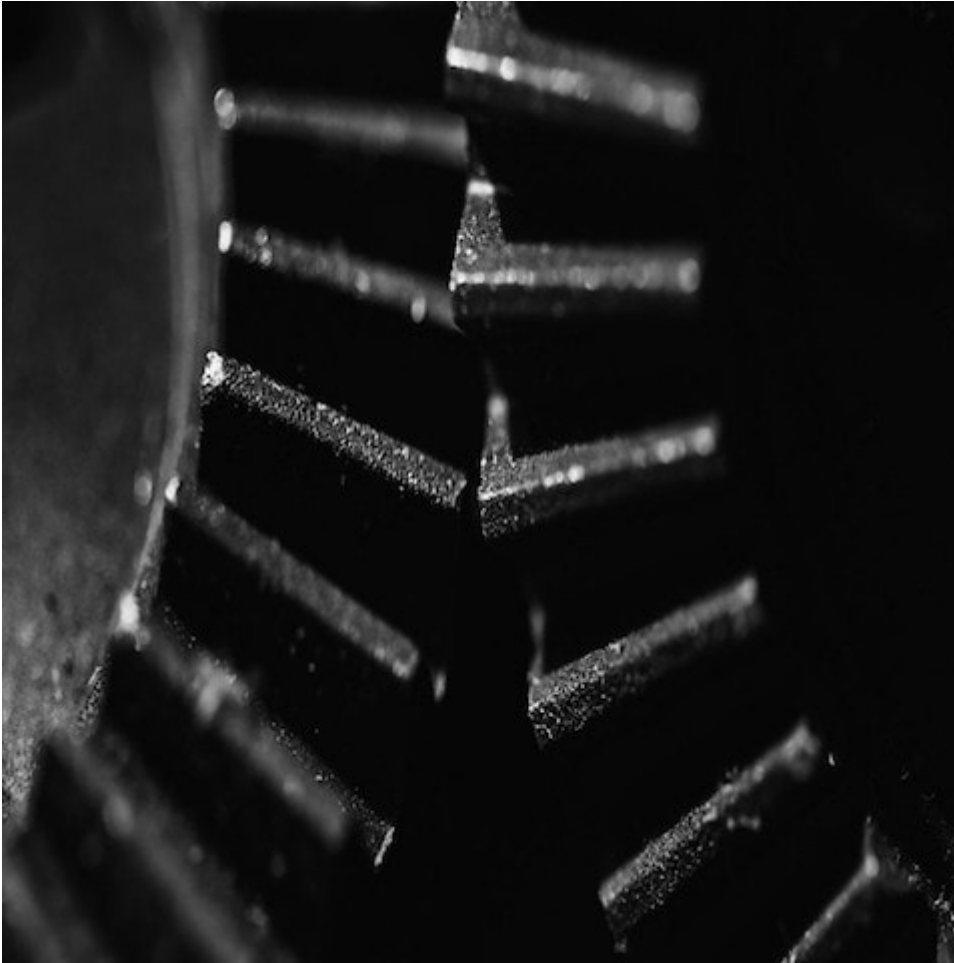




#failures: Living Out of Synch

Madeleine Reeves

September, 2020



In their introduction to this thematic series, and the [symposium](#) that preceded it, Berisha, Mafizzoli and Ojani invite us to reflect on what happens when breakdown becomes the very fabric of daily life. How, they ask, does this impinge upon hopes and expectations? One answer to that question - or one way to think through how we might approach that question ethnographically, at least - is to attend to the temporal dynamics of breakdown and failure. How are breakdown and failure experienced *in* time and *through* time? How does temporal disjuncture itself come to be experienced a form of breakdown or crisis?

During my research between Moscow and Batken, Kyrgyzstan, I lived, travelled



and [queued](#) with migrant workers as they sought to navigate the often-impossible demands of legal regularisation during a period of acute economic uncertainty in the wake of the global financial crisis. I sought to document and understand the physical, mental and emotional effort involved in coordinating different temporal regimes: those of work, those of social reproduction, those of care, those of social and religious obligation, those of bureaucratic accounting and legalisation.

One way to think through that question ethnographically is to attend to the temporal dynamics of breakdown and failure.

My informants, temporary tenants of two so-called “rubber apartments” (*rezinovye kvartiry*), were adept at suturing together conflicting cycles of work, life and co-residence. In one of the two Soviet *khrushchevki* where I was a temporary tenant, 14 people shared two living rooms and a kitchen (and a balcony during the summer months). In the second, 21 tenants shared a 3-room apartment, with 12 tenants renting mattress-space in the largest of the three rooms. Life in such apartments entailed particular disciplines of co-habitation. Privacy was constantly threatened and the thin lines between intimacy and intrusion had constantly to be negotiated. Alongside a formal rota (*dezhurstvo*) that determined who was responsible for cleaning the apartment, there were expectations of bodily comportment and time-keeping that shaped how co-residents, who might be virtual strangers, and working asynchronous shift patterns, occupied space: knowing when it would be possible to have some privacy; at what times it was possible to cook without being watched over your shoulder; or at what points to avoid trying to take a shower so as to avoid the exasperated knocking of the next in line.

Life in such apartments entailed particular disciplines of co-habitation. Privacy was constantly threatened and the thin lines between intimacy and intrusion had constantly to be negotiated.

Co-residence involved the bodily discipline of synchronizing discordant routines.



But synchrony was also essential in a much broader sense to making a liveable life in Moscow: to finding ways to earn enough, within given physical and legal constraints, to keep life prospects and future projects alive, to keep the road 'white' (*ak*) or open. The mastery of life as a migrant worker in a deeply hostile social environment grounded in precarious labour was tied up with the possibility of figuring out its complex polyrhythms: the subtle forms of coordination that are required to manage co-habitation in the rubber apartment; the challenge of managing long, physically demanding or repetitive shift-work in patterns that messed with one's circadian rhythm; figuring out the patterns of the metro system and the commute; the monthly demands of payments to landlords (or their proxies) and often, too, to the local neighbourhood policemen who provided a formalized-informal system of protection against unplanned raids on rubber apartments.

Finding the pulse

Anthropologists of labour have highlighted the importance of rhythm and the capacity to rhythmize - to impose one's rhythm on work - to questions of agency and value. As Gregor Dobler (2016: 864) puts it, drawing on a distinction first introduced by E.P. Thompson "rhythm facilitates and provides the acquisition of skills; it forms a link between the exigencies of "clock time" and the experience of "task time"; and it mediates between plans and situated actions.": In his [ethnography of peasant work in northern Namibia](#), Dobler explores how physically demanding and monotonous work is rendered both physically tolerable and socially meaningful through the production of coordinated rhythms of action (among women pounding millet for instance), and how the production of rhythmic movement becomes the measure of difference between the novice and the virtuoso.

But what happens when the rhythms that surround us - those of capitalism, most obviously, but those of political violence or states of emergency - constrain the



possibility that we have to feel that we are able to structure or rhythmize our work: both in the sense of finding its inner pace or pulse, and in the possibility of coordinating it meaningfully with others' own actions and rhythms? For the conditions of possibility for being able to live and work in temporal harmony - being synchronized with others, whether in the micro-dynamics of how we structure a working day or the durational questions of social reproduction - are profoundly political questions, in the sense that that capacity is unevenly distributed within society, and that such unevenness may be both systematic and intentional.

The "zero-hours" contract, for instance, can be a mechanism for limiting freedom precisely because one foundational aspect of rhythmization - the capacity to know whether one will have work on a given day - is undermined by the logic of just-in-time production. In the case of my informants, the possibility to rhythmize was undermined by excessively long shifts, by work patterns that undermined the capacity to plan, and by a quota system that meant that those who arrived late in the year to the job marked were forced to work off the books.

"I was an accountant", he reminded me. "I'd much rather go the legal route."

Take Adilet, for instance. Adilet was a former soldier and one-time accountant for the Batken branch of the Kyrgyzstan ministry of emergency situations, forced to leave for work in Russia after the costs of a funeral wake left him indebted beyond his capacity to repay. When I first met him in 2010 he was working as a brigade-leader for an informal construction team just outside Moscow, without an official work permit. He was one of several among my interlocutors who had found himself at that time in legal limbo, reliant upon 3-monthly trips to the Ukrainian border so as to make him appear a constant "new entrant" to the country, trapped by a quota system for work permits that made him unable to regularise his situation. In Moscow and Moscow region in 2010, the work permits issued by quota had run out in April, the very month in which Adilet had paid 15,000 roubles to a private firm that promised to mediate his access to a "clean" permit



through the official government quota. “I was an accountant”, he reminded me. “I’d much rather go the legal route.” Five years later, Adilet found his name on the notorious Russian “[black list](#)”: a vast digital register of non-citizens whose administrative violations meant that they were subject to prohibition on re-entry were they to attempt to leave the Russian Federation. He was still making an existence outside Moscow on unregulated construction sites, unable to return to Kyrgyzstan to see the two-storey adobe home in which five years of remittances had been invested.

Failing time

My interlocutors often celebrated their virtuosity in managing to “trick” time (Ringel 2016) – by creating fictive acts of re-entry that allowed them to delay the need to regularise their situation; by juggling two jobs that each worked on a 48-hour rota; or by switching in for a friend or relative who had left temporarily for a visit home. But they also drew my attention to, and often remarked upon, the logics of necessary failure in which they were enmeshed – the ways in which ‘failing time’ may be built into certain systems of value extraction and intrinsic to the modes of subordination that they enact.

Papers are time-sensitive. A paper is only as valid as its date stamp; an authorization only holds if it has been obtained within the permitted temporal window.

Attending to these labours of synchronization has implications for a broader comparative critique of the politics of irregularity in contemporary migration regimes. Migrant ir/regularity needs to be understood as constituted by a temporal political economy: a political economy of necessary asynchronicity. This is so in a double sense. First, the particular forms of labour vulnerability experienced by those whose presence the state deems “irregular” or unauthorized are constituted in part through particular forms of temporal indeterminacy and



temporal inequality: from the insecurity institutionalized in the zero-hours contract to the bodily demands of the night-shift; from the pressure to work “to the last client” to the uncertainty of whether a job will exist tomorrow; from the denial of holidays through hiring “off the books” to the gruelling endurance of month-long shifts on construction sites.

Second, ethnographic specificity shows how migrant “illegality” and deportability often emerge precisely from the gaps between different, asynchronous temporal orders. A failure to obtain a document, permission, stamp or signature within a specified temporal window can jeopardize the other documents that the first document authorizes, such as the migration card that enables the temporary residence registration that in turn authorizes the application for a work permit. Papers are systematically and hierarchically linked; and they are time-sensitive. A paper is only as valid as its date stamp; an authorization only holds if it has been obtained within the permitted temporal window. An expired document becomes, quite literally, not worth the paper it is written on.

In conditions of vulnerability, that capacity to find and maintain rhythm can be profoundly constrained.

As anthropologists we can benefit, I think, from a critical interrogation of the ways that precarity is constituted precisely through the abrogation, extension, usurpation and denial of individual and collective rhythms of life. Time is both a category of bureaucratic abstraction and a site of human desire, agency, and experimentation. We can find and look for rhythm in work, as in life, as Dobler suggests. We can trick and work it to our advantage. But in conditions of vulnerability, that capacity to find and maintain rhythm can be profoundly constrained. The current crisis reveals starkly how the violence of temporal disjuncture falls unequally, [magnifying inequalities](#) and differential vulnerability to epidemic threat. As I write, dozens of migrant workers find themselves [trapped for days](#) in the ‘neutral zone’ of Moscow airports, unable to re-enter Russia, nor to fly to home states that have closed their borders. Delhi’s thousands of migrant



workers were given just four hours to leave the city, with no privilege to maintain 'social distance' as they [sought to leave the city](#) on over-crowded buses. In such a situation, to understand what endures *when things don't hold*, as the organisers of this thematic section invite us to do, we might want to look, less to grand stories of hope-in adversity than to little acts of maintenance through which we seek to suture discordant temporal regimes, and the labours *in* time and labours *on* time on which these acts depend.

References

Dobler, Gregor. 2016. 'Work and rhythm' revisited: rhythm and experience in northern Namibian peasant work. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 22 (4): 864-883.

Ringel, Felix. 2016. Can Time Be Tricked? A Theoretical Introduction. *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 34 (1): 22-31.

Featured Image

"Out of Synch" by Dave Edens ([found on flickr](#), resized in square format; [CC BY-NC 2.0](#))