

# A NEW BOOK EXPOSES THE TYRANNY OF CLOCKS. Can A New Kind Of Clock Offer An Alternative?

By Jonathon Keats

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On August 15, 2015, seventy years after Korea overcame Japanese occupation, Pyongyang took back half an hour plundered by the invaders. By order of the Supreme People's Assembly, Pyongyang Time was set precisely thirty minutes behind the local time in Japan. Legally mandating that all clocks be adjusted, the measure situated North Korea in a time zone that no nation had used since colonial Japan imposed its own time standard on the occupied country in 1912.

When first announced, the move appeared to be another of Kim Jong-un's authoritarian idiosyncrasies. A fascinating new book by the historian David Rooney reveals that Kim may have been a shrewd student of history. Clocks are "tools to standardize the behavior of the masses," Rooney asserts in *About Time*. His "history of civilization in twelve clocks" is not only a welcome companion for visitors to the *Clockmaker's Museum* (where he serves on the management committee) and the *Royal Observatory Greenwich* (where he was formerly the curator of timekeeping), but also provides important perspective on devices that have regulated societies for the past several thousand years. Alerted to their many modes of influence, we have the potential to recalibrate their authority and even to reset their social function.

Ancient Romans were well aware of the coercive effect of clocks on daily life. Shortly after the first sundial was installed at the Forum, writers attacked it, damning “the man who first discovered the hours”. Characteristically for a culture fixated on cuisine, the greatest criticism concerned the timing of meals. “When I was a boy, my stomach was the only sundial,” complained the playwright Plautus. “But now what there is, isn’t eaten unless the sun says so.”

By the time the British Empire became a colonial power – aided by English chronometers that helped captains to reckon longitude at sea – dominion was practically synonymous with command over time. Time-signaling posts were built in ports along the coast of Africa as beacons for setting the the clocks on ships and as symbols of imperial control. Tower clocks outfitted with loud bells were erected to mark the conquest of Australia and India, sounding subjugation on the quarter hour. Lest the messaging be unclear, the British sought also to rearrange time zones to suit the interests of the Crown (foreshadowing the Japanese conquest of time in Korea).

The potent symbolism of clocks becomes more evident when you consider people’s reactions. As Rooney documents, Indian rebels opened fire on the clock tower in Bombay’s Crawford Market during a late 19th century riot. Even more dramatic were the attacks on royal observatories, where astronomers standardized time and distributed it throughout the realm. In 1894, for instance, an anarchist named Martial Bourdin nearly reached the observatory in Greenwich with a bomb that exploded prematurely. He died before he could be questioned, but the logic behind an attack on Greenwich Mean Time – and the enduring grudge against standardization – were clearly articulated by the anarchist George Woodcock half a century later. “The movement of the clock sets the tempo of men’s lives,” he wrote in *The Tyranny of the Clock*, echoing Plautus. “Complete liberty implies freedom from the tyranny of abstractions as well as from the rule of men.”

In his essay, Woodcock acknowledged that the abuse was not limited to governments, a point that Rooney addresses as well. Before Greenwich issued an official time signal, factories set their clocks to whatever time suited them, and forbade workers from wearing watches lest the owners’ authority be challenged. In some cases, the clocks were directly controlled by foremen, who would manually change the hour as desired. In other cases, the clocks were driven by the same waterwheel that powered the factory. When the water was low, slowing production, time moved more slowly, ensuring that workers stayed until the job was done.

The evil of “engine time” lays bare the power of clocks and those who control them, whether factory foremen or colonial governments. But engine time also serves as a reminder of something society has forgotten in the struggle for standardization: Clocks need not operate on the basis of a pendulum set by an astronomical observation, or by the oscillations of a cesium atom, which provides a basis for navigating ballistic missiles and coordinating multinational corporations today.

We can creatively calibrate our clocks according to other standards, such as the flow of rivers (as I have recently done in Alaska, working in collaboration with the [Anchorage Museum](#), and will also soon do in [Atlanta](#) and [Vienna](#)). These standards will not provide the predictability afforded by Greenwich Mean Time. On the contrary, the rate of river time is in constant flux. The unpredictability matches the world in which we live, which becomes ever less predictable with the changing climate. The time kept by the flow of rivers, or [the growth of trees](#), has a ground truth. Calibrating our lives to the natural world in all its chronodiversity can prevent us from further colonizing it with human hubris.

“People use clocks to kill us,” Rooney observes, “but clocks might save us, too, if we would only think about the power they wield.” With his book in hand, and an eye on the world that sustains us, we might just save ourselves.

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