

# 5.3 Time and Practice

Reading and Doing Ethnography  
Social Anthropology 314

Strategies are largely about timing

How do you know when to do  
something?

# West African day laborers in Naples

*"How do I prepare for going to the joint? I pray to God before leaving the room in the morning. Then I focus my attention on the cars, keeping an eye on any car that pulls up, to make sure that I am the first to go near that car."*

— **Hans Lucht**, *Darkness before Daybreak* (Ch. 1)

*The figures of the young West Africans stand out against the dawn light; they watch in silence—faces half hidden under hoods and caps—as the long snake of cars moves toward the city center, ready to make their move if a driver should leave the queue and pull over, looking for a set of hands to mix cement or pick tomatoes. When a car pulls over, everybody rushes helter-skelter to get inside. Fights break out regularly between the immigrants, as when somebody gets to the car first and begins discussing the job with the potential employer, then somebody else just flings open the car door, leaps inside, and shouts, “Vai, vai!” (Go, go!).*

*Because of his desperation, the person who reaches the car first rarely can take the time to discuss the work or the pay. “You just rush and get inside and move with the car, not knowing where the car is going or what kind of job you’re going to do.” Every car is studied carefully for details that might indicate an opening; most often this scrutinizing is done in complete silence, almost in resignation—nobody moves until the opportunity reveals itself.*

Talking about his tactics, Richard explained that even though he appeared at first glance to be disinterested, he was alert to any little detail that would reveal a possible employer. “What I am expecting to see is a car that is slowing down as it enters the roundabout, [suggesting] they’re coming from afar and they’ll be looking for someone, and you’ll see them watching us, maybe even doing like this [makes a small gesture with the hand]. Some cars also carry equipment, which tells you they’re going to work.” In the effort to find work, the immigrants are both colleagues and competitors; moving around together in Naples, they feel safe, but at the same time they fight each other to approach cars and land jobs, and usually the stronger or bolder ones push the weaker ones aside.

*Richard was prepared to do what he had to if someone beat him to an approaching car. “For instance, this morning a car had pulled over and a lot of the guys were standing around the car, discussing with the man. So I said to them: ‘This is my man, this is my master. I have been working with him for a long time.’ And before they knew it, I was inside the car, moving with the man. This is some of the things you have to do. That gave me the chance to get in there, and I went.”*



# The timing of boxing

*I wrap up my first month of intensive training with three frustrating rounds of sparring with Ashante. I can't find my timing or keep his attacks in check. My punches are wild, disorganized, hurried, and Ashante has no trouble getting through my guard to pepper my upper body with short hooks. He counters my every punch tit for tat, and nearly takes my head off with a combination flush in the face: bim-bam! My head flies back. I finish in a daze, half-groggy in the locker room, and leave the gym physically and emotionally drained.*

**— Loic Wacquant, *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*, 242**

# Some different sorts of moments

- >> father vs daughter beatboxing
- >> Midori Ito Conquers The Triple Axel
- >> The Boring lecture Survival
- >> Cape town traffic
- >> Things to do in Stellenbosch, South Africa

Senses of time are intensely  
variable

# Time and experience

- >> Social encounters have a standard structure of time.
- >> Yet they are not evenly experienced.
- >> Most encounters are polyrhythmic: containing several different rhythms.
- >> Most encounters have repetition (can there be rhythm without repetitions?)
- >> "Birth, growth, peak, then decline and end."

Conversations have a rhythm

Describe a moment when things  
happened faster than you could  
keep track

Describe a moment when time  
stopped

Describe some rhythms from your  
fieldsite