The beginning of social time:
An interview with myself☆

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Editor's Note: Donald Black was invited to contribute an essay for this special issue on "The Pure Sociology of Right and Wrong" – a subject he introduced in 1976 with his now classic book, *The Behavior of Law*. But instead of writing a conventional essay he chose to conduct an interview – with himself. The focus is his latest book, called *Moral Time* (2011).

The interview

Interviewer: First I must mention that I cannot recall ever having heard of a self-interview. Would you mind saying how you came to interview yourself about your new theory?
Donald Black: I decided to interview myself partly because I have never been entirely satisfied with the questions interviewers have asked me in the past (see, e.g., Black, 2002a; 2010b). I thought I might be able to ask better questions – and more difficult questions – if only because I am better acquainted with the nature and history of my work. Interviewing myself also allows me to go into as much detail as I wish. But of course others will have to judge for themselves whether this was a useful strategy.

Part I: the birth of the theory

Interviewer: That makes perfect sense to me. So let us begin with the beginning of your new theory: The main claim of *Moral Time* is that the fundamental cause of conflict about right and

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wrong is the movement of social time. Can you say something about the origin of this idea? Does it build on earlier work by anyone? Or did it come to you completely out of nowhere? It would be especially interesting to learn how you came to formulate your concept of social time.
DB: The origins of my ideas are often somewhat mysterious and even magical to me. In this case, however, I was able to consult my early journals and notes to see what I recorded about the theory's birth. And I was somewhat surprised by what I found.

First I should say that the concept of social time has rarely appeared in sociology, and the meaning of the concept has always been entirely unlike the one I introduce in *Moral Time*. On the other hand, my concept is to some extent consistent with ideas about time in fields such as philosophy and physics. Various philosophers and scientists have said that physical time is a kind of change, for example, such as the movement of the Earth around the sun or the movement of the moon around the Earth. Social time similarly refers to a kind of change: the fluctuation of social space. And because social time is the dynamic dimension of social space, my concept calls to mind mathematician and physicist Hermann Minkowski's idea that physical space and time are inseparable (later known as "spacetime").

One distinctive feature of social time, however, is its multidimensionality. Each dimension of social space has its own form of time: Relational time is the fluctuation of relational space while vertical time and cultural time are fluctuations of vertical space and cultural space. In everyday language, then, a movement of social time might be a change in intimacy, inequality, or diversity. Social time also moves both forward and backward. For instance, relational time might move toward more or less intimacy, possibly reversing itself repeatedly in a single relationship.

The theory of conflict in *Moral Time* is new as well. Much of my earlier work concerns the handling of conflict — clashes of right and wrong — but for many years I struggled with the question of why conflict occurs in the first place. As early as 1984, in fact, I wrote in my journal that the origin of conflict was the great puzzle I most wanted to solve.

Anyone who has thought seriously about conflict knows that it is a recurrent and inescapable feature of human life. Yet why is this the case? What causes it to occur? Eventually I began to wonder if the answer might have something to do with time, and started reading descriptions of what I sometimes called the "temporal structure of conflict." I thought that conflict might obey some kind of schedule, and that it might be useful to study its rise and fall over time. But my conception of time was entirely commonsensical and conventional — like the hours of a day or the days on a calendar — and I was making little progress.

Then one day in the spring of 1988 while reading a history of headhunting in a Filipino tribe (Rosaldo, 1980) I experienced a very exciting rush of thoughts that included the idea of social time. Something in the headhunting book apparently jogged my mind — possibly something about the events that preceded headhunting raids. I do not remember my precise sequence of thoughts, but I immediately knew that the concept of social time was the "great leap forward" for which I had been waiting. The next day I wrote in my journal that "suddenly I found myself in the grip of ideas that are truly going to revolutionize my work."

Two weeks later I had a second rush of related ideas, including a conception of deviant behavior as a "violation of social structure." I noted that rape "violates a structure of intimacy," for example, and that theft "violates a stratification system." I viewed those two big bursts of ideas, two weeks apart, as "breakthroughs," and marveled that "all of the major challenges" were "basically solved in a few minutes."

A key step occurred when I asked myself what might seem a strange if not ridiculous question: Why does rape cause conflict? I remember my tremendous sense of discovery when I

realized that the reason rape causes conflict is that it is a drastic increase of intimacy − which I quickly conceptualized as a radical and rapid movement of social time. I also saw that it is, in particular, a movement of relational time. My instincts instantly told me that other relational changes and changes in other dimensions of social space must cause conflict as well, which ignited still more ideas that would someday appear in *Moral Time*.

Because no one would normally ask why rape causes conflict, the question reminds me of the legend of Isaac Newton sitting under an apple tree and asking himself why an apple falls down instead of up (which is said to have inspired his theory of gravitation). Rape was, so to speak, my apple.

In any case, I realized that my new ideas about conflict and social time would dominate my life for years to come. I could hardly believe my good fortune, and I am still amazed by those discoveries.

Interviewer: I am amazed as well. Do you possibly have any thoughts about why those ideas came to you when they did − why such a burst of creativity occurred at that particular moment in your life? I ask because I wonder what your experience might reveal about the process of creativity itself.

DB: Creativity is a subject I have pondered nearly my whole adult life. And fortunately my early journals and notes contain some information about the conditions that spawned my new theory − and that might be relevant to a sociological theory of creativity.

I have long believed that social isolation is a major condition conducive to creativity, partly because I knew that many famously creative people (such as Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Ludwig Wittgenstein) were highly isolated during their most inventive periods (Black, 2000: 359). Many were culturally marginal as well − members of an ethnic minority or foreigners far from home. I have also thought that a simple and tranquil life is more conducive to creativity than a complicated and hectic life.

I was working alone in the woods of Virginia when the theory of moral time came to me, but my life was far from simple and tranquil. On the contrary: Both my personal life and my professional life were nothing short of tumultuous, largely dominated by one crisis after another. My personal life was in nearly constant upheaval − the details of which someone can someday read in my journals. Suffice it to say now that I was experiencing major movements of relational time.

While heading the University of Virginia's Department of Sociology I was also facing continuous conflict with the faculty − who strongly and aggressively resisted virtually all my efforts to improve the Department, such as my attempts to raise the standards used in the recruitment and promotion of faculty. Ultimately the senior faculty demanded my resignation, and asked the dean to remove me as head of the Department when I refused their request. The graduate students strongly supported me, however, and sent a letter to the dean expressing their fear that I would leave the University and urging him to do whatever was necessary to keep me. The University administration supported me as well − possibly because they had brought me from Harvard to Virginia in hopes that I might be able to raise the stature of the Department of Sociology.

Despite constant disruptions and distractions, I somehow managed to complete a final draft of *Sociological Justice* (1989). And only a few days later I experienced my first big rush of ideas about conflict and social time. The week after that I prepared a lecture (called "Structural models of conflict management") to present at the University of South Carolina − and even my flight was turbulent! The following week was at least as difficult as any that year (including a

health scare that proved unfounded). Yet almost immediately thereafter I had my second big rush of ideas about conflict and social time.

I might add that on both of those very creative days I recorded in my journal that I was extremely tired ("to a point of nausea"). Before the second burst I was so exhausted after a "sleepless night" that I literally could not stay awake during part of the afternoon. Some of my biggest and best ideas about conflict and social time thus took me completely by surprise under highly abnormal conditions.

Could it be that a tranquil life is not as crucial to creativity as I had originally thought? I have no doubt that social isolation is a major factor, but maybe a degree of tumult and turmoil can also play a role − possibly in combination with periods of peace and quiet. Maybe some movements of social time are conducive to creativity − a possibility I briefly suggest in *Moral Time* (2011: 186, note 179). Because conflicts are movements of social time, maybe they can contribute to creativity as well. If so, the conflicts and other movements of social time in my own life might partly explain the creation of my theory that the cause of conflict is the movement of social time.

Interviewer: That is all very interesting. However, I am curious to know why so much time passed before you published those early ideas in the form of a book. What took you so long?

DB: It is true that I lived with the theory quite a few years before the book finally appeared. Most of that time I even knew its title and the chapters it would contain. But other projects simply seemed more pressing, including *The Social Structure of Right and Wrong* (1998) and a series of writing obligations and opportunities that I felt I could not refuse. Among the results were such essays as "The epistemology of pure sociology" (1995), "Dreams of pure sociology" (2000), "The geometry of terrorism" (2004a), and "Violent structures" (2004b) − which consumed a lot of thought and time. Hopefully most if not all will eventually appear as a book I plan to call *The Death of the Person: An Introduction to Pure Sociology*. In effect, then, I was actually writing a second book when I was writing *Moral Time*. During the same period I published a new edition of *The Behavior of Law* (2010a).

I must add that it was not easy to remain silent about the new theory for so long − though my wife (Roberta Senechal de la Roche) continually discussed it with me from the beginning. All along I believed I possessed one of the most exciting theories in the history of sociology, but thought it should not be revealed until I could do so in a book. I was truly ecstatic about what the book would contain, and often celebrated my good luck to have had such a theory come to me. It was like secretly owning a gold mine or winning a lottery. I felt like a sociological billionaire. Yet I also had a sense of urgency about finishing the book while I was still alive.

Interviewer: I am certainly glad you managed to finish *Moral Time* and are here to talk about it!

As far as I know, the only earlier sociological idea at all similar to the theory of moral time is that social change causes conflict. To what extent would you say your theory resembles this idea?

DB: What do social scientists mean when they say that social change causes conflict? By "social change" they usually mean a large-scale transformation of society (such as industrialization or urbanization), and by "conflict" they usually mean some kind of collective struggle (such as between social classes or ethnic groups). My theory is both vastly more general and vastly more precise.

In my theory the fundamental cause of conflict is not merely large-scale social change but the movement of social time in any relationship at all, whether between spouses, lovers, friends, strangers, tribes, or nations. A movement of social time is any increase or decrease of intimacy, inequality, or diversity − which includes everything from a rape or trespass to the end of a marriage or weakening of a friendship, a robbery or other theft, any gain or loss of social

standing, a new idea or style of clothing, and any form of opposition to anything of a cultural nature. Such movements of social time explain the entire range of conflict about right and wrong, whether personal or collective, small or large, from bad manners to the beating of a wife, the burning of a witch, or the beginning of a war. So I hope anyone can see that the theory of moral time is far broader in scope and more powerful than the old idea that social change causes conflict.

Interviewer: Although social time is a completely new concept, it would seem to be a natural extension of pure sociology — especially its multidimensional conception of social space. Do you think anyone could have developed this concept without pure sociology?

DB: Social time directly and explicitly extends pure sociology's focus on social space — the geometry of the social universe — and is itself an entirely geometrical concept. Geometrical thinking is common in natural sciences such as physics and astronomy, but it is largely absent in sociology and other social sciences. So it seems unlikely that anyone unfamiliar with pure sociology would have proposed a similar concept of social time.

I believe one reason sociology has so rarely employed a geometrical style of thought is that it has always been so psychological. Most sociology should really be called "psychosociology" — a term I recently saw in a work of science fiction (Lem, 1968: 70). I also believe sociology's highly psychological nature has retarded its ability to explain conflict. How, for example, can psychology explain why rape causes conflict? Because it upsets the victim? Of course it upsets the victim! But being upset is merely a psychological reaction to the rape — how the victim thinks or feels. It is not the cause of this reaction. The cause of any conflict lies beyond anyone's mind. It is social. It requires a sociological explanation. And no sociology is more sociological than pure sociology.

Interviewer: Would you say that the concept of social time also advances pure sociology itself — apart from the understanding of conflict?

DB: Social time was a gigantic step for pure sociology. Before social time, the paradigm was stranded in social space. The focus was largely static: the geometry of the social universe. Now the social universe went into motion, social space began to fluctuate, expanding and contracting from one moment to the next. In turn, social time opens the door to causal explanation (which pertains to sequences of events) to complement the deductive (or "covering-law") explanation characteristic of the pure sociology of the past.

Social time also alters our conception of human behavior. Pure sociology had already removed the human from human behavior — a theoretical shift I once called "the death of the person" (Black, 1995: 870). It reconceived human behavior as the behavior of social life, such as the behavior of law, the behavior of ideas, and the behavior of art. Now social time reconceives something equally fundamental: the human act.

I had long sensed intuitively that a genuinely sociological sociology would not include people as such. Finally — when I first conceived of "the behavior of law" — I was able to eliminate — "kill" — the person at a theoretical level. But I had no such "evil intentions" concerning the human act. My conception of the human act was not distinctively sociological. It was merely commonsensical — something done by a person, such as the commission of a crime or the kissing of a spouse.

Soon after I conceived of social time, however, I realized that every human act is a movement of social time. Just as a rape is a movement of relational time, so is anything else that increases or decreases intimacy in any way. And just as a theft is a movement of vertical time, so is anything else that increases or decreases inequality in any way. With this new

concept of social time I had thus unintentionally killed something that had been lurking in the sociological darkness all along: the human act.

Yet in retrospect the death of the act was inevitable. Because pure sociology is the science of social life in the strictest sense, its theoretical vocabulary cannot and should not include anything about the human as such, whether a human thought, human feeling, or human act. I honestly marvel that sociology could ever have managed without a concept of social time. But often we do not know how much we need something (such as a computer or microwave oven) until we have it. Nor can we always know the possible uses of something new until we have it. Surely the concept of social time will have countless applications that we cannot presently imagine, and surely it will someday be included in the basic vocabulary of sociology and possibly other social sciences. The beginning of social time was truly a revolution within the revolution of pure sociology.

Interviewer: I fully share your enthusiasm about the concept of social time. Even so, I must admit that I am not entirely clear about what a philosopher might call the ontology of social time: the sense in which it exists. Is social time as real as physical time, such as the passing of days on a calendar or the ticking of a clock? Did you discover social time? Or did you invent it? How do we know it is really a form of time?

DB: Those are all excellent questions. Let me add another: Did physical time exist before anyone invented calendars and clocks? In one sense physical time did exist before anyone began to measure it. Years and months and hours passed. Yet in another sense physical time did not exist until someone conceptualized it and invented a way to measure it, such as a calendar based on the motion of the moon and Earth.

Physical time never told anyone how it should be defined or measured. Nothing in nature ever tells anyone anything. Someone must invent concepts and how to measure them. I therefore do not mind saying that I invented social time. But that does not mean social time is not real. The beginning of social time might even prove to be an example of what I call the invention of reality − one of the most exciting experiences in science. The newest and most important scientific concepts change what we regard as reality. They reveal and identify something previously unseen and unknown. In this sense, something new comes into being. So the creation of such a concept is not merely an invention. It is a form of discovery − a conceptual discovery.

I would add that whether social time exists is not a question of fact. It is not true or false − something we can prove or disprove. Instead, we judge a concept by its usefulness: Does it help us make sense of reality? When a concept improves our ability to describe reality, it becomes part of reality itself. For me, social time is already part of reality. Colleagues of mine have also told me that the concept of social time has allowed them to see the movements of social time in their own lives − including those that cause conflicts. If enough people have similar experiences, social time will eventually become part of reality − as real as anything else, including any other form of time.

Part II: the old and the new theory

Interviewer: Can you say anything more about the relationship between the theory of moral time and your earlier theoretical work? Does the new theory answer new questions? Or does it answer old questions in a new way? Does it possibly even displace some of your earlier theoretical ideas in the way that, say, Einstein's theory of gravitation displaced Newton's theory of gravitation?

DB: I would answer yes to all your questions. It should be obvious that the new theory answers new questions, such as why conflict occurs and why morality prohibits what it prohibits. But the relationship between the new theory and my earlier theory might not be so obvious.

Much of my past theoretical work predicts and explains the handling of conflict with its location and direction in social space – or social geometry. It specifies how the handling of conflict depends on who does what to whom, and who else becomes involved. One of my earliest and best-known ideas about the geometry of law was that (within a society) *law varies directly with relational distance* (see Black, 2010a: 40–46). This principle correctly predicts, for example, that a rape between people separated by more relational distance (such as strangers) will attract more law (such as more punishment) than a rape between closer people (such as spouses or friends) (see Black, 2011: 159, note 15). The same principle applies to legal cases of all kinds – at all stages of the legal process and in all societies.

Occasionally, however, people have asked me *why* law varies directly with relational distance, and more generally why law varies with its social geometry. And all I could say was that we can always ask what explains any scientific principle, and that in any case an answer would require a new theory. The theory of the geometry of law always seemed to me an important discovery in itself – even the most important discovery in the history of legal scholarship. So honestly I saw no reason to worry about how we might explain the geometry of law itself. I thought this was the end of the story: Law is not universal. It varies with its social geometry. Period.

Then the theory of moral time changed everything. I soon discovered that the new theory predicts at least some of the same facts predicted by the earlier theory – and explains them in an entirely new way. For instance, the new theory predicts that a stranger rape will attract more law than a closer rape such as a spousal rape – not merely because a stranger rape spans a greater distance in relational space, but because a stranger rape is sociologically different – drastically different – from a closer rape: A stranger rape is a greater movement of relational time than a closer rape. It is a huge increase in intimacy (from none at all to sexual intercourse), while a closer rape is a smaller increase of intimacy (especially if sexual intercourse had previously occurred between the parties). Here the new theory explains the earlier theory.

Yet even if the new theory were able to predict and explain all the facts the earlier theory predicts and explains, the earlier theory would not necessarily become obsolete. The relationship between the two might instead resemble the relationship between Einstein's and Newton's theories of gravitation: Although Einstein's theory predicts all the facts that Newton's theory predicts and more, Newton's theory remains valuable because it is a simpler and easier way to make many predictions about gravitation. My earlier theory might similarly be a simpler and easier way to predict at least some of the same facts my new theory predicts. If so, the earlier theory is likely to remain useful.

Interviewer: Speaking of Newton, Randall Collins says on the cover of *Moral Time* that "Reading Donald Black is like reading Isaac Newton doing sociology." This must be very pleasing to you. But do you agree with him? Do you actually think you are the Newton of sociology?

DB: Of course it is pleasing to be mentioned in the same sentence with Newton – especially by such an eminent sociologist. I must also confess that back when I was writing *The Behavior of Law*, I fantasized that it would be for the sociology of law (and maybe sociology in general) what Newton's *Principia Mathematica* had been for physics and astronomy. I even considered

calling the book *Principia Juridica*!

Eventually, however, I realized my ideas might better be compared to Einstein's than to Newton's. One reason is that Newton's conceptions of physical space and time were entirely conventional, while Einstein's were not. Whereas Newton considered physical space to be mere emptiness, for example, Einstein introduced a radically new conception of physical space as a variable that differs in shape from one location to another. My conceptions of social space and time are new as well. And like much of Einstein's thinking, my ideas about these subjects are highly geometrical.

I would also note that Newton is celebrated mainly for his explanations of known facts (such as the ocean tides and the moon's orbit around the Earth), while Einstein sometimes predicted previously unknown facts (such as the slowing of time and shrinking of objects at higher speeds). My theoretical work likewise predicts previously unknown facts (such as that law varies with its social geometry and the movement of social time). A successful prediction of a previously unknown fact (which I call a theoretical discovery) is a rare achievement in the natural sciences, and I am not even aware of any other predictions of this kind in sociology or other social sciences (see Black, 2002b).

Part III: the truth of the theory

Interviewer: The theory of moral time has many virtues, including its extremely high degree of generality, simplicity, and originality. Yet some might wonder how to judge whether it is true. Is it testable? Or, in the language of the philosopher Karl Popper, is it falsifiable — capable of being proven wrong?

DB: The theory is eminently testable. Before I elaborate, however, I want to say a few words about its explanatory power. Any scientific theory must first of all explain something — order facts about something, make sense of something. How well, then, does my theory explain conflict?

The theory of moral time is designed to explain so much that some might find it hard to believe that such a theory is even possible. Its purpose is to explain all clashes of right and wrong in all relationships in all societies, past and present. Notice, too, that the theory explains both social control and deviant behavior — which sociologists have always thought were complete opposites that required completely different theories.

Consider the social control of deviant behavior. Why does deviant behavior attract social control? In other words, why is deviant behavior deviant? Why is it regarded as wrong, bad, or otherwise undesirable? Sociologists have never been able to specify how deviant behavior differs from other behavior. All they could say is that deviant behavior is deviant because it is labeled as deviant or because it violates a rule. But my theory explains *why* some behavior is labeled as deviant and why rules prohibit *what* they prohibit: Every form of deviant behavior is a movement of social time, and greater and faster movements of social time attract more social control. Rules prohibit these movements of social time.

For example, deviant sexual behavior such as rape, incest, or indecent exposure is a movement of relational time. All are cases of what I call overintimacy — too much intimacy. The same is true of trespassing, invasions of privacy, and violations of etiquette such as staring at a stranger or talking too much about oneself. Divorce and other forms of social separation are movements of relational time in the opposite direction (underintimacy). Disrespect toward an equal and rebellion against a superior are movements of vertical time (overstratification and

understratification). Heresy and apostasy are movements of cultural time (overdiversity and underdiversity). And so on.

In my everyday life I often use the theory to explain why particular kinds of human behavior are regarded as deviant. Not long ago, for instance, a graduate student told me of his interest in addiction, such as drug addiction, alcohol addiction, or an addiction to gambling or pornography — which led me to wonder why addiction is deviant. Why does it cause conflict? I soon realized that any addiction is too much closeness to something — another form of overintimacy. "Getting hooked" on a drug or anything else is thus a movement of relational time — a considerable increase of closeness to the object of the addiction. When the addiction reduces the addict's closeness to other people such as family members and friends, it is also a form of underintimacy. When the addiction results in financial problems or a decline in performance at work or elsewhere, it includes a movement of vertical time I call overstratification. Still another common element of addiction is a loss of self-control, a form of understratification (suggested by James Tucker). For any or all of these reasons many addicts come to dislike their own behavior and seek a therapist or someone else to help them end their addiction.

Look at any kind of deviant behavior, and you should be able to see that it consists of one or more movements of social time. All deviant behavior is a deviation of social space from its normal shape.

Interviewer: You mentioned that your theory explains deviant behavior as well as social control. Can you elaborate how it would explain a particular act of violence, such as a killing or beating?

DB: I should first note that not all violence is deviant behavior. Some is social control (such as when it is a form of self-defense). And some is both social control and deviant behavior at once (such as when violence against an unfaithful spouse is a crime) (see Black, 1983). But whether violence is deviant behavior, social control, or both at once, my theory implies that the cause will be one or more movements of social time. It might be a movement of relational time (such as the unfaithfulness of a spouse or the termination of a close relationship), vertical time (such as a display of disrespect or a rebellion against someone's authority), or anything else that alters or threatens to alter the social geometry of any relationship. No other theory can so readily and precisely explain a particular killing, beating, fight, or other case of violence.

The theory also explains why some violence causes more conflict than other violence. For instance, I once found it difficult to explain why (in the United States and other Western societies) violence by men against women attracts more social control (such as punishment) than violence by men against men, or women against women, or women against men (see, e.g., Lundsgaarde, 1977: 224). However, my new theory has allowed me to see that because violence by a man against a woman is typically against a physically weaker and more vulnerable party, it is a form of overstratification akin to any other "abuse of power" involving violence against a physically weaker or more vulnerable party, such as the beating of a child ("child abuse"), an elderly person ("elder abuse"), a peer ("bullying"), or a defenseless party by a police officer ("police brutality") or soldier (an "atrocity" or "war crime").

To assess whether I have correctly identified the cause of a conflict such as a case of violence, I sometimes do a thought experiment to determine whether a conflict would have occurred *without* a particular movement of social time. Would a husband have killed his wife if she had *not* left him for another man (a form of underintimacy)? Would a fight have started if one man had *not* insulted another (a form of overstratification)? Would the Holocaust have occurred if the European Jews had *not* achieved greater economic and other success than most Christian Europeans (another form of overstratification)?

The theory's ability to explain conflict reminds me of how Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection can explain virtually any characteristic of an animal or plant with its contribution to the organism's survival. Why do giraffes have long necks? So they can eat leaves other animals cannot reach. Why are polar bears white? So they can blend into their environment and better kill their prey. Although Darwin's theory can be tested experimentally, its primary value (and the reason it became one of the most celebrated theories in the history of science) is surely its ability to explain so many characteristics of plants and animals throughout the world and across history. I believe my theory has a similar power to explain conflict.

Interviewer: I fully appreciate the power of your theory to explain so many kinds of conflict so effectively. But can we now go back to the question about how the theory might be tested?

DB: To be testable a theory must predict something observable that might conceivably contradict the theory and prove it wrong. For instance, Newton's theory of gravitation predicts that closer objects are more likely than more distant objects to fall toward Earth, and anything that behaves otherwise would contradict the theory and challenge its validity.

Perhaps the most obvious prediction of the theory of moral time is that greater and faster movements of social time will cause more conflict than smaller and slower movements of social time. That is why we can predict that a stranger rape will cause more conflict — such as a call to the police or a greater punishment — than the rape of someone closer, such as a spouse or friend. In a recent test of the theory using the same logic, Angela Barlow examined whether "sexual harassment" (such as an intimate touch or comment) causes more conflict when it occurs in a more distant relationship — and found that it does (2013).

Another test of the theory could examine whether particular relationships or groups that experience greater and faster movements of social time have more and greater conflicts. Still another test could examine a sample of conflicts (such as interpersonal or interethnic conflicts) to determine whether they occurred after movements of social time, and whether greater and faster movements of social time caused greater conflicts.

Although some might object that sampling conflicts would fail to identify any movements of social time that did *not* cause a conflict (see, e.g., Geddes, 1990), my view is that such a test would still be valuable. To test whether smoking causes lung cancer, for example, would it not be useful to know how many lung cancer victims were smokers? Would a finding that few victims were smokers not count as evidence against the theory? Of course it would. If so, a finding that most (if not all) were smokers should count as evidence in favor of the theory. Likewise, a finding that many conflicts do *not* occur after movements of social time would count as evidence against the theory of moral time, and a finding that most (if not all) conflicts *do* occur after movements of social time should count as evidence in favor of the theory. And if greater conflicts occur after greater and faster movements of social time, that should count as evidence in favor of the theory as well. Whatever can falsify a theory can also support it.

Part IV: applications of the theory

Interviewer: The theory in *Moral Time* explains an almost unbelievable range of human behavior, including virtually if not literally every kind of human conflict and every element of human morality. The last chapter even contains a theory of moral evolution across the history of human societies. But some readers might want to know more about how *Moral Time* is relevant to their own special concerns. Why, for example, might criminologists want to read your book?

DB: The theory of moral time has numerous applications to the understanding of crime, including a completely new conception of crime itself. Criminologists of the past could only say, in effect, that crime is crime: whatever is labeled crime or whatever violates the criminal law. In *Moral Time*, however, I suggest that every crime is a movement of social time, and that greater and faster movements of social time are more serious crimes. Sex-related crimes are movements of relational time, for instance, and various forms of theft are movements of vertical time.

The theory also introduces a completely new explanation of crime — the central problem in criminology. Criminologists have developed many theories of crime, such as that crime results from an absence of opportunity or social bonds, or from the presence of inequality or a criminal subculture. Yet virtually all their theories have a major shortcoming: They try to explain crime with something static (such as an absence of opportunity or the presence of inequality). But nothing static can cause a crime or anything else. The cause must be something dynamic that happens before the crime and causes it to occur.

And the heart of my theory of conflict — including crime — is something dynamic: the movement of social time. The cause of a crime might be a movement of relational time such as an act of adultery or the loss of a close relationship, a movement of vertical time such as the loss of a job or being disrespected by peer, or another movement or combination of movements of social time. As I mentioned earlier, these are the kinds of events that cause killings and other violence. They are the kinds of events that cause other crimes as well.

Note also that the cause of a particular crime might have no connection whatsoever to the victim of the crime. A man who suffers a reversal of fortune (such as the loss of a lover or job) might victimize a total stranger who had nothing to do with his loss. Nor does the movement of social time necessarily occur immediately before the crime it causes. Although exactly what caused a particular crime might sometimes be difficult or impossible to identify, the theory at least tells us what, in principle, we should expect to find: one or more movements of social time that occurred before the crime itself.

But criminologists seldom try to explain particular crimes. Typically they try to explain only rates of crime, such as why poor people commit more crime or why some communities have higher rates of crime. Yet my theory provides a completely new way to explain differences in crime rates as well: Higher rates of crime should be found in faster social time zones — wherever movements of social time are greater and more frequent. Why, for example, do younger men commit more crime than older men? Because younger men experience greater and more frequent fluctuations in their relationships with other people and in their social standing, economic and otherwise. Why do men commit more crime than women? Because they too live in faster social time zones.

The same applies to differences in crime rates across social classes and ethnicities or from one place or time to another. For instance, low-income African Americans in urban areas have higher crime rates because they live in faster social time zones. Urban areas have higher crime rates because they are faster social time zones than rural or suburban areas. And societies with higher crime rates (such as modern South Africa and Brazil) are faster social time zones than societies with lower crime rates (such as modern Sweden or Switzerland).

Crime feeds on itself as well: Because every crime is a movement of social time, every crime increases the speed of every social time zone, increasing the likelihood of still more crime.

Interviewer: Very interesting. Can you also say why legal sociologists or others who study legal behavior might want to read your book?

DB: Moral Time introduces a completely new way to explain the handling of legal cases. Whereas my earlier theoretical work explains variation in the handling of legal cases with their social geometry, my new theory explains this variation with the movement of social time from one case to the next.

Greater and faster movements of social time attract more legal attention, such as more calls to the police, more lawsuits, and more punishment. Killings are thus greater movements of social time than lesser injuries, so killings attract more legal severity. And some killings are greater movements of social time than others. Compare the killing of a business owner with a wife and children to the killing of a homeless drug addict with no family or other responsibilities. Because the business owner's killing has more social consequences for more people, it attracts more legal attention, including more punishment.

A noteworthy historical detail, incidentally, is that the written law of traditional Tibet required killers to pay compensation to anyone who suffered a loss from their killing, such as the victim's spouse, children, employer, and landlord (French, 1995: 303—304). Although modern law does not explicitly recognize indirect victimization of this kind, it too handles such greater movements of social time more severely.

Punishment and other legal remedies are also movements of social time that alter the offender's life to a greater or lesser degree and that might alter the lives of others as well. A prison sentence often effectively punishes more people than the offender, for example, including the offender's family and anyone else who suffers a loss from the offender's removal from the community.

Any application of law transforms and possibly irreversibly ruptures social space. A mere accusation of legal wrongdoing reshapes the social world of the accused party, especially someone at a higher social elevation with more to lose. Not long ago, for instance, a housekeeper in a New York City hotel made an accusation of rape against a highly prominent guest — Dominique Strauss-Kahn, director of the International Monetary Fund and a leading candidate for the presidency of France. Many undoubtedly viewed his dramatic arrest on an airplane and incarceration (without bail) as an admirable example of equality before the law. From the beginning Strauss-Kahn insisted on his innocence, but he still felt it necessary to resign his directorship of the IMF while awaiting trial in jail. When the prosecutor eventually learned that the accuser had lied about various matters relating to the alleged rape and apparently was hoping for financial gain from her accusation, he dropped the charges and released Strauss-Kahn from jail. Yet Strauss-Kahn had already suffered enormous social losses, possibly including the presidency of France — far greater movements of social time than would have occurred if someone of lesser standing had been accused of the same crime.

Interviewer: One important implication of your earlier work (such as *The Behavior of Law*) is that equality before the law does not really exist. To most people this would mean that law is unjust. Does your new theory also say that law is unjust?

DB: First I must note that I have never said that law is unjust. In my role as a sociologist, I have always avoided making value judgments about my subjects of study. Even so, I fully understand why some might think my earlier work says that law is unjust.

No standard of justice in modern jurisprudence is more fundamental than the ideal of equality before the law, which means that all cases that are the same according to the written law — formally the same — should receive the same treatment. Law should be universal: the same for everyone. Yet if law varies with the social geometry of the cases — the central claim of my earlier work — equality before the law does not describe the reality of law. Because cases

with different social characteristics have different law, different people have different law. And to virtually anyone this means that law is unjust.

But now my new theory throws a new light on equality before the law as a standard of justice: Different movements of social time attract different amounts of law – even when the cases are formally identical. Because a stranger rape is a greater movement of social time than a formally identical spousal or other more intimate rape, for example, a stranger rape attracts more legal attention, such as more punishment. Formally identical applications of law might also entail different movements of social time, illustrated by my earlier comparison of a business owner's imprisonment to a homeless person's imprisonment.

In effect, then, the ideal of formal equality before the law requires legal officials to handle sociologically different cases in the same fashion – to be not only unsociological, but anti-sociological. Formal equality before the law might therefore arguably be considered a form of injustice: sociological injustice.

A new sociological jurisprudence could conceivably introduce a new ideal of *sociological* equality before the law that would require legislators and judges to define greater and faster movements of social time as more serious. It could also require them to define applications of law, such as sentences to prison, as more severe when they entail greater movements of social time.

Yet modern justice is already highly sociological. Legal officials already to a large extent handle different movements of social time in a different fashion. So a new ideal of sociological equality before the law would mainly make explicit what is already implicit but unrecognized. Law would thus become openly sociological instead of claiming to be otherwise.

A sociological understanding of right and wrong would have similar implications for morality of every kind. Justice is always a matter of social time. Any morality that ignores the movement of social time is arguably incomplete and obsolete.

Interviewer: I am sure many will find your idea of equality before the law as a form of injustice to be somewhat surprising – if not shocking. But perhaps this would be a good place to end the interview. So let me thank you very much for agreeing to answer my questions.

DB: The pleasure was entirely mine.

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