

Time, Change and Presence

“And it’s too late (too late), too late to change the time.

But it’s not too late to change your mind,”

sings a young and black edition of Michael Jackson together with the rest of The Jackson 5. Something makes me ask: Are our thoughts about time about to change?

In the text, “Social Time: The Heartbeat of Culture,” professor of psychology Robert Levine at California State University at Fresno shares interesting experiences and research about time. From reading the text we learn that watches in Brazil could have been produced without a minute hand (they never show the same time and no-one cares anyway); post-office clerks on the countryside of Indonesia might be more interested in discussing relatives in America than actually selling stamps; and there seems to be a very strong relationship between the accuracy of clock time, walking speed of pedestrians and postal efficiency across different countries. Reading the text really opened my eyes to how much we actually adjust to each other’s behavior, without thinking about it. We are paced by the other people in our environment, and we take that pace for being the natural speed of life.

Though it is only expressed explicitly in this particular text, Levine outlines it in clear words in his book *A Geography of Time*, “People are prone to move faster in places with vital economies, a high degree of industrialization, larger populations, cooler climates, and a cultural orientation toward individualism” (Levine 9). Back in 1997, when Levine wrote this, I was a dutiful, directed pupil in the seventh grade of elementary school. During the decade and a half since then, the economic situation, size of population and climate in Norway haven’t changed much. Thanks to the oil, we still have a strong economy; we haven’t had a baby boom since the years after the Second World War, so we are still a sparsely populated country; and despite global warming, it is still cold. What has changed, though, is the size and number of cellphones and computers, and thereby the way we communicate and make appointments.

Let's look at an example. If I wanted to meet my classmates in 7A for playing soccer in the autumn darkness, I mainly had two choices. I either had to make a verbal appointment during the school day, or organize a round of calls to those in the class who were interested in soccer. The latter alternative included digging in the drawer of the telephone table to find the frayed class list with telephone numbers. The answers I received were either of the form, "Yes, that is cool!", "No, I'm sorry, I have to finish my homework" or eventually no voice in the other end. – Not to forget the shy voice of a cute little sister telling me her big brother was not at home. In any circumstance, I got the answer instantly, and when we had agreed about where and when to meet, there was no other option than to keep that time and place. Otherwise, someone would be left alone. Automatically, by the way we made our appointments, some kind of time structure was created. I worked undisturbed and concentrated on my homework, until I had to run.

What is it like in these days? Luckily, I still have friends that remain in such a good shape, that they find playing soccer a nice way to spend their evening. Well, in some cases, it might also be the other direction; they find soccer a nice way to maintain in decent shape. Anyway, I write a funny worded text message containing a proposed time and place and send it to all the possible candidates I have stored in my phone memory. As I get back to my studying or whatever I was up to, I start waiting for answers. One by one they are coming in. "Good initiative! I have to finish an article on the... but maybe I will get time", "I'm not sure, I have a half way appointment with...", "I have to ... , so what if rather we met...", "Thanks,.. but I don't know if I feel that good. Hopefully I get better. I will let you know!" I leave my desk, after having done three pages of reading progress during the last two hours, to collect my soccer equipment. As I'm about to tie my shoelaces, the fourth suggestion about where to meet makes my phone vibrate, and I shake my head. A quarter past the proposed time, there are three of us out of an estimate of nine guys at the field. As we are about to start some easy warm up with some one-touch play, I lose my touch distracted from the familiar ringing sound of my cellphone. I dig it out of my bag and read: "I'm there in 5 min". The American author, Henry Thoreau, once wrote, "*If a man does not keep pace with his*

companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer.” In my own words, I might put it like this: If a man does not keep pace with himself, perhaps it is because he hears too many different beeps.

“What kind of rule is this? The more timesaving machinery there is, the more pressed a person is for time,” writes Sebastian De Grazia in his book *Of Time, Work and Leisure*. Anthropologist Marvin Harris follows up with observing that modern appliances are “labor-saving devices that don’t save work”. (Levine 12, 13) Today, we have more crafts than ever before to manage and organize our time. In my opinion, though, the time-saving devices don’t save time, rather they steal time. The way I see it, we are in our society soon reaching the point of spending more time and mind power on organizing towards “personal time and energy optimization”, than actually acting. That means we use more time trying to save time, than we actually save. It is like spending more money on a financial advisor, than he actually helps you save or generate. The bottom line is that we get stressed, because we don’t get done what we should, but as this behavior gradually is becoming more and more normal, it is getting more and more difficult to notice it. We all adapt to it, and thereby follow self-reinforcing consequences.

In my opinion, the root of this behavior is that we are beginning to be afraid of waiting. Waiting is being confused with wasted time, and “speed is frequently confused with progress,” as Levine writes. We are getting so used to something having to happen all the time. The thought “time is money,” has become such a strong part of our mindsets, so we always make sure that we do something in between. However, I think waiting is healthy. Waiting creates excitement, and when we show up with excitement we are more present. The goal in my opinion is to live a life with as much presence as possible. If we are able to find peace in everyday life’s pace; that is beautiful.

New technology has made major changes to how we are able to manage our time. In the search for flow, we reschedule and change our appointments, activities and duties. Yet, we often end up showing up too late and have a chronic feeling of being in a hurry. But, it’s not too late to change our minds; whether we choose it to be about the order of upcoming tasks, or the way we want to live our lives. In the bigger perspective;

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no-one knows what tomorrow will bring. The only thing we have for sure is the moment. The best way to take care of it might be to just show up, without thinking about whether we should rearrange our next move or not.

Post thought:

Perhaps it was easier to be a dutiful and effective seventh grade pupil in 1997? At least it was exiting to stand behind the newsstand in the clear, cold winter air, waiting for her. Would she show up or not? All I could look for was her white jacket. And the only sound I was interested in was easy steps in the crunchy snow.

Works Cited

Levine, Robert. *A Geography of time*. BasicBooks, 1997