

ALL TIME
A Question of Power and Freedom
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FOREWORD

Why do we always feel like there aren't enough hours in the day? Can we escape this feeling by managing our time and optimising our day-to-day lives? Is being adept at dealing with time simply another required skill these days?

Social progress is often measured by increasing prosperity and technological innovation, and justice explained as a question of access to power and money. Yet these are only a few of the many dimensions that shape a society and affect our everyday lives. In this book, I set out to show that time is a key factor here. We need to take a closer look at how it influences us – both in terms of its social and individual impact – and use that to develop a vision of a new approach to time, because the reality is that having too little time isn't an individual problem, it's a societal one.

Our current approach to time structures our lives, but we don't stop to consider whether this default setting is a good fit for everybody. In fact, it isn't: it leads to inequalities, maintaining and reinforcing them. Our ability to do with our lives as we see fit is also restricted by the fact that we don't all have the same degree of freedom to decide how we spend our time. In a society where time is considered a financial asset, many people find their own needs take a back seat. A culture that works this way will remain one-dimensional, and often it can make people unhappy or even affect their health. How would we spend our time if we were free to choose? And what would change if we could?

The distribution of time – as well as how it can be used, how its value is measured and how it is experienced – is therefore a question of justice. People are 'time-poor' and 'time-affluent' to differing extents, and that's no accident: it is the result of social power structures. At the heart of what we might call a politics of time, or perhaps a vision of a new approach to time, is not how individual people spend it or how they can get more out of it; it is how time gives our society direction. Yet the attitude that currently prevails in both political and social discourse is that individual effort determines the way our lives unfold. This must be overcome.

We can only create more time for everybody if we consider society as a whole. Time equality isn't a luxury, it's a question of democratic rights: if only a handful of people have time for politics, then our culture around time leads inevitably to exclusion and discrimination. Children and adults who spend years in refugee camps, who wait months for their asylum applications to be processed before they can start building a new home for themselves, do not have the same access to time as people who are born into and inhabit a stable environment. Our relationship with time is always a question of power.

In order to develop a new approach to time, we need to do more than simply optimise how we allocate it. To generate ideas about how we want to live, we need to understand how time shapes us and the way we live together as a society: we need to know what role is played by our roots, exactly where we are situated in the present, and where our future seems to be leading us. We need to question the assumptions we have long taken for granted, mapping out new and fairer concepts of time. Do people really have to reach a certain age in order to be allowed a say in things that affect them? Will we always put paid

work at the centre of our lives, or can we change that? Why is the bulk of our leisure time weighted towards the final stage of our lives? Why do social groups tend to be segregated by age? What responsibility do people in the here and now owe to future generations?

We need a positive and political conception of time – we need to get away from the notion that we never have enough of it and that our time doesn't belong to us. Ultimately, we need to realise that time does not dictate the course of human life; rather, we can use it to shape how we want to live. We need to understand that it is produced through human interaction, so if we pull together more closely there will be more of it. A new way of thinking about time will offer greater freedom for all, take a broader view of life than ever before, and treat other people's time with respect – including that of coming generations.

A new understanding of time as a political issue may also appeal to people who have previously felt less represented by progressive politics, because it doesn't speak to their concrete, day-to-day problems. I'm thinking of people for whom significant amounts of money and power are either out of reach or simply less important. Not everybody wants to build a career, gain in influence or become rich. If we want to redress the unfairness of our current approach to time and create a better foundation for a more resource-efficient economy, we have to keep translating our overarching goals into issues that are meaningful to people on a more granular, everyday level.

Time equality has the potential to rapidly improve the lives of many people, making our society freer, more cohesive and more resilient in the face of a crisis. It lays the groundwork for a more environmentally sustainable politics. Time is a gift, but it's also a responsibility. This new way of thinking about time is not merely a utopian dream, because so many people have put thought into how it might actually be implemented. We are now able to start building a world in which all of us have access to the time we need.

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Why There Are Never Enough Hours in the Day

'A 24/7 environment has the semblance of a social world, but it is actually a nonsocial model of machinic performance and a suspension of living that does not disclose the human cost required to sustain its effectiveness.' – Jonathan Crary¹

Feeling Short on Time

Yet again, I can't squeeze everything I want to get done into the time available. I have an image in my head of the ideal day, but it never works out like that. Even if I plan my week meticulously, by the time evening rolls around there's always something I've left out: something I wanted to get done or some box I had to tick; something that would have been nice to do, something on my wish list. There literally aren't enough hours in the day.

The sociologist Jenny Shaw connects our subjective perception of the shortness of time with objectively quantifiable changes in our everyday lives, which have spurred us to demand more and more out of our time: 'The greater choice of when to do things, like work, eat or shop, increases the intention to do more overall.'² We originally created these additional options to make our everyday lives more convenient. In many cities, supermarkets don't close until late, so that people coming home from work at ten p.m. can buy milk for their morning coffee. Many businesses these days also have an online presence, and will deliver even after the brick-and-mortar shop is closed. There is an enormous array

¹ Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. Verso, 2013, p. 9.

² Jenny Shaw, 'Feeling A List Coming On': Gender and the Pace of Life, *Time & Society*, 7, 2–3, 1998, p. 384.

of options for eating out late at night, with some restaurants offering round-the-clock dining. We are increasingly able to work from anywhere at any time, because our jobs are 'remote' and 'flexible'. Some gyms and fitness studios are even open twenty-four hours a day, and the vast range of video training options available means that it doesn't matter when work begins or ends: all we have to do is get up early enough or stay up late enough, and we can exercise every day.

We are more able than ever to satisfy our desires, but also more subject to the expectations of others. It is becoming less and less credible to excuse ourselves from obligations by saying that we aren't around or don't have the time. Setting geographical and temporal limits on our activities is perceived as a personal decision rather than something unavoidable. Exhaustion can be combated. There are fewer and fewer external restrictions on our activities, which are increasingly a function of our ambition and willingness to push past our own limits. We are supposed to be 24/7 people.

Childhood is a place where time is initially less important. You're swimming in it as though in a sea: it seems endless, and you can simply drift. You haven't yet learned to tell the difference between five minutes and five hours, between today and tomorrow and the distant future. But as you get older, the sea shrinks to a swimming pool, separated into lanes that prescribe distance and direction. Eventually, time starts to feel like a bathtub: we barely fit anymore, the water's gone cold, and what's left of it is rapidly draining away. The experience of time being 'short' is something that education researcher Ingrid Westlund refers to as the final stage in socialising a child's perception of time. Children are taught eight lessons, beginning with how to read a clock face, that gradually turn them into what Westlund calls 'time adults'.³ In her view, the moment children are able to perceive their own time as limited and express the wish to have more of it, they have attained an adult perception of time.⁴

Children, in other words, only develop an adult concept of time once they perceive a lack of it. In her research paper, Westlund reports finding the desire for more time 'in order to get more done' in children as young as twelve – albeit only in girls.⁵ The fact that people experience time as short instead of simply reading it from a clock tells us that it is more than just a means of orientating ourselves: we associate it with feelings; it triggers emotions in us. Time pressure can cause immense stress. Accomplishing something more quickly than expected is very satisfying, while thinking about having some time to ourselves on the weekend can reassure and relax us.

The moment that time is first perceived as short can be aptly described as the moment we arrive in reality. Children learn that there is a limit to the possibilities time affords them, just as in many other areas of their lives they come to realise that not everything that is theoretically possible or that they want will actually happen. 'Time in itself is not scarce,' wrote Niklas Luhmann. 'The impression of scarcity only arises when expectation places excessive demands on experience.'⁶ In other words, people feel pressed for time when their expectations are not within the bounds of what is feasible. They want too much. Is the human urge to maximise the main reason why we perceive time as scarce? Is adjusting our expectations the key to rectifying this?

All our available time is taken up by childhood dreams and fulfilling our desires, until it's no longer enough. Our imaginations allow us to go beyond the limits of what we have. This would be the charitable, poetic view of time scarcity. If there was enough time in

³ Westlund, Ingrid: 'Kinderzeiten. Zeitdisziplin und Nonstop-Gesellschaft aus Sicht der Kinder', in: Adam, Barbara/Geißler, Karlheinz A. Geißler/Held, Martin Held (eds.): *Die Nonstop-Gesellschaft und ihr Preis*, Stuttgart/Leipzig 1998, pp. 93–106.

⁴ Ibid., p. 102.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Geyer, Christian/Luhmann, Niklas: *Die Knappheit der Zeit und die Vordringlichkeit des Befristeten*, Berlin 2013, pp. 29–30.

the day for our plans, we would always be living in the moment, but since we can't fit everything we want to do into the present, we postpone the things we still want to achieve and experience to some future date. There'll be more time tomorrow. On this view, time is an ample resource that lasts a lifetime, allowing us little by little to realise all kinds of hopes and dreams. If it occasionally seems to run short, that simply tells us that we have a lot to fill it with. Another step in the process of socialisation as it relates to time might be this: appreciating the fullness of time and being aware that we have plenty of it.

Two hundred years ago, factory workers toiled fourteen to sixteen hours every day, six days a week.⁷ The fact that working hours are significantly shorter now is always wheeled out in support of the argument that time scarcity isn't a real phenomenon – on this view, we are richer both materially and in terms of time. And it is true that modern working hours are shorter, while life expectancy in most countries has risen. A hundred and fifty years ago the average life span was less than forty, mainly because the infant and child mortality rates were so high, while only about a third of the population reached the age of sixty.⁸ If you were born in 1960, you have on average an additional thirty years of life compared to those born in 1870, and according to the German Federal Office of Statistics you are predicted to live until roughly 2030.⁹ Girls born in Germany in 2020 will live thirteen years longer than their grandparents' generation, reaching an average age of 83.6. Boys born in the same year will have almost four years fewer in which to accomplish their life goals, but will still reach an average age of 78.9. They, too, have gained more time. The way we live today and take care of one another has afforded us more of it.¹⁰ Theoretically, we could counterbalance our everyday experience and the feeling of time scarcity with the knowledge that we have more years of life ahead of us to achieve what we want to achieve. We don't have to want to do everything at once.

However, the way we typically socialise children to think about time, as well as the time-related skills we as modern-day adults need to organise our lives, are much more strongly focused on the present than the future. Many people do have a bucket list of things they eventually want to tick off, most of which can still be done in their sixties or seventies, but this type of long-term life planning is not systematically taught and relates mainly to specific wishes rather than to daily life. Moment to moment we are supposed to 'manage' our time, structuring it so that our activities slot in with millimetre precision. Or, if we get

⁷ See Schneider, Michael: 'Der Kampf um die Arbeitszeitverkürzung von der Industrialisierung bis zur Gegenwart', in: *Gewerkschaftliche Monatshefte*, Vol. 35, 1984, pp. 77–89 <http://library.fes.de/gmh/main/pdf-files/gmh/1984/1984-02-a-077.pdf> (visited on 27.06.2022).

⁸ See Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung: Soziale Situation in Deutschland. Lebenserwartung (10.08.2020) <https://www.bpb.de/kurz-knapp/zahlen-und-fakten/soziale-situation-in-deutschland/61547/lebenserwartung/> (visited on 28.06.2022).

⁹ Statista Research Department: 'Entwicklung der Lebenserwartung bei Geburt in Deutschland nach Geschlecht in den Jahren von 1950 bis 2060', (24.01.2022) <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/273406/umfrage/entwicklung-der-lebenserwartung-bei-geburt-in-deutschland-nach-geschlecht/> (visited on 28.06.2022).

¹⁰ The average life expectancy across the population varies significantly, however. According to estimates by the Robert Koch Institute, people in Germany with low incomes and with fewer educational qualifications live significantly less long than those with a higher income. According to the Institute's reports, these differences have not been reduced over the past twenty-five years. See *Ärztezeitung*: 'Lebenserwartung von ärmeren Menschen in Deutschland weiterhin niedriger' (14.03.2019) <https://www.aerzteblatt.de/nachrichten/101652/Lebenserwartung-von-aermeren-Menschen-in-Deutschland-weiterhin-niedriger> (visited on 28.06.2022).

Data from other countries where health outcomes have been compared against other socio-demographic data indicate further inequalities in life span. In the USA, for instance, Black men and women die earlier on average than white men and women. See World Economic Forum: »This is the toll that everyday racism takes on black men in America« (02.07.2020) <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/07/george-floyd-racism-opportunities-life-expectancy/> (visited on 28.06.2022).

them done more quickly than expected, we can stuff extra tasks into the same allotment of time – maybe we'll even have some left over at the end to start a new project.

Children's first experiences of time management are usually when they're told to tidy their rooms before dinner or finish classwork within the duration of a lesson. By doing so, they learn that it's not the task that determines how much time they spend on it; rather, the task must be made to conform to a certain amount of time. In these examples, time isn't short because children's expectations are too high but because other people – adults – have deliberately given them a short amount of time in which to get the job done. If a child wants to write a particularly good essay, this is obstructed by the teacher's expectation that he or she will finish it within forty-five minutes. Time pressure can originate from within, arising within the context of the demands we place on ourselves, but it can also be imposed from without, through the demands placed on us by other people. 'Time [is] one of the most effective methods of social control,' writes ethnologist Laura Wehr. Schools are 'key institutions in this process of disciplining', in which children are guided away from their conception of time and towards that of adults.¹¹

Children are taught that they must continually strive to make better use of their time: to be faster, to be punctual, to complete tasks in the time allotted to them by adults. Children can't generally say to their teachers, 'I'll have time to do my homework tomorrow.' The time available to them tomorrow is worth nothing in the present moment. More homework awaits them tomorrow anyway. Borrowing time from the future is not an option that's encouraged at school; children can't expect to be rewarded if they put forward that idea. They're not supposed to be running short on time in the first place – this is supposed to be forestalled or counteracted by speeding up and accomplishing the task in the artificially limited time allowed. We're taught to put up with feeling like we don't have enough time: although the ticking clock can create stress, students are expected to be able to think clearly during timed assignments. In the professional world, employees are commonly expected to make decisions under time pressure, even though people in stressful situations have been proven to have reduced cognitive function. What would our world look like, how would we think and feel, if we took more time for the things that matter?

As children and teenagers, speed is consistently rewarded and slowness punished. The clock is always a little ahead of us – this seems to be a ubiquitous experience. Why, then, would we think to question this as adults? Why would we stop to wonder whether time always *has* to be scarce? The feeling of being pressed for time – of having to rush – may be unpleasant, and we often wish things were different, but on the other hand it somehow seems inevitable. It feels like part of reality, and we accept it as such, just as we accept that rain occasionally falls from the sky and then dries again. After all, our experience of time only varies because the pace of it does. It is allowed to pass more quickly and more slowly. It is allowed to pause and sometimes to be short. We are only able to enjoy an unexpected windfall of time because we know what it feels like to be facing a deadline. But if a lack of time is wreaking havoc and having a massive effect on quality of life, then that calls for a different approach. It's not just about acknowledging the situation; it's about addressing it.

The Time Pressure Paradox

Is time scarcity fact or feeling? Judy Wacjman, the feminist scholar whose work focuses on the sociology of work and technology, has noted that there is a contradiction between the statistical data and the widespread perception that our everyday lives are increasingly

¹¹ Wehr, Laura: *Alltagszeiten der Kinder. Die Zeitpraxis von Kindern im Kontext generationaler Ordnungen*, Weinheim und München 2009, p. 131.

rushed, that we have too little time at our disposal, and that the pace of life has gradually accelerated. To describe this contradiction, she coined the phrase ‘time-pressure paradox’.¹² In virtually every country where research has been conducted into how we budget our time, it has been shown that the amount of free time available to people of working age has been steadily increasing in recent decades.¹³ This is also noted in the Eight Family Report published by the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, issued in 2012, which focused on families and time. The authors disputed that there exists a ‘general lack of time’ in Germany.¹⁴ They back up their claims in part with the statistic that the average number of hours worked annually in Germany has fallen by more than a third over the last five decades. This puts Germany well below the OECD average; after France and Denmark, it is the third lowest in Europe.¹⁵ The report also lists additional indicators related to paid employment. For instance, it notes that the number of days of annual leave has risen slightly over the past thirty years: in 2020 it stood at an average of 29.6 days’ holiday, a modest increase of approximately one day compared to 1991.¹⁶ By law, German workers are entitled to twenty days’ annual leave. When you add in public holidays, the total comes to anywhere between thirty-eight and forty-one days off per year (depending on which federal state they live in).¹⁷ School holidays in Germany, according to an agreement between the individual states and the federal government, are seventy-five working days. Another indicator that we now have more free time on our hands – paralleling the rise in life expectancy – is the length of time we now draw a pension: on average, retired people in Germany now receive a pension for twenty years, whereas in 1995 that figure was just under sixteen.^{18 19}

From a statistical perspective, the average citizen works fewer hours per year, has more days of holiday and a longer period of retirement than ever before. Yet in 2020, it is estimated that more than 26 million people in Germany – over the age of fourteen and German-speaking – feel that they have ‘far too little time’.²⁰ That’s over a third of people in this age group who consider themselves chronically pressed for time.

Why do so many people perceive time to be scarce if we now spend less of it at work? For one thing, this extra leisure time is not evenly distributed across all workers in Germany and all phases of life, since these figures are averages and most of the additional time is skewed towards retirement age. Moreover, the data collected does not show whether these changes have been accompanied by an improvement in quality of life. Above all,

¹² Wajcman, Judy: *Pressed for Time. The Acceleration of Life in Digital Capitalism*, Chicago und London 2015, p. 5.

¹³ Ibid, p. 65.

¹⁴ Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend: *Zeit für Familie. Familienzeitpolitik als Chance einer nachhaltigen Familienpolitik. Achter Familienbericht*, Berlin 2012, p. XIII.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁶ See Institut für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung der Bundesagentur für Arbeit: *IAB-Arbeitszeitrechnung. Daten zur Entwicklung der Arbeitszeit und ihrer Komponenten. Die lange Zeitreihe mit den Quartals- und Jahreszahlen ab 1991. Durchschnittliche Arbeitszeit und ihre Komponenten*, updated: 07.06.2022, <https://www.iab.de/de/daten/iab-arbeitszeitrechnung.aspx> (visited on 28.06.2022).

¹⁷ Haufe Online: ‘Urlaubstage in Deutschland ungleich verteilt’ (28.07.2020) <https://www.haufe.de/personal/hr-management/urlaubsanspruch-wer-hat-die-meisten-urlaubstage-in-deutschland-80-368876.html> (visited on 28.06.2022).

¹⁸ See Deutsche Rentenversicherung: *Rentenversicherung in Zahlen 2021*, Berlin 2021, p. 65 https://www.deutsche-rentenversicherung.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Statistiken-und-Berichte/statistikpublikationen/rv_in_zahlen_2021.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=1 (visited on 27.06.2022).

¹⁹ That said, we are also working longer: in 2020, the average German citizen retired at just over sixty-four years of age, two years later than twenty years ago. Under current legislation, people born after 1964 – i.e. everybody younger than fifty-eight in the year 2022 – must continue to work until the age of sixty-seven or face reductions in their pension.

²⁰ Statista Research Department: ‘Anzahl der Personen in Deutschland, die das Gefühl haben in einer gehetzten Zeit zu leben, von 2017 bis 2021’ (20.08.2021).

however – and this will be key to my discussion in this book – these numbers do not mean that people are *experiencing* ‘time affluence’. This term is drawn from the sociological literature on time, and it goes beyond simple statistical measurements of hours away from work. According to researcher Jürgen P. Rinderspacher, who has defined time affluence both quantitatively and qualitatively, in order for someone to be considered time-affluent they must have a sufficient amount of it to meet their own needs: they must be able to spend enough time with others, for instance on the weekends; they must be relatively free to choose how they spend their time; and they must perceive time as not overly compressed, meaning that they feel minimal time pressure when completing tasks.²¹

If we think beyond absolute measurements to do with working hours and leisure time, we soon find indications that time pressure is a legitimate phenomenon. The number of commuters, for example, has been rising steadily in Germany – from 14.9 million in the year 2000 to 19.3 million in 2018 – and the average distance has increased from fifteen to seventeen kilometres.²² Meanwhile, the number of single parents has been growing since the 1990s, as has the proportion of women in paid employment, both of which affect the amount of time that can be spent with family. Although remote working is sometimes credited with allowing people more autonomy, being constantly available can take up or disrupt free time. Staff shortages make work more intense and exacerbate feelings of stress.

Moreover, the prospect of additional years post-retirement does not reduce the perception of time scarcity in daily life. Time cannot be stockpiled or controlled, no matter how many time-management tools we use. We can save money for our old age, to afford ourselves greater choice or to improve our wellbeing, but not to buy more free time. Time management alters how we spend our time, but it doesn’t give us more of it. A life spent waiting for a ‘well-deserved retirement’ is a life partially unlived: when we put off meeting our needs to some unspecified future date or only allow ourselves to meet them as a reward for achieving our ‘life’s goals’, we are no longer living in the present. After all, time is created between us when we spend it together, and when we’re alone it simply ticks away. Our time and the way we perceive it is always in the now. The things we spend most time on and the way we feel most of the time – that is our life.

Every day you make decisions about the next twenty-four hours: what you’re going to do, what you’re *not* going to do, what you’ll give to other people, what you’ll postpone because it’s less important and you can risk the possibility that there may never be time for it. If you don’t make time for friends or hobbies now, that’s not something you can simply catch up on later in life. You can’t know what age you will reach, or whether in your final years you will be able to live the life you’ve always wanted.

Voracious

We can’t do without sleep – yet. Even as 24/7 humans, we aren’t awake around the clock, but we do our best to spend the rest of our time in ways that are as exhausting as possible, controlling our days by filling them with purposeful activity. As far as possible, we seek to imbue time with meaning so that we don’t ‘lose’ it.

Sociologists Tally Katz-Gerro and Oriel Sullivan have researched how people use their time outside paid work, discovering various patterns of behaviour. They have

²¹ Rinderspacher, Jürgen P.: ‘Zeitwohlstand – Kriterien für einen anderen Maßstab von Lebensqualität’, in: *WISO - Wirtschafts- und Sozialpolitische Zeitschrift des ISW*, 01/2012, p. 11–26, <https://www.isw-linz.at/index.php?eID=dumpFile&t=f&f=493&token=ea21c3684060d2915833a8b237bca77f628a0195> (visited on 27.06.2022).

²² See *Der Spiegel*: ‘In Deutschland gibt es immer mehr Pendler’ (06.02.2020), <https://www.spiegel.de/karriere/pendeln-in-deutschland-nehmen-immer-mehr-menschen-lange-wege-zum-arbeitsplatz-in-kauf-a-085c2c3a-36ef-4aeb-b807-6fbc70e5d95d> (visited on 10.07.2022).

identified a group that pack their time particularly full of consumer activities. People who not only have a broad spectrum of cultural interests but also pursue these interests on a regular basis are referred to as ‘voracious cultural consumers’, and this voraciousness is primarily apparent outside of the home.²³ Several times a week, these voracious consumers do something exciting, something unusual or challenging. They know all the newest restaurants, go to theatre premieres, concerts, play different types of sports and book things like massages and manicures – all one after another. This type of behaviour is more common among people in higher income brackets, those with more formal education who belong to a higher social class. Those earning less, as the data shows, are less likely to flit from one activity to another and tend to pursue their interests at home.²⁴ Voracious consumer behaviour is also more widespread among adults living alone and young couples without children than among the elderly or people with children.²⁵

These empirical findings are hardly surprising: people without obligations as a carer have more time on their hands to keep trying new things. Having more money allows us to pursue a more varied range of interests. Playing sports, attending cultural events and going out to restaurants and bars – especially in combination – can get expensive. Younger people generally have more energy to do things and – so long as they are working – more money than those at retirement age.

This group of indefatigable do-ers also work extremely long hours. The higher a person’s socio-economic status, the more likely it is they will spend more than forty hours a week at their job. German workers whose annual salary is more than 100,000 euros do an average of six hours of overtime per week.²⁶ It seems almost inevitable, then, that high earners will feel pressured, because not only do they put in additional hours at the office but they also cram their lives outside of work full of planned activities as well. The perception of time scarcity may be class related. People who are busy at work are often busy in their free time too.

A packed social calendar isn’t necessarily stressful, of course, or this behaviour would hardly be so common. It may be experienced as satisfying, or as simultaneously stressful and enjoyable. In countries where the pace of life is relatively quick, more people say they feel short on time, yet they also tend to be more satisfied with their lives than people in countries where the pace is slower.²⁷ Psychologist Robert Levine, whose research explores cultural differences around this issue, describes his findings in his book *A Geography of Time*, explaining that material wealth in faster-paced societies tends to be higher, and that this has a positive effect on wellbeing. Living at a breakneck pace can be fun, because it makes us feel like we’re participating and gives us a sense of belonging. Yet not wanting to miss out on anything relevant can also lead to social and temporal conflict. For younger generations in particular, the emotion referred to as FOMO – the fear of missing out – is widespread. FOMO forces us to be constantly weighing up whether we can find the time to take part in an activity against the social costs of non-participation.

When our free time starts to become more exhausting than relaxing, we feel like we need even *more* of it for ourselves. Whether or not we perceive time as too scarce, then,

²³ Katz-Gerro, Tally/Sullivan, Oriol Sullivan: ‘Voracious Cultural Consumption The intertwining of gender and social status’, in: *Time & Society*, 2010, 19(2), p. 193-219. doi:10.1177/0961463X09354422.

²⁴ Stiftung für Zukunftsfragen: ‘Freizeit-Monitor 2015: Die beliebtesten Freizeitbeschäftigungen der Deutschen’, in: *Forschung aktuell*, 264, 36., 27.08.2015.

²⁵ Katz-Gerro, Tally/Sullivan, Oriol Sullivan: ‘Voracious Cultural Consumption The intertwining of gender and social status’, in: *Time & Society*, 2010, 19(2), pp. 193-219. doi:10.1177/0961463X09354422.

²⁶ Schwarz, Franziska: ‘Überstunden: Deutsche schenken Unternehmen dreieinhalb Jahre Arbeitszeit’ (17.09.2021), in: *Merkur*, <https://www.merkur.de/wirtschaft/ueberstunden-arbeitnehmer-deutschland-durchschnitt-studie-erhebung-arbeitszeitmonitor-2021-90985750.html> (visited on 27.06.2022).

²⁷ Levine, Robert: *A Geography of Time. The Temporal Misadventures of a Social Psychologist*, New York 1998, p.212.

partly depends on how much we pack into the day. This leaves people who have got used to squeezing a lot into their schedule facing a dilemma: they can buy experiences, but not time. In a consumer society, perceived lack of time can become a vicious cycle: stressed-out individuals try to soothe their agitation by piling on more and more activities that they think of as a counterbalance or a form of 'self-care'. Yet far from alleviating stress, often all this means is that another hour has to be found in the day, more space made in the calendar, and more hours worked in order to pay for it. Massages, spa weekends and meals out are generally reserved for those who have spent a lot of time working to earn money.

Our desire to counterbalance time spent at work and the pleasure gained from hobbies, trips, eating together and cultural offerings are not the only reasons why we take on so much. The British writer Madeleine Bunting writes in her book *Willing Slaves* about what she calls overwork culture. Consumption has 'become the arena where we develop our sense of self, and experience a sense of freedom'.²⁸ We attempt to construct identities for ourselves by buying products and services, and in doing so we declare our allegiance to particular groups. In addition to status symbols like clothes and cars, we have now added another dimension: how we use our time. The cultures in which we live, as well as our social and financial pressures and preferences, merge together into our 'time identity'.

Busyness as Currency

Am I interesting or dull, busy or boring? This question is key to our identity under digital capitalism. In the individualistic culture of Western societies, the desire to seem interesting to others has translated primarily into the habit of being – and being seen to be – busy. After all, we are not automatically intriguing to others. We aren't born 'interesting people'. If we want others to see us that way, we have to *work* for it – and this is a sustained effort. We may have been interesting yesterday, but if we rest on our laurels instead of coming up with something new to offer, we are interesting no longer. We have to move 'with the times' and stay up to date on what qualities appeal to others. This is especially true on digital networks, where personalities build up followers partly by putting themselves forward as inspiration. 'Interesting' and 'busy' are becoming increasingly coupled, because in this context – and from the fans' and followers' perspective – being interesting isn't so much a character trait as a practice, something that must be repeatedly renewed through constant transformation and novelty. We're watching each other try to wring every last ounce of possibility out of every last second of our lives. We live in an age when we can observe other people's lives play out on a digital stage while simultaneously performing our own lives on it too. If you're not continually updating, you fall out of step.

Many people who use social networks decide to live a part of their lives in public.²⁹ Our everyday lives are saturated with digital devices. We measure our behaviour with 'quantified self' technology, either live or in retrospect – with apps that count our steps, remind us to drink a glass of water every hour or record the phases of our sleep – and many social media users now anticipate in advance how others will judge their digital performance. This is especially true of visually orientated media, where people post photos and videos of their lives. Users plan how to optimise this process of documentation so that it resonates better with others and with the algorithm. The goal is to get more likes and comments, giving them a boost of positivity, or even to build a 'personal brand' that may

²⁸ Bunting, Madeleine: *Willing Slaves. How the overwork culture is ruling our lives*, London 2004, p. 155.

²⁹ In 2021–22, roughly fifty percent of Germans said they used Instagram. The highest proportion was in the age bracket between twenty and twenty-nine: seventy-eight percent. See Statista Research Department: 'Anteil der befragten Internetnutzer, die Instagram nutzen, nach Altersgruppen in Deutschland in den Jahren 2015 bis 2021/22' (16.06.2022) <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/691584/umfrage/anteil-der-nutzer-von-instagram-nach-alter-in-deutschland/> (visited on 27.06.2022).

someday prove marketable. A booming cottage industry has arisen of consultants offering advice to ordinary people – not just companies and media figures – on how to turn themselves into brands. One author even advises nurses to identify their ‘brand essence’.³⁰

This push to turn us all into brands has birthed a new kind of celebrity culture. While many of us look down our noses at the tabloids and celeb magazines we secretly read in the waiting room, we have created something with digital media that closely resembles the world of celebrity. On social networks, people from all walks of life are now spending time each day following the comings-and-goings of their idols, ‘normal’ people who share information about themselves that in traditional magazines would be referred to as ‘gossip’: what did I wear, who am I in love with, what colour have I painted my living room? It is the practice of distraction. In the new world of entertainment media, however, we are no longer simply consumers but protagonists.

The good news is that the roles we take on in this digital public forum have become more open and diverse. People are allowed to deviate from ideal beauty standards, fail at work or talk about their depression – taboos are falling like ninepins, and rightly so – but we are expected to weave this deviation from the old norms into interesting stories we share about ourselves. Every day, ideally. Users of social networks – and this is more and more of us all the time – have become masters of the cliff-hanger, competing to lure back the audience and stay memorable: ‘I’ve got some exciting news that I’ll share with you all tomorrow!’ Users of digital networks thus oscillate between their own scripts, which they use to engage and expand their base of followers, and their life as a fan (or at least observer) of family members, friends, acquaintances and traditional celebrities like actors or musicians.

As observers, we take note of whether other people are busy or whether their daily lives seem tedious, whether they have new projects in the pipeline or they don’t have much going on. We react to other people’s digital lives with emotions and judgements. We may be disparaging or impressed, relaxed or anxious (‘I can’t keep this up!’), which can devolve into envy and self-criticism, because we feel as though we haven’t achieved as much as other people. Digital technologies have massively expanded our immediate social circles, increasing the pressure to do more – or at least to more elaborately present the few things we *do* do – so that we can feel part of the broader narrative.

Participation in this crowdsourced culture of entertainment requires users to invest time. Scrolling through social networks can be relaxing and enjoyable, but it can also become a new form of work, adding to our fatigue. Busyness also has a social function: it serves to reassure us and set ourselves apart from others.³¹ On the one hand, being busy doing things that are worth telling other people about is a way of proving to ourselves that we are adept at using our time. On the other, it is a demonstration to others: ‘Look how much I pack into my schedule. More than other people!’ This pattern predates social networks and is also found elsewhere in the analogue world, but digital communication has boosted its visibility and helped establish busyness as a status symbol. Unlike other such symbols – material possessions, say, or high professional or social standing – busyness is relatively easy to attain. It doesn’t cost much, has a low barrier to entry and does not necessarily require much participation from other people. It’s because of this fact – that it is within reach for more people and its hidden costs aren’t immediately apparent – that busyness is so appealing as a status symbol. We only pay for it with our time and attention.

³⁰ Jacobs, Luisa: ‘Der Job kann morgen weg sein und was bleibt dann von mir?’ (17.08.2020), in: Zeit Online <https://www.zeit.de/arbeit/2020-08/tjen-onaran-migrationshintergrund-marketing-branding-digitalisierung-sichtbarkeit/komplettansicht> (visited on 27.06.2022).

³¹ See Gershuny, Jonathan: ‘Busyness as the Badge of Honor for the New Superordinate Working Class’, in: *Social Research*, Vol. 72, Nr. 2, 2005, p. 287–314 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40971766> (visited on 28.06.2022).

Busyness as a social norm has led to us devaluing time not spent on goal-directed activity – periods when we are bored, for instance, or being lazy. One might have thought that our attitude towards spending time on unspectacular things would have changed over the past couple of years, given how much the pandemic restricted our everyday lives. Certainly, there were a number of people who enjoyed staying at home. Yet new pressures also emerged: to come up with unusual lockdown projects, for example, or to learn new skills. Time could still only be valuable if we found things to fill it with.

One thing that characterises the prevailing contemporary approach to time is that exploiting every last second of it is now an ethical issue. If you're not making the most of your time, you're failing. In groups with high social status, it's not enough to *only* be successful at work, only be sporty, only be cultured or only have great taste in food. If you want to fit in, you need a range of skills and a comprehensive knowledge of almost everything, and you need to somehow find the time to maintain all that. In cultures that value perpetual busyness, people with a more leisurely approach or more focused interests fail to meet the social norms. 'To be cultured is to be culturally omnivorous, no matter how much time it takes,' writes US author Anne Helen Petersen, describing the pressure on young adults to spend their leisure time in particular ways.³² She has observed that many people no longer consume culture because they enjoy it but because they feel social pressure to portray themselves as people who work hard, consume hard and chill hard. At base, it plays on our desire to belong. Our culture teaches us that 'people who do more are worth more', writes psychologist Devon Price in his book *Laziness Does Not Exist*, in which he analyses the fear of being considered lazy.³³ In an ever-accelerating society, people who live too slowly are left behind.

Mere variety, however, is not enough. If we want to be in the club, we must also use our time 'meaningfully'. This entails constantly striving to do more with our time, trying to meet the right people and taking deliberate, optimised breaks that are maximally refreshing. If you don't plan your time, you waste it. 'Having it all', the term that political scientist Anne-Marie Slaughter used in the context of the discourse around equal rights for women, now means not just a fulfilling career and a family but also meticulously scheduled free time; although it's not actually *free*, of course, because it's got to serve a specific purpose.³⁴ The way we spend this time isn't about contentment, it's about fulfilling cultural norms. We're supposed to use our time productively, to yield a concrete result. Busyness, the habit of stuffing our time to the gunwales with paid work and leisure activities, has become a new skill we're expected to master.

Labelling every activity as meaningful also functions to assuage any doubts we may have about being perpetually busy. If something is meaningful, there's less reason not to do it. After all, there's a point to it. Moreover, assigning meaning to everything we do makes us forget that not everything that *seems* to be a choice actually *is*. Decisions we perceive as free are always taken within the acceptable boundaries of our culture. There may be a purpose to overtime – getting promoted more quickly – but how voluntary is it really? Many people confuse the sheer busyness of their lives with appreciation, success or freedom. True freedom, however, would mean that we could do less, know less, communicate less, and yet still be someone.

³² Petersen, Anne Helen: *Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation*, Boston/New York, 2020, p. 189.

³³ Price, Devon: *Laziness Does Not Exist*, New York 2021, Kindle-Version, p. 206.

³⁴ In 2012, the American writer Anne-Marie Slaughter kicked off a debate on whether a family is compatible with a career, with her essay *Why Women Still Can't Have It All*: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/07/why-women-still-cant-have-it-all/309020/> (28.06.2022).

Busyness and Power

The cultural practice of enriching our lives with a wide variety of experiences is a way of conferring power. In capitalist societies in particular, where a fast-paced lifestyle is considered aspirational, packing more into our time is an expression of cultural capital. Newly acquired knowledge, new contacts and the assumption of certain characteristics associated with busyness reinforce the high social status that endlessly busy people already possess. Skills and opportunities lead to more skills and more opportunities in terms of financial, political and cultural participation.

Busyness is an intangible currency that can ultimately boost a person's financial clout. This is especially apparent in a professional context, where someone's very willingness to take on more work can be an advantage: it is termed 'flexibility', and can mean, for instance, that a person works longer, fills in for others, or attends events outside regular working hours, such as at evenings and weekends. Both employees and the self-employed are pitted against one another, competing to make ever-greater amounts of time available for work-related tasks. Some people – those whose time is taken up with responsibilities in the home, for instance, or who prefer to draw clearer boundaries between free time and paid work – will inevitably lose out.

In the 'overwork culture', a person's willingness to give up their free time in order to spend more of it on their job is a competitive advantage, even mutating into a type of qualification – although it is different from a traditional skill in the sense that it isn't about learning something new but about accepting or complying with informal norms and official requirements. Flexibility and extra work aren't skills we possess, they are demands we consent to – things we make possible by making sacrifices in other areas. Concrete professional competencies are thus increasingly being mixed up with our ability to make time available, and making time available is simply not an option for everybody – or at least, not to the same degree.

Saying we're 'very busy at the moment' plays down the encroachment of paid work into the rest of our life. Being 'busy' in this context means doing additional, often irregular hours as well as packing more work into the hours we're already doing, which long-term can have a negative impact on our health. Using terms like 'busy' makes these extra demands on our time seem voluntary; we even come to look at them as a positive thing, since the ideal worker in our contemporary culture is supposed to give more than a hundred percent. The ability to handle time pressure and time scarcity is part of the deal if you want to stand out at work.

Constant busyness, however, is not interpreted in the same way for everybody. If you're a well-paid, highly qualified employee, long hours at the office are seen as voluntary – something you do to benefit your career. Yet in badly paid industries where people often have less formal education, or in physically taxing jobs, working long hours generally doesn't confer additional benefits and is not subjectively considered positive. In groups on a precariously low income, we see this as exploitation. Exploitation and self-exploitation, however, are found in better-paid jobs as well.

Many people simply accept that in a private as well as professional context they will have to sacrifice a lot of time in order to achieve higher social or financial status – and, once this is attained, to keep it. The more a culture rewards heavy workloads and hectic private lives, the more strength it takes to swim against the current. Few people manage it alone. It's easier if you're part of a community that shares your values. Having the support of other people allows us to make decisions freely.

Paradoxically, time pressure is especially common and especially strongly felt in socio-economic groups whose members have the money to liberate themselves from it. Because these groups dominate the social discourse, the problem of time scarcity is often depicted as a 'first world problem': if you can buy your way out of it, then it must surely be

self-inflicted. Yet the high-earners who criticise the accelerated pace of modern society don't necessarily translate that criticism into action – working less, making do with less money, reducing leisure-time activities – because making these changes would mean a loss of status. Many people aren't ready for this. Yet.

The belief that professional success and social progress largely depend on how much time we invest into them – and that there are no alternatives – is deeply rooted in our culture. If you want to achieve something, we are told, you need to put in the time. If you don't work hard (read: work long enough), then you're not serious. As long as busyness remains crucial to identity-formation, it will be difficult to take any serious steps towards redressing the problem.

Since busyness is a cultural practice, we can't buy our way out of it by assigning tasks to other people. We have to learn new patterns of behaviour. 'In the end, everyone realises that time is the only true and rare resource: no one can produce it, no one can sell it, and no one can store it,' wrote internationally renowned scholar Helga Nowotny in *Eigenzeit Revisited*.³⁵ This is alien to people in capitalist societies, because we are accustomed to the idea that we can buy a solution to virtually any problem and that we can perpetually optimise our behaviour. Time resists this individualistic model, because it is something that arises through interaction with others. We underestimate the impact our relationship with time has on other people's time as well, affecting it in far-reaching and complex ways. We cannot extricate ourselves from this web.

Sometimes, we take time from other people and act as though it belongs to us. Even today we take it for granted, for instance, that family members will 'have our back' so that we can pursue a career. All this means is that the remaining members have neglected their own (time-related) needs in order to support the success of one person. This produces unequal, often unfair relationships. The well-known German TV anchor Claus Kleber admitted in an interview in 2020, when he was sixty-five years old, that his wife had 'paid a price for [his] career'. She is a doctor, but could not practise medicine because Kleber's job took precedence.³⁶ This kind of critical introspection is rare, and usually only happens in retrospect; many people still seem to think it's normal to view other people's time as their own or to consider it less valuable. But this is how power imbalances are created.

Our time is always reciprocal, always connected to other people's. When we take time from them, treat theirs as though it's less important than our own, or pay them very badly for it, these people are less free than we are. We should start asking ourselves how our relationship with time affects other people's lives. The problem cannot be addressed on the level of the individual or specific, narrowly defined groups; our society is too closely and too intricately interconnected for that. We will only find a fair approach to time by disentangling these relationships, rearranging them and finding solutions together – solutions that work for the many and not just for the few.

³⁵ Nowotny, Helga: 'Eigenzeit Revisited', in: Maren Hartmann, Elizabeth Prommer, Karin Deckner, Stephan O. Görland (eds.): *Mediated Time: Perspectives on Time in a Digital Age*, New York 2019, pp. 67–86.

³⁶ Otto, Jeannette/Scholz, Anna-Lena: 'Was waren Sie für ein Kind, Claus Kleber? "Ein Klugscheißer. Immer mit der Schnauze vorne"'(06.01.2021), in: *Die Zeit* <https://www.zeit.de/2021/02/clus-kleber-journalist-heute-journal-gendern-lernen/komplettansicht> (visited on 28.06.2022).