

Reclaiming Time

Article by Marie-Monique Franssen

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In the West, the grip of clock time has become inescapable. Being overly busy may be worn as a badge of honour, but it is wrecking our health, our communities, and the planet. If we want to radically transform our societies, we need to rediscover time's connection to the Earth. How can we access other ways of experiencing time and implement them?

"My four-year-old wants to learn how to read the clock. What a pity..." a young mother of two tells me. She looks pensive. "I mean, I'll obviously teach him, but I already notice the clock is becoming a source of stress for him." Like most of us in the West, she suffers from permanent time scarcity and it weighs her down: the endless feeling of never doing enough, the limitless personal and professional needs she cannot possibly fulfil. Her reflection resonates with me. Just like the young mother, I too find myself increasingly preoccupied with the relentless onslaught of the clock on our personal lives. We both wonder about its implications for our social and ecological fabric.

My musings about the concept of time arose gradually, at first like little drops of rain touching arid land, only to then turn into a massive torrent, ubiquitous and unstoppable. As the theme forced itself on me, I was compelled to see how it permeated our collective bodies like a sponge. It reached its peak when several of my peers and close relatives started suffering from burnout, anxiety, and panic attacks, which led them to go on sick leave: two weeks at home, seven months of sick leave, years of withdrawal from the labour market. People had blood tests to rule out incurable diseases when all they needed was rest.

In my native Belgium, the number of people unable to work for more than a year due to burnout or depression has increased by as much as 46 per cent over the past five years. According to a new study conducted in six countries of the European Union, 38 per cent of workers are at high risk of poor mental health. As a society, however, we glorify those who are ultra-productive and ultra-active. We put them on stage and on the front page, holding up impossible standards for everyone else. Why, really? What are the trade-offs here? What keeps falling through the cracks? And, no less important, whose interests does this serve?

Time spent, time saved

The first mechanical clock was invented in China in 725 AD. By the 14th century, it was widely used across Europe as a useful tool to structure societies, allowing us to get organised. But, since Einstein, we know that time measured in absolute numbers, where one unit follows the other, is simply not real. Instead, time is elastic: it passes faster on a mountain than at the coast. It is also relative: some minutes can seem to last for hours, while some hours pass like minutes. Since the invention of the mechanical clock and the introduction of Greenwich Mean Time and time zones, we have become disconnected from our personal, local, and natural temporal rhythms.¹ Clock time lost its original function and was appropriated to serve the needs of economic productivity. This economic view of time, as a finite amount of hours to be spent in the most efficient way possible, has, over the past two centuries, come to pervade every nook of our collective organisation. The impact of the ever-accelerating pace of clock time

on our social and ecological lives is severe: it erodes our foundations of care and community, and the earth's resources and ecosystems.²

How can we expect to change any system if we fail to free ourselves from the yoke of clock time and keep running longer and faster?

The Western approach to time is, unsurprisingly, about control. "A society founded on notions of control builds systems in which time does not flow in being, but is rather, compartmentalised and objectified as something outside the self," writes geographer Nicole Gombay.³ The clock became the symbol of the arrangement of life itself, allowing the perpetuation of man's dominion over nature.⁴ Dutch philosopher Joke J. Hermsen takes this critique a step further by comparing capitalism to "a tyrant seeking to expand his power by keeping the people constantly busy, that is, restless and unthinking",⁵ adding that, in the West, "time has primarily become a political and economic construct at the service of capitalist ideology."⁶

This productivity mindset has spilled over from the workplace and lodged itself into all aspects of our personal lives. It is what makes capitalism so successful not only in keeping itself alive but also in endlessly expanding: we have deeply and intimately internalised the rules it has imposed on us as absolute truths. This is what makes capitalism so inescapable and, therefore, so powerful. As philosopher Byung-Chul Han notes "the drive to maximise production inhabits the social unconscious."⁷

Chronopolitics: time is political

Since Aristotle, however, rest and so-called idleness are considered the conditions of culture and democracy because they allow stillness and contemplation. This stands in stark contrast with the frenetic doing we have succumbed to. Hermsen therefore wonders if the democratic nature of a society can be guaranteed if economic clock time has supplanted all other experiences of time, resulting in people's alienation from themselves and their environment.⁸ How can we expect to change any system if we fail to free ourselves from the yoke of clock time and keep running longer and faster? Trying to find an answer to this question inevitably leads to another: in the realm of labour, whose time belongs to whom? And how does this structure power relations in our societies?

In recent decades, digitisation has not freed up time. On the contrary, now that we are always connected, it has pushed labour even further into the private sphere. In this sense, reclaiming time that does not care about profit and loss, about productivity and efficiency, is not only subversive but also a necessity. Poet and activist Tricia Hersey writes: "Rest is not some cute lil luxury item you grant to yourself as an extra treat after you've worked like a machine and are now burned out. Rest is our path to liberation. A portal for healing. A right."⁹

In her book *Saving Time: Discovering a Life Beyond the Clock*, artist Jenny Odell similarly emphasises how in a culture that cannot stand what looks like emptiness, leisure becomes a stent, "the critical pause during which the worker wonders why she works so much, where collective grief is processed, and where the edges of something new start to become visible".¹⁰ It is precisely this political understanding of time that would allow one to look outward, imagining different "structural arrangements of power".¹¹

Quite frankly, it makes me want to punch the clock. And then punch it again.

Children of time

“We are born and we learn to be children of time, as sea snails learn to be of the shores,” Puerto Rican musician Residente tells us. Our beliefs about time profoundly shape our reality and how we consequently act in the world. Like money, the way we experience time only exists because of the meaning we give to it: our perception of time is culturally conditioned. In other words, it is a social construct, and constructs can be broken down. The moment has come to develop an understanding of time that is connected to the planet we live on. Reclaiming time is about returning to our humanity – our deeply rooted, deeply enmeshed humanity, entrenched in the bountiful ecosystems that support us.

In many indigenous cultures, time is experienced as cyclical and flexible. It shifts according to seasons and to people’s and the earth’s needs. Examples of cultures living in accordance with other temporalities are plentiful: Inuit, Maori, and Navajo, to name a few. Time, here, is abundant rather than scarce. In *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants*, Potawatomi botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer writes: “For in the popular way of thinking, history draws a time ‘line’, as if time marched in lockstep in only one direction. Some people say that time is a river into which we can step but once, as it flows in a straight path to the sea. But Nanabozho’s people know time as a circle. Time is not a river running inexorably to the sea, but the sea itself – its tides that appear and disappear, the fog that rises to become rain in a different river. All things that were will come again.”¹²

They have clocks, we have time

Nanabozho’s people are not alone.¹³ For example, in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, time is also cyclical, rather than sequential. In his book *Sand Talk*, Aboriginal scholar Tyson Yunkaporta writes how in his greatgrandmother’s language, there are no separate words for space and time.¹⁴ On the Tiwi Islands off the Australian coast, time is read through the swelling of mango and the changing colour of carambola: “Here is a time that feels like never rushed and never lost. A time that always returns. A time in the rhythm of these fruits,” writes researcher Alexander Van Vooren.

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build new worlds.*

More ecological approaches to time, such as nonlinear and relational ones, weave time into the fabric of the land, into the seasons, into the wind, the rain, and the soil. They follow the migratory patterns of animals in fluid motion. They are “embedded in the rhythms of ecosystems and seasons, our bodies, and in networks of (human and non-human) social relations and patterns.” In short, they take shape through environmental and social indicators. Instead of our temporal experience being determined by the quantity of time we have, where it becomes the means to one’s ends, a more qualitative approach to time focuses on perpetual becoming.

Deep time adaptation

In her book, Jenny Odell looks at the capitalist approach to time in relation to climate change, calling it “the absurdity of racing against the clock at the end of time”.¹⁶ Since “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” as philosopher and activist Audre Lorde puts it, Western timekeeping will

never be an adequate tool to build new worlds. If we want to change, we need to adopt different temporal parameters. So, what if we considered time as abundant rather than scarce? What could reclaiming time then concretely look like in our societies?

Truth is, the answer will always be complex and nuanced. Concrete policy proposals such as working time reduction, a housework wage, or universal basic income are steps in the right direction. But cultural adaptation in the long term cannot be about finding pragmatic, silverbullet solutions. It needs to take place on a much deeper and fundamental level. “We are not going to change any system of oppression without doing serious inner work and without thinking about how to heal and be in proper relation with nature,” activist Nathan Thanki wrote on X. It is the only way to take the indoctrination out of ourselves. A paradigm shift always takes place on a collective and personal level at the same time, as an interactive exchange in perpetual motion. Cultures must adapt to changing contexts and “remain fluid enough to allow for continual emergence. No entity is immortal,” says Yunkaporta. Not even clock time.

Just as seawater reshapes the coastline daily, we need more stories of change, stories that reshape our relationship to time within the living environment, where we can develop a language, thinking, and praxis that are appropriate to the complexity of the 21st century. Ultimately, these new narratives are going to have to be formed collectively. The community must organise. We must create spaces where that other time becomes the norm – spaces that allow the soft rocking of the waves, the coming and going of the tides, the rhythmic drumming of a heartbeat.



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