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“You Are Late. Off With Your Heads?”: Time in American Popular Culture

by Jennifer Rupp

*“The more time-saving machinery there is,
the more pressed a person is for time.”*

Sebastian de Grazia

Time is perceived to be a valuable resource (Lauer 4). Some people even compare managing their time with managing money: they save and they spend (Lauer 13). Technology has provided a number of time-saving devices to enable people to use time to its fullest potential, and now Americans cram as many activities as possible into a period of time. Often this rushing about is for the sole purpose of creating more leisure time. Instead, in reality the opposite occurs and people are constantly running to beat deadlines and get more done. Ironically, American Popular Culture, obsessed with saving time, has created a scarcity of time.

Humanity’s Perception of Time Throughout History

Humanity’s need to measure time has changed immensely since the beginning of history. Time measurement has progressed from seasons to milliseconds. The earliest humans, who lived by hunting and gathering their food, relied on natural phenomena to show the passage of time. The migratory patterns of the herds and changes in the surrounding plant life were sufficient time-keepers to serve the needs of ancient people (Rifkin 70).

The need for more precise time-keeping arose as people began to settle in agricultural communities. Farmers needed a method for predicting the seasons and determining the times to plant and harvest (Boorstin 4). Also, because people were living in a permanent social setting and more people coexisted within a smaller area, there was need for a uniform time measuring system in order to provide some social synchronization. The lunar calendar was created by the ancient Babylonians around 432 B.C. (Boorstin 4). Though it was not accurate by today’s standards, it was the first to try to create “a time scheme to

hold people together, to ease the making of common plans, such as agreements on the planting of crops and the delivery of goods" (Boorstin 6). Farmers and craftsmen went about their daily work at their own pace and the lunar calendar was sufficient to aid them in keeping track of the seasons (Chance 59).

Though lunar calendars were adequate means for most people to keep track of their time, ancient societies experimented with ways to divide the days as early as the fifteenth century B.C. This experimentation led to inventions like the sundial, various types of water clocks, hour or sand glasses, and candle clocks (Hood 12).

In spite of these early experiments, it wasn't until the sixth century A.D., during the Middle Ages, that the calendrical culture began to undergo lasting changes. The calendar had come to be based on the observance of past important dates, most of which were sacred; now a new concept of time that forced people to plan into the future was introduced by sixth century Benedictine monks. Their time divisions were called canonical hours, which were named after the times of prayer (Matins, Sands, Prime, Terce, Sext, Nones, and Vespers) (Hood 12). The Benedictines felt that in order to obtain eternal salvation, one must use one's God-given time on earth productively. To use their time to its fullest potential, these monks planned out every moment of the day in a strict schedule to which they adhered diligently, for in the words of St. Benedict, "Idleness is the enemy of the soul" (Rifkin 80).

The first mechanical clocks were introduced in the fourteenth century (Hood 12). The most common clock at this time was the town clock which announced the hours with tolling bells. Because of widespread illiteracy during this period, many early town clocks did not even have faces (Boorstin 43).

The Benedictine monks used their time to secure spiritual salvation, but with the advent of industry, people began to use their time to obtain financial security (Rifkin 80). It wasn't until modern industrial times that all people began to make use of the division of days into hours and, later still, minutes and seconds. The mechanical clock became an invaluable tool during the Industrial Age. This tool enabled large numbers of workers, gathered in one place, to synchronize their activities and to work in an organized fashion in factories--a circumstance which essentially made mass production possible (Rifkin 90).

The clock also allowed factory owners to dictate a set pace for workers. Nothing could be accomplished if workers stopped and started as they pleased. Another advantage of time-consciousness in industry was that it spurred people to become more efficient with their time particularly in industries in which higher pay resulted from

completing a certain amount of work in a designated time period, thus, resulting in an increase of production.

Time-consciousness in industry was brought to the world's attention by Henry Ford and Ford Motor Company in the early twentieth century. Ford recognized the need for efficient use of time in his auto factories when the Model T could not be produced fast enough to satisfy the great demand. He began to concentrate his efforts on making the car-assembly process faster. His most important innovation was the development of the moving assembly line. The amount of time for the construction of a Model T was shortened within only a few years from 728 hours of labor by one man to only 93 minutes on the assembly line (Halberstam 72-73). The ability to create more cars per unit of time decreased the manufacturing costs and allowed Ford to lower the prices of his cars. This gave him an edge that secured his company's success in the auto industry. This was proof that time really is money.

The Importance of Time Today

Since Henry Ford's time, emphasis on making the most of one's time has spread to other industries and even into the daily lives of Americans. Time-management has become a cultural necessity. In her syndicated column, Ellen Goodman states, "We are expected to conserve, even recycle, every minute and to use several of our five senses at a time." She notes that it has become commonplace, even necessary for people to do several things at once: "We are able to watch one television program while taping a second, vacuum while talking on a portable phone, bike 20 miles on an exercycle while studying Swahili from a tape, and log on to our portable computer in an airport waiting room."

Results of today's cultural emphasis on speed and on time-conservation can be seen everywhere. Most American homes contain many appliances which have been developed to save time. These include dishwashers, washing machines, clothes dryers, hair dryers, microwave ovens, mixers, and vacuum cleaners. Many foods are designed to be "quick and easy" such as ready-made pie crusts, canned soups, frozen pizza, and microwave dinners.

Shopping and errand-running can be completed faster today than ever before. Advertisements for businesses such as photo finishers, dry cleaners, and optometrists boast of their speedy services. Convenience stores and shopping malls save time by putting everything we need in one place. Grocery stores have express lanes for impatient

shoppers who are too busy to wait in line. In fact, it often isn't necessary to leave home to shop. One can just use the phone to order goods from catalogs or television home-shopping programs.

Society's desire for speed in transportation is obvious. Most Americans would not think of living without a car to get them to and from work and the grocery stores. Interstate highways and freeways are built to enable travelers to go long distances without stopping, or even slowing down. Planes and trains are constantly being built to travel faster than before. The Concorde, for example, proceeding at twice the speed of sound, makes it possible to go from New York to London in just over three hours.

However, the field in which the importance of speed is most startling today is communication. The telephone changed the world by enabling people to deliver information in minutes or even seconds. Today, computers and fax machines allow us to transmit information in a fraction of a second. Today's media--television, radio, newspapers, and magazines--base their existence on the quick transmission of information. News programs air commercials emphasizing the fact that they bring their viewers the news *first*. On-the-spot reporters report the news as it happens. Satellites even enable them to broadcast live stories from the other side of the world.

The ability to communicate information within seconds has brought about what seems to be an "acceleration of history" (Lauer, Rotenstreich). Since the news of an occurrence can now be communicated with a minimal delay, there is a shorter period of unproductive time between the actual occurrence and the reaction of other people (Rotenstreich 162). Imagine how different the world might have been if the news of Christopher Columbus's discovery of the New World had reached Europe as quickly as information from the satellite Voyager has traveled to earth.

The media also seem to speed up time by advertising fashionable products. Today's consumers place much value on new things because telecommunications give them access to new ideas every day. Trends in clothes, cars, books, movies, electrical appliances, foods, and music are in and out of style so fast that it becomes difficult to keep up. There is a rush to be the first to own "the latest thing." For this reason, many goods which are produced in America today are considered to be disposable. Products are bought with the idea that they can be thrown away or traded in for new ones in a couple of years. This means that consumers come in contact with more products in a period of time than ever before.

Concerns

By looking at history one can see that time and its measurement have become more and more important to humankind throughout the ages. More precise ways of keeping track of time--from natural phenomena to calendars to clocks--have allowed people to increase productivity, especially with the advent of the industrial age. With the increase in productivity there has also been an increase in consumption and a seeming acceleration of history. One of the most important causes of these changes has been the ability to communicate information at a faster rate. All of the above circumstances show that humans have become infatuated with time and the conservation of time. Ironically, it seems that the more humans try to control the passage of time the more they themselves are controlled by it.

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