

Time in our Hands

By Stephen Cave

It is a paradox that we, who have never had it so good, should feel so harried. Whereas our great-grandparents worked 14-hour shifts on steam-filled factory floors just to keep themselves in gruel, we clock off when we fancy and still afford the finest foods on our well-stocked supermarket shelves. We don't know what it is to sweat over the washboard and mangle: our many and various machines wash, launder and dry while we put our feet up for a leisurely evening planning our next trip to Thailand. And to top it all, we can expect 80 years of this easeful existence, nearly twice as many as only a century ago. We should be swimming in an abundance of time.

But instead we are drowning. Despite our alleged lives of leisure, we are still slaves to the clock and the calendar. Seventy per cent of organisations in the UK report that work-place stress is rife – an astonishing 88 per cent of these are in the public sector. One recent study estimated that 10m working days a year were lost to stress-related health problems at a cost to the UK's gross national product of £26bn.

How is it we have such a wealth of time, yet never enough? How can it be that our supposed lives of privilege feel so pressured? Three recent books tackle this paradox from different perspectives and come to surprisingly similar conclusions on how we can become masters of our own days: by reclaiming control of our calendars and by appreciating the value of the moments that make up our lives.

The first part of the answer is to recognise that we are not so time rich compared to our ancestors as we think. Working hours may be shorter than during those dark days of the 19th century's satanic mills but the industrial era was an anomaly. In the Middle Ages, many Europeans enjoyed more than 100 holidays a year, plus Sundays. At the height of Rome's decadence, more than 200 days were reserved for public merry-making. As the team of social scientists from Sweden, Finland and Australia write in *Discretionary Time: A New Measure of Freedom*, if existing tribal peoples are anything to go by, our hunter-gatherer ancestors could meet their needs with only a few hours graft a day. "If the Kapauku of Papua work one day, they do no labour on the next. Kung bushmen put in only two and a half days a week."

So maybe we shouldn't be beating ourselves up about our supposed lives of leisure after all. Taking the long view, our lives are still a slog compared to those of our ancestors. But this does not explain why we feel more stressed than our parents or grandparents. They did not have the kind of statutory holidays and

labour-saving devices that we enjoy.

Perversely, our wealth is part of the problem. Although more prosperous societies are on average more leisured, as the authors of *Discretionary Time* report, the richer the individual, the more he or she reports feeling stressed. This runs contrary to our expectations that the affluent can afford the help that makes life a little bit easier. The well-to-do might believe they are simply harder working. Sometimes this is the case but that in itself is paradoxical – surely they should not need to work as much the rest of us.

Their very prosperity, however, is their undoing, as *Discretionary Time* explains. To take an example, if a City banker chooses not to work, then for each hour of leisure he must forgo the £200 that he could have earned at his desk. Taking account of this opportunity cost, that makes going to the cinema seem an expensive indulgence. His cleaner, on the other hand, forgoes only a tenner when she decides to go home and watch TV. Put this way, the banker's decision to work on seems rational. But the reality is that he is already vastly better off than his cleaner and the extra £200 will make little difference to his life. In other words, we work harder as we get richer because we are too greedy and short-sighted to realise when our coffers are already full.

But this is only half the story. In *Time: A User's Guide*, the German science writer Stefan Klein cites a study showing that the wealthy experience more time pressure even when they do not work harder – indeed even when they do not work at all. “The richest housewives, with cleaning women and gardeners at their beck and call, feel that they are in a constant state of stress.” The reason, he suggests, is they have more options that need sorting, prioritising and reconciling. Unlike the City banker's wife, the cleaner is unlikely to be worrying about where to build the swimming pool, whether the yacht is ship-shape and where to go skiing this year. For those for whom money is no object, the only limit is time.

Underlying all this is a culture of time that a few largely Protestant European and American nations have spread throughout the western world and increasingly beyond. Our work ethic teaches us that time is money, and to waste either is a sin. In a capitalist economy, labour is measured by the hour, rather than by the task. And, we all could have retired long ago if we would be happy with the simple pleasures enjoyed by our ancestors. But instead, our consumer society depends upon the creation of new needs, for televisions that are even flatter, computers that are even faster. As these three books suggest, we have created a culture wherein success and status depend upon being ever richer and ever busier.

The conclusion of *Discretionary Time*, an academic text based on a wealth of data from OECD countries, is that most of us have no one but ourselves to blame for our time-scarce predicament. Time pressure, they argue, suggests compulsion. But are we really forced to work so hard, take the kids to hockey, and redo the patio? No: these are our choices. If we see “free time” as the hour at the end of the day to read the paper once the children are in bed and the chores are done, then we never seem to have enough. But the authors suggest it would be more accurate to measure the amount of time we have left once we have met life’s necessities – what they call “discretionary time”. We could, after all, just work enough to feed ourselves, clothe the kids in hand-me-downs and wash only once a week. We would then have a lot more time on our hands: indeed, around 80 hours a week, or almost 12 hours a day, even accounting for sleep.

If we are not content to live on the poverty line, we might – and usually do – choose to spend a good many of these 80 hours further lining our pockets. But then, the book argues, we should not complain about our choice afterwards. We are, in fact, time-rich but profligate spendthrifts. For us to complain about not having enough time is like our banker claiming to be poor because he regularly splashes out his vast income on lavish dinners and fine wines.

But does it help the stressed executive to know that his packed diary is all his own doing? According to Stefan Klein, yes. He suggests that it is not lack of time per se that causes stress but lack of control. He cites the classic “Whitehall Study” of more than 10,000 British civil servants begun in 1967 and still on-going. This demonstrates a direct correlation between stress and feelings of powerlessness.

Those who felt their time was regulated by others “were up to two and a half times more likely to die from a heart attack or stroke than were colleagues who considered themselves to have control of their time”. Whereas there was no such link between long hours alone and stress. Recognising that we are choosing to stay late in the office than rush home to take little Olivia to her violin lesson is the first step to regaining control of our time. And that is the first step to low-stress living.

The second step is to understand better how we perceive time and what it means to spend it well or badly. Both Klein and Steve Taylor, author of *Making Time*, note that there is more to an hour than just 60 minutes: our own sense of time passing is only loosely linked to the ticking of the clock. Taylor asks us to imagine twins, one of whom spends an adventure-packed year travelling, the

other a year of workaday routine. For the first, the year is full of stimulation that enriches each moment and stays in his memory. For the second, each month passes all but unnoticed. The first “experiences more time in that one year than his brother does, he lives through more time, so in a sense, he has now actually lived for longer than his brother”.

We all know that two weeks of a holiday in a new country add more to our lives than, say, the following two weeks back at work. Which is why many of us have become novelty-junkies, seeking ever more exotic destinations or more extreme adventures. This is certainly to be recommended over sitting in front of the television, that great thief of time. But for those not inclined to bungee jump from the Eiffel Tower, Klein and Taylor point to a gentler way of expanding our days: simply by paying more attention to the here and now. Learning to focus on the present, for example through meditation, can help us to concentrate, beat stress and appreciate each moment.

Time: A User’s Guide, an international bestseller first published in Germany and now released in an excellent English translation in the UK, presents a rich landscape, full of interesting detail you will be talking about later in the pub or round the dinner table. *Making Time*, by contrast, is like a trip through suburbia: banal and repetitive. Both books purport to explain to the general reader how and why we perceive time the way we do, and they come to many of the same conclusions, but Taylor’s book has neither the scientific grounding nor the charm of Klein’s. It is as empty of insights as *Discretionary Time* and *Time: A User’s Guide* are full of them; and whereas they are based respectively on the latest sociological and neurological findings, Taylor bases his claims on a shallow trawl through the mystic’s book of common codswallop.

In one of many diverting asides, Klein explains the biological inheritance behind the stress-reaction. Our brains evolved to aid survival on the African plains, where “new stimuli were infrequent, and those that did appear could be of vital importance”. Our adrenalin-fuelled reaction made the difference between catching the evening’s meal or becoming someone else’s. But now we are bombarded with new stimuli – texts, e-mails, adverts – and though we “know full well that most of the messages we receive are pointless,” reminds Klein “we cannot help reacting with a level of intensity appropriate to a person on the savanna who hears rustling in the leaves.”

The problem, therefore, is not that we have too much to do and too little time but that we are too easily distracted and do not focus on making the most of the days we have. The solution: unplug the TV, switch off the mobile phone and do something that will stand the test of time.

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