Julian Pörksen

*Waste your time*

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# Waste your Time

Foreword by
Carl Hegemann

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## Contents

The Metaphysics of Wasting Time 7
*Foreword by Carl Hegemann*

Introduction 19

**I The Economization of Time**
Experienced Time, Physical Time 25
Clock Time 30
The Tyranny of the Clock: Time and Discipline 32
The Inner Clock: Internalization and Bad Conscience 36
Sacred Time: The Worshipper's Duty 38
Time Management: Self-Exploitation and Subjectivation 41

**II The Concept of Waste**
The Ultimate Machine 51
Surplus: Waste as Economic Necessity 53
The Utility Principle and Tamed Pleasure 55
Glorious Waste: Insubordination and Sovereignty 57

**III Wasting Time**
The Most Grievous of Sins 63
1. Wasting Time: A Delimitation 65
Intended Intentionlessness 65

www.alexander-verlag.com | TheaterFilmLiteratur seit 1983

Suspension of the Future: The Carefree State 66
Passivity 68
2. Instances 73
Idiorrhythmy: Sauntering and Dawdling 73
Rhythm of Drowsing: The Flâneur 76
Omissions: Procrastination and Truancy 77
Waiting: Diversion 81
Leisure: Delightful Indifference 83
3. Outlook: Theatre, for Example 90
Come to the Theatre! 94

Biographies 96
Bibliography 97
Illustrations 102

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# The Metaphysics of Wasting Time

Foreword by Carl Hegemann

*Due to its lack of tranquillity, our civilization is heading toward a new barbarism. At no time have active people, that is to say, restless people, counted for more. Among the necessary corrections in the character of humanity that we must therefore undertake is a considerable strengthening of its contemplative element.*

Friedrich Nietzsche

In the summer of 2011 Julian Pörksen made a film with the disconcerting title *Sometimes We Sit and Think and Sometimes We Just Sit*. The film was shown in February 2012 at the Berlinale, in the "Perspectives of German Cinema" section. At that time he was still studying dramaturgy at the Hochschule für Musik and Theater in Leipzig. The film was the result of a self-organized internship within the framework of his courses. This small book titled *Waste Your Time* can be seen as providing the theoretical basis of the film.

The unavoidable problem – that even a defence of doing nothing, of uneventfulness or time uselessly wasted, requires much work and discipline if it is to be persuasive – was clear to Pörksen from the outset, and that is precisely the joke behind the whole undertaking. In the programme booklet



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to *The Cherry Orchard* (in a production by Luk Perceval at the Thalia Theater in Hamburg which emphasized the play's almost complete lack of event), Pörksen refers to his film and concludes by saying, "The wonderful paradox of this work was how much planning and activity it took to make a film that centred on an idler, how much determined effort it required to gain something artistically from avoidance of action and create a space for it in the viewer's consciousness." The notes also tell us what led to his working with such concentration and persistence on the theme of inactivity and non-utility:

Happiness beckons those who are active. Voluntary inactivity, by contrast, is attended by a prohibition; to decide on a course of uneventfulness is not an option. Last year I saw a play with the actor Peter René Lüdike who made a game of this prohibition by doing nothing on stage for a virtuosic half-hour. An avoidance-artist. I wrote a playbook for him and we made a film together that circles around this idea: Peter, a wealthy 50-year-old man with family still intact, moves into senior housing with the idea of living out the rest of his life there. He is a "voluntary senior" who has entered an institution that in the public perception is something like a penultimate resting place, a place to die in rather than live. Peter, however, sits cheerfully unproductive by the drawn curtains in his room and undergoes no change throughout the rest of the film. Instead, as a hero of passivity,



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he delegates the task of dramatic development to secondary figures who take issue with his decision and try to come up with new interpretations. While his doctor sees symptoms of depression in his behaviour and thinks he has to help him, his care worker regards him as a model, a dropout from the society of exhaustion. His son, on the other hand, sees his decision as an escape to inactivity that ultimately amounts to attempted suicide and wants to rescue him. An elderly woman who also lives in the home eventually falls in love with his lack of interest because to her it is a space of freedom, a value-free zone.

We might add that the only "luxury" the film's hero has brought with him to his penultimate resting place is the Ultimate Machine that Pörksen describes at the beginning of the second chapter of this book and which has no other function than to turn itself off as soon as someone has turned it on. This process is fundamental to the metaphysics of wasting time.

A useless film on inactivity and the dynamic that generates inactivity in its environment. And now a small, intelligently calculated and solidly constructed book on the joys of wasting time and ignoring self-evident economic truths. It is a joy to read, at least I have found it so. It leaves me with the exhilarating feeling of having witnessed a long overdue process of liberation. Pörksen allows himself to utter a few



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simple truths that are still taboo, although most people at least occasionally act according to them, if only with a bad conscience. They are nothing new, and there is probably very little danger that they will ever fall into oblivion, but they do not fit as positive maxims into the logic of the creative market society's political economy, where thoughts of utility and advantage, not to mention personal egotism, seem to be the driving force of all action.

Time and money, as we well know, are synonyms in our market- and performance-based society; it is not permitted to waste either. For the rationality of all economic activity is measured by time. Time expended to achieve an end result tells us whether a specific activity makes sense or not. It only makes sense from the economic point of view if it pays off, if not immediately, then later at least. Julian Pörksen opts out of this self-evident principle of accounting. He sets up a parallel account and seeks to explain the necessity of the other hidden side of the economy, which resists all instrumental, goal-directed activity. This side is always present as an implicit negativity to be overcome, for if there were no inclination to non-rationality, waste, excess, and asocial behaviour, all goal-directed action, all self-discipline, would be superfluous – it would be targeting a void. In other words, all these lovely virtues – discipline, self-definition, optimization, etc. – can be postulated as meaningful only to the extent that there exist opposing tendencies that need to be curbed and held in check. If lethargy and lack of discipline



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were ever eliminated, their antitheses would instantly lose their meaning.

But the discourse Pörksen represents is not primarily about this conceptual interdependence; it is concerned with a provocative re-evaluation of uselessness. Terms typically used to criticize are given a positive sense. Wasting time is to be seen as something important and good. This recalls Kant's notion of aesthetic judgement: the "disinterested delight" in the beautiful, the enjoyment of something that is not to be used for anything else – enjoyment that Kant reserves for aesthetic contemplation alone. Schiller too has assigned the "aesthetic impulse to form" (which releases man "from all that might be called constraint, alike in the physical and in the moral sphere" [*On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, 27th Letter]) to its own "joyous kingdom", where it is allowed to express itself in play beyond all goals as long as it does not deny the illusory character of its action. Yet for Pörksen, wasting time and doing nothing are not confined to the aesthetic world; they are desirable positions in day-to-day life as well.

To claim value for aesthetic positions outside of art, however, is regarded as fundamentally suspect. One of the first to discover this was Dostoevsky, who declared war on the so-called "instrumental rationality" (*Zweckrationalität*) of the political economy and opposed it with "nonsense". In his *Notes from Underground*, he describes the machinery of humanity's constant improvement by the consistent use of reason as repulsive and indecent. For the Underground Man



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the idea that all human behaviour could be cogently and validly determined by a rational higher development was a nightmare. Private advantage as the uncontested guideline of all action seemed to him a dead end; and he found the maxims that people always act out of "well understood private interest" and never do anything detrimental to themselves to be both empirically false and inhuman. Principles like these would ultimately bring about an end to all surprise and unpredictability, to everything, in other words, that distinguishes a human being from a machine. Through utilitarian economic thinking, human beings will become "organ stops" which do nothing but "function" (Dostoevsky, *Notes* I.7, trans. Constance Garnett [online]). If rational progress could declare once and for all what was most advantageous for us in every conceivable situation, there would no longer be any freedom or possibility of choice.

Dostoevsky, 150 years ago, was probably one of the first to describe the logical downside of advantage-rationality or a planning calculus. He pulled the figurative emergency cord by claiming to find the greatest advantage precisely in non-rationality, in the ignoring of calculations, in nonsense: "One's own free unfettered choice, one's own caprice, however wild it may be, one's own fancy worked up at times to frenzy – is that very 'most advantageous advantage' which we have overlooked, which comes under no classification and against which all systems and theories are continually being shattered to atoms" (ibid.).



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Dostoevsky's thesis – that human beings can only prove they are more than "organ stops" by not doing what is expected of them, but some nonsense instead, and that their whole power consists in this – would, if taken seriously, torpedo the entire political economy, which down to the present time must take utility and effectiveness among market participants as its supreme maxims.

Here in the St. Petersburg cellar a thought was born which so inspired Nietzsche that he declared Dostoevsky to be "one of the happiest discoveries of my life" (*Twilight of the Idols,* section 45), and Bataille's theory of waste is clearly part of the same tradition.

This is the background against which Julian Pörksen sets his two models of subjective constitution, of what makes us human beings. First there is the "time-economical model", which is always accorded primary status because it emphasizes our autonomy and assumes that we shape the world to our will through objective activity and thereby acquire something like an identity. In this model, self-consciousness constitutes itself as consciousness of our effectiveness in the world. "The essence of the I consists in its activity" (Johann Gottlieb Fichte). Then the opposing model, which Pörksen finds in Bataille: that we can only grasp our self-conscious nature when we renounce objective activity, when we stop appropriating the world, stop defining ourselves and everything else, and rather allow ourselves to be defined. Bataille's conclusion: "*Self-consciousness* … is a consciousness



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that no longer has anything as its object" (Bataille, *Share*: see Chapter 2 below).

Pörksen backs the second model, opposing it, as Bataille does, to the productive logic of the *vita activa* and developing a qualitative concept of time that at least temporarily permits the realization of another mode of life: laziness, idleness, dawdling, truancy, sauntering about, waiting for nothing in particular. These are what create identity: everything that is unproductive. The state of aesthetic contemplation, which does not remain confined to the realm of aesthetic illusion, is crucial. Passivity is seen as the condition of subjective identity, not, as in the first model, that what hinders it.

The only living philosopher who takes a similar position is Boris Groys, who, like Dostoevsky, comes from St. Petersburg and who introduced the following model of the subject and the psyche in an interview some years past concerning Dostoevsky, Bakhtin, and Bulgakov (published in *Einbruch der Realität – Politik und Verbrechen* [Berlin, 1992]). "I would say that the psyche is generally an entity at rest. The only thing a person prefers to do is relax, otherwise nothing... We should imagine a model of the psyche like the following: we find ourselves first in a state of equilibrium, are ejected from this state, and then do things to restore it – and this ritual constantly repeats itself. The whole of life is more a dramatization of this effort than the effort itself" (65). Whether what he describes here is a model of the "Russian soul" I don't really know, but in any case it profoundly con-



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tradicts western thought's logic of productivity, in which the psyche is a restless entity that occasionally has to pause solely in order to recover its restlessness or regenerate its capacity to work. The striking thing is that neither Boris Groys nor Julian Pörksen themselves seem to follow the countermodel they propagate. Groys is a highly productive intellectual labourer as professor, writer, and curator, and I made the acquaintance of Julian Pörksen as Christian Schlingensief's well-organized and reliable personal collaborator, before he began his studies in Leipzig.

Pörksen and Groys themselves seem to follow a different model of the subject than the one they represent and propagate. But it is not the economic model of autonomy either. De facto they represent both models simultaneously, even though these are mutually opposed. They strive to be passive and active in equal measure. This is a contradiction, but perhaps an unavoidable one. For if such a thing as a subject – a living self-conscious entity – is thought to constitute itself at all, it can only be through the conflict, or contradiction, between both these models. For, in the first place, autonomy and determination are interrelated concepts, so that one cannot logically exist without the other; and this means, secondly, that both models of the subject are interdependent and one cannot be substituted for the other. Or more simply put: determining oneself and letting oneself be determined are two opposing kinds of relationship to the world that mutually condition each other. The



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one cannot exist without the other. The subject consitutes itself in necessary self-contradiction.

Groys and Pörksen know that both sides are necessary; otherwise neither of them would work so much. But then why do they so vehemently advocate laziness and waste, and why is that so liberating? Very simple: our society has allowed one side to hypertrophy and tried to deny the other its raison d'être. Their appeals in behalf of wasting time and doing nothing are really meant as a strategic intervention in behalf of what the society of creativity and achievement criminally neglects. For Pörksen the theatre is the ideal place for such strategies, since it is an institution dedicated to the wasting of time, a place where enormous effort is expended, beyond all time-economical considerations, to produce something that serves no prior interest and does not have to calculate some advantage, and the audience watches without expecting to derive any specific advantage from it.

When asked whether his model does not a little too onesidedly focus on contemplation, Boris Groys said, "I agree. But one can be sure that others are active – and with time will become even more active. One can always count on activity and creativity" (in Hegemann and Groys, "Metanoia. Der Künstler als unbewegte Beweger oder die Welt als ewige Ruhestätte," *Lettre Internationale*, Autumn 2010).

Thus it is hardly necessary for us to recall here Marx's virtually inarguable contention that a nation which stopped working and surrendered to laziness even for just a few



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weeks would be a dead nation. We can hardly imagine something like this occuring in western civilization. Therefore, Groys continues, "we can relax with respect to our actual positioning in the world. Others will position you, even if you don't want it. So we don't need to worry about that" (ibid.). With this in mind we will be able to understand the following statements of Groys, which I want to reproduce here in their complete form, even though this foreword is already rather burdened with quotations: "We don't have to worry that nothing more will be created; all humanity creates, everyone is vital and full of energy. We have to work to have no energy, to do nothing, produce nothing … in order to preserve a position which remains central for a civilization and culture which makes only one demand: to be active. This unbelievable activity – the fact that all people want to make themselves seen and be permanently doing something – why does this happen? Because people think that someone is watching them and approving what they do. For a long time that was God. He sat in heaven and watched them, and this feeling moved them forward, that's why they made such an effort. Now God is dead. What to do? Now we have to produce this contemplative position ourselves, in order to keep activity going. Activity keeps going because, instead of God, Duchamp, Warhol, and Schlingensief are watching people. Otherwise no one would do anything. They represent the unmoved God who moves everything" (ibid.).



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This metaphysical appeal, which declares artists and contemplative idlers the unmoved movers who have taken God's place, understands itself as an attempt to rescue activity. Pörksen's film about utter inactivity illustrates this very well. If one person sits down and stops doing anything, others become almost insanely active: we don't need to worry about activity. Could this also mean that wasting time and doing nothing to the point of asociality are temporarily necessary conditions that the subject should self-consciously enter into without anxiety, if it does not wish to become stunted? It very much seems so. But these trans-economical modes of contemplative experience thrive only when they are not themselves functionalized and fed into the economic process. The compulsion to thoroughly economize the entirety of life is a dead end, even for the economy.



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# Introduction

*Use time well, it exits with such speed;*
*With management you'll have it when you need.*
Goethe, *Faust I* (Mephisto)

Many experiences have given rise to the following analysis, experiences that, for all their difference, share one common trait: the suspension of a certain kind of time-consciousness. Whether it was a matter of being head over heels in love or contemplating a felicitious night at the theatre, of waiting eight hours for a train on an Indian railway platform or falling by chance into long and wandering conversation, each situation involved a shift in my perception of time. They were moments marked by a joyous absence of purpose and expectation, a pleasantly passive experience of events, an engagement with time untroubled by any sense of compulsion. The obligation to make use of time, to get something out of it, was lifted for a while.

This observation prompted me to study a number of phenomena and figures who break in widely different ways with this compulsive "economic" exploitation of the time allotted to them: Beckett's hapless clowns, doomed to lives of inaction; Melville's refusal-artist Bartleby; Büchner's heroes of indolence; Goncharov's Oblomov, mired in a state of



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almost complete inertia; Eichendorff's blithely errant Good-for-Nothing; Dante's procrastinating Belacqua. Happily or unhappily, voluntarily or involuntarily, they all flout the tyranny of the clock, assert a position of passivity, and so find themselves in a remarkable state of disparity with the constant busyness of the world.

This busyness rests on the economization of all areas of life. Everything is understood in the context of productivity, every action evaluated according to its usefulness, every moment of time interrogated for its potential. Clocks beat out the uniform rhythm of this utilitarian concept of time in every available location; bookshops in airports and railway stations offer manuals on improved time-management; a plethora of seminars and courses promise techniques for optimizing our temporal budget. At the same time we are increasingly bombarded by invitations to escape this same stressful routine so dominated by the sense of temporal urgency and remove ourselves from the flood of information. A weekend internet sabbatical, a retreat in a monastery, a few days in the country: these are the kinds of things managers, politicians, and business people recommend when asked how they relax. But ultimately these pauses in the routine serve to enhance perfomance capability: they are part of the paradigm of productivity. Even the current discourse focusing on the fast-track lifestyle and the need to slow down, on the society of achievement and the society of exhaustion, typically leaves the utilitarian paradigm untouched – it



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simply shifts the optimization compulsion to other areas. The consensus is still that time is a scarce commodity and the recommended alternative is simply a different way of managing the budget, a reallocation of resources that still always seeks to wrest the maximum gain from the moment. This ultimately amounts to the lines of Mephisto quoted above, when, disguised as Faust, he advises a young, disoriented student to "Use time well, it exits with such speed …" (lines 1908–9).

The subject of the following pages will be precisely the crucial instance in which this economic compulsion to exploit time is ignored: the wasting of time. But instead of dismissing it as an unproductive irritant, we will attempt to defend it with a new conceptual definition. The first, general chapter therefore is devoted to the origin of the prevailing model of time and its effects on consciousness, experience, and our self-understanding. The second chapter is concerned with Georges Bataille's concept of waste and his philosophical-economical justification of voluntary loss as both a necessity and a source of pleasure, which provides the groundwork for the the third chapter. In this final section we will sketch out a concept of wasting time in the positive sense as a mode of voluntary passivity and subsequently examine various instances of unutilized time, in order to conclude by asking to what extent we can understand theatre as an institution dedicated to the wasting of time.



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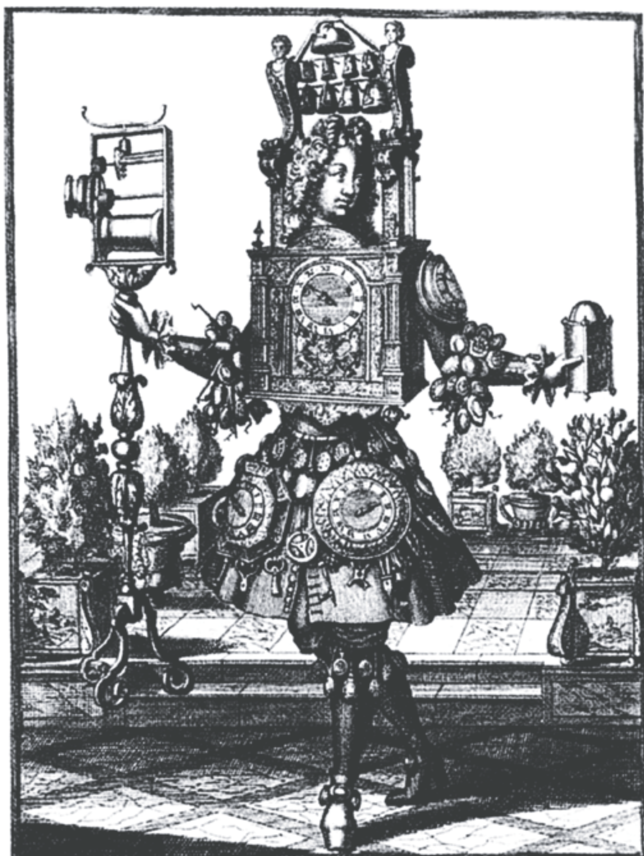

# I

# THE ECONOMIZATION OF TIME

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*What power imposes first and foremost is a rhythm*
*(in every possible sphere: life, time, thought. discourse)*
*Roland Barthes*

## Experienced Time, Physical Time

How are we to understand time beyond the prevailing paradigm marked by science and the economy? Or to ask the question more directly: What is time? The question arouses a certain discomfort, thought stumbles, perhaps we point helplessly at the clock or resurrect a few ideas from a former physics course. Hardly anyone will be in a position to give a coherent explanation of the physical or philosophical concepts. Our theme here is not the whole scope of knowledge on the subject. We propose only to make a few distinctions that will be useful for what we will say in the following pages.

One answer to the question of what time is, is found in the eleventh book of Augustine's *Confessions*: "When no one asks me, I know what it is; but when I want to explain it to someone who does ask, I'm at a loss" (*Confessions* XI. 14). An exemplary answer in many respects. For if there is an intuitive knowledge of time, but this knowledge cannot be fruitfully interrogated either by others or by oneself – if it resists formulation the moment the question is asked – then



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there are only two possible conclusions. Either time is not a meaningful object of philosophical speculation, and there is no alternative but to lay down our intellectual weapons; or the question has been wrongly posed and requires reformulation. Augustine did reformulate the question by determining in the first place that the three times – past, present, and future – do not really exist in the literal sense: "Both these times, past and future: how should they actually *be*, since the past no longer *is*, and the future *is* not yet. The present by contrast, if it would continually remain present and not shift into the past, would no longer be time at all, but eternity" (ibid.). By this criterion, time manifests itself in its capacity to differentiate events, to put them into a series from the standpoint of the present, establishing an *earlier* and a *later*, in contradistinction to a *now*. Although we cannot speak of a true *being* of these times, they do exist in the present of consciousness: as "memory", "appearance", and "expectation" (*Confessions* XI. 20). On the other hand, this triad – and here the circle closes – permits inferences with respect only to the time-sense and time-consciousness of the individual, not to the nature of time itself. And so the question of time must always be a question of how time is experienced and felt.

Hans Castorp, the hero of Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*, finds himself caught up in very similar considerations. He stands on the balcony of the sanatorium very early in his stay there, keeping his cousin Joachim company



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as the latter takes his temperature, and going on about his ideas on the phenomenon of time – not suspecting that he is drawing on the central repertoire of philosophical hypotheses. "'So then, what is time?' Hans Castorp asked, bending the tip of his nose so forcefully to one side that it turned white and bloodless" (*Magic Mountain*, trans. Woods, 64). A conversation unfolds from which two basic positions emerge. Representing the first is Joachim, who insists that there is an "actual" time that can clearly be measured. Opposing this physical concept of time is Hans Castorp's philosophical approach, which centres on Augustine's relativistic principle of time as experienced and perceived by the subject.

Hans Castorp's ruminations are based on a banal but critical observation: the possibility of having entirely different perceptions of the same physical span of time, of experiencing the proverbial minute with an entirely different sense of its duration. "In order for it to be measurable, it would have to flow *evenly*. But where is it written that it does that? It doesn't do that for our conscious minds, we simply assume that it does, just for the sake of convenience. And so all our measurements are merely conventions, if you please" (64). This experience of a fundamental discrepancy between lived time and physical time, between non-uniform perceptions of a uniformly enumerated continuity, will be of later significance.

The measures and conventions that we assume "just for the sake of convenience" are based on a physical concept of



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time, on the idea of time as a linear continuum that can be divided into cyclically returning intervals of constant duration. This arrangement has gradually taken hold and led to a globally uniform fixation and synchronization of the "course of time". Yet this temporal system is by no means a representation of "actual" time, no effigy of its "natural course", but a historically developed, socially normative construction that finds its ubiquitous expression in the clock (see Norbert Elias, *Über die Zeit,* II, 78 f.). "If our clocks were just machines that measured time, then the change could not be as significant as it is. More drastic is the fact that they are machines that create time, that generate time" (Ernst Jünger, *Sanduhrbuch*, 129). That this model of time authoritatively governs our daily lives can be explained by its economic function. The clock has become the critical instrument of control, the yardstick of productivity. It is the schema by which everything can be accounted for, for it makes it possible to put a value on *should* (estimated time) and *have* (time actually needed). Thus time-consciousness marked by economic concerns makes time appear as something we have at our disposal. A lifetime is understood as a potential to be formed and evaluated, an available capital that should be exploited. The ascendancy of this idea can be clearly seen in our daily speech. When we speak of time, we use expressions that are saturated with economic notions: time can be possessed and given, managed and budgeted, robbed, stolen, and saved, gained and lost, used and wasted.

How did this economic model of time come about? What changes to consciousness and self-conception have accompanied this standardization process? I will briefly outline a few important aspects of this development in the following pages.



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## Clock Time

The gift of a first watch, at least in my memory, is a curiously decisive moment in a child's life. Not that I could do much with the idea of clock time – life had other rhythms: parents were responsible for the structures, they were the ones who divided up and managed the day. The attraction of the gift had to do with its symbolic character, with the feeling of belonging to the adult world from now on, of being initiated into its rules. So at first, whenever anyone asked what time it was, I would proudly and officiously give them the exact information right down to the second. Ernst Jünger describes the implications of the gift of a watch in his *Sanduhrbuch* [*The Hourglass Book*]: "When we give the child a watch, it means more that we are burdening him with part of our responsibility. Yet it is necessary, for our rhythm is the rhythm of the clock, and one could say that the great drama of machine technology and ever stricter automatism began when the gears of the first mechanical clock began to turn" (18).

Before the invention and implementation of the mechanical clock, which most historians date roughly to the beginning of the 14th century (see Carlo M. Cipolla, *Clocks and Culture*), daily life and work were determined predominantly by natural rhythms: seasons, position of the sun, tides, constellations of the heavenly bodies. Only a few crucial points, such as sowing and harvesting, were set and



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publicly announced, first by religious, then governmental authorities. This cyclical, need-oriented, agrarian model of time was replaced in the modern era by a new version.

As the establishment of the calendar was an important prerequisite for trade capitalism, so the mechanical clock – which in the Middle Ages was still a rare and prestigious decorative element of church towers, palaces, and monasteries – became a central instrument of rising industrial capitalism (see Kerstin Jürgens, "Ökonomisierung der Zeit" [2007], 167–73). Of course there were already much earlier technical means of measuring time (sun and water clocks, as well as hourglasses), but these processes differed from the possibilities introduced by the mechanical clock in three essential ways. First, the former only permitted divisions into fairly rough units. Second, these units were not mutually adjusted, so that there was no universally valid reference system: the determination of time differed from place to place. And third, these non-mechanical clocks were to be found only in exclusive institutions, such as monasteries and palaces; thus they were not publicly accessible and had little influence on the temporal organization of production and life. It was only the mechanical clock, the development of which was accompanied by the establishment of a scientistic, initially physics-dominated world-view that made it possible for an exact, precisely regimented, uniform, and public time-reference system to be put into place. And this is what determines our understanding and consciousness of time today: time is clock time.



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