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Fundamentals of Time for Durable Living in the 21st
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Book Reviews

Freek Broekman, *Alle Waar is Naar Zijn Tijd: Tijdfundamenten van Duurzaam Leven in de 21ste Eeuw* [Every Commodity in its Own Time: Fundamentals of Time for Durable Living in the 21st Century]. Aspekt: Soesterberg, 2005. 288 pp.

Great Expectations

Since January 2006, I have kept a diary, recording things that somehow trigger my imagination or, as the case may be, my anger. Soon, the diary started to live a life of its own. It becomes demanding, on my time especially. I have a reasonably busy job, a loving relationship, children and friends, and I have little time. Time is the identity of true scarcity: it is absolutely scarce and the effort to manipulate the strategic resource of time merely underlines the futility of doing so. The opportunity cost of time does not lead to time, but at most to the awareness of opportunities foregone.

Saving time takes time and provokes an unpredictable backlash that may well be more costly than the original time saving promised. According to Robert Musil (1970), there are three things you can do: keep your mouth shut when you have nothing to say; stick to chores when there is nothing remarkable to do anyway; have no feeling at all, except when you are carried away by the irresistible. The last treatment, Musil reminds us, is the heavyweight of the three. It is the gist of his chapter on the 'utopia of the exact life', a real utopia for the 'professional', a bridge too far (a true utopia) for the lucky ones who have not yet completely succumbed to their greedy professions.

Freek Broekman obviously loves literature. Judging by his book, Musil escaped his attention. In his eager attempt to enlighten the subject of 'time control', Broekman also offers us three options (p. 142), reminiscent of the three treatments (*Abhandlungen*) as suggested by Musil. These are: acquire more disposable time; save on useless expenditures of time; isolate yourself from the distractions of the world. Admittedly, my preference is with Musil, but the echo is there. And so is the

context, for the utopia of the exact life is nothing but the mocking par of Broekman's 'exact time' as the stick and carrot of time in a frenzied world, gasping for a breath of time in order to gain the luxury of time to breathe.

Time is the awareness of measurement and the measurement of awareness. In a world of *real time*, these tend to merge and to open up a bewildering spectre of new possibilities, puzzles, problems and paradoxes. Think of real time and the lifting of the erstwhile constraints on action. Actions can start anywhere at any time and, through real time, they, and their effects, will prove real enough. Real time impacts on the realm of communication too. Once, we depended on co-ordination. Now we can bank on synchronization. Real time is, more than ever, time on the move. It exists, like money, in its movement, dispersal and disappearance, endlessly and endlessly renewed; a *perpetuum mobile* indeed, inescapable and inimitable. Money has to circulate, so does time. Yet, time is the difference in and of time; if we want to have it, we have to spend it. Something along these lines is, in my view, the substance of an essay on time. It may be that it is actually hidden in the book by Broekman. If so, I must apologize for being unable to find it. Let me explain what I did find and why a very timely subject got caught in the neck of its own hour-glass.

The Book: An Hour-glass

There are nine chapters in the book, partly in chronological order, partly thematic. Chapters 1 and 2 (on the pre-historical and classical fundamentals of the awareness of time; and on an expanding world of making money through being quicker) connect time and daily life, the rhythms of nature, faith, and the seasons, up to the point where the differentiation of the world (an economy coming into its own, for example) and the differentiation of activities (specialization, for example) both call for and are driven by an ever more exact and exacting time regime. Differentiation and specialization require trade and circulation, with the railway as a major illustration of the economy of capital goods (spending time to gain time); no railway, however, without agreement on time zones, time schedules. We learn how many minutes and seconds an hour contains, but not what they are. We learn to dimension, not to understand. The next two chapters (on desirable and obnoxious time constraints, budgets, controls and expenditures; and on time in the 20th century) sketch the growing empire of time: socially, individually and to a growing extent also into the future, for which we make provisions, insure ourselves, and for which we work and save now – to hopefully enjoy later. Chapters 5 to 9 pick up and expand the themes of time in the modern world. In Chapter 5, the grip of people on time is the theme (from standard to choice biographies; time management; the dilemmas of 'consumptivity' – think of productivity and thus the speed of production and transplant it to the realm of consumption). Chapters 6 and 7 deal with the apparent contradiction of having time and no income, and of having income but no time. The emphasis is on the 'apparent'; the author, not being from the school of phenomenology, equates appear-

ance and a clouded perception. Chapters 8 and 9, finally, point to the necessity of finding a new social and temporal balance between material and immaterial (wealth and well-being), leading to a plea for a world where time adopts the habitat of sustainability, in the wealthy West and in the needy Rest.

The Right, the Duty, the Freedom or the Plight: The Choice of Time or Time to Choose?

What, now, to make of the book? Summarizing is not easy; the chapters are highly repetitive. A mistaken identity of redundancy and repetition? Or of the replacement of the convenience of redundancy by the abundance of repetition?

Broekman uses the image of the hour-glass to introduce us to his subject. An hour-glass is a fine metaphor for the reduction of complexity in order to create it. We all do it, continuously. We focus on something and not on something else; because we do so, we transform our something by adding to it, connecting it, comparing it, and so on. The mechanism of the hour-glass doesn't create visibility, but at least some semblance of it. For a claim, however, more is needed as any insurance company can tell you.

As a device for measuring time, the hour-glass is crude. Foucault's pendulum is already much better. It all leads, in the end, to standard time. Simplifying the jungle of times and time indicators (a morrow as a yardstick for a piece of land and for time, moons and suns, seasons and their accompaniments) is what we find in the top half of the hour-glass. Ever finer calibrating of time, and at the same time expanding its sphere of influence to practically each and every domain of life, is what we find in its lower half. How did we get from the top to the bottom, how did we pass through the neck of the glass? And at the end of the day, can we peek through it for a new day?

A few themes stand out, like scarcity of time and scarce time, psychological time preferences (preferring present to future satisfaction and the explanation of the phenomenon of interest) and factual time preferences (symbolized by the rational allocation of time through 'time management'), time dimensions (past, present, future), and the struggle between exogenous (imposed) and endogenous (autonomous) control of time. The author stresses the difference between time scarcity and scarce time. When we have more demands on time than there is available, we are in a situation of time scarcity. When we choose between alternative modes of spending time then, of course, we are in a situation of scarce time. The difficulty is that time scarcity and scarce time may interfere with one another. The question then is: does the alleviation of the scarcity of time (higher productivity, for example) add to or subtract from scarce time? Does it add to claims, to responsibilities, to freedoms, to plights?

As a good economist, Broekman takes great pains to convince us that when time is scarce, for example in deciding on how much to work, to care and to devote to

leisure, there may be a trade-off. If work pays more, shall we spend more time on it? We have an income effect: with more money we can stop work earlier – therefore, more leisure. And we have a substitution effect: the price of one hour of leisure is one hour less work. So, if the price of work goes up, so does the price of leisure – therefore, less leisure. The net effect depends on ‘preferences’ and ‘tastes’. Here, the economist loses his right, attempts to integrate ‘frames’ and other insights from psychology notwithstanding. Moreover, the more we can do with our time, the more vexing the decision on what to spend it on. The quip that ‘everything is possible but not everything at the same time’ is indeed a timely truism. The pleasure of time spent gets submerged under the doubt of the luring opportunities forsaken. Consequently, exit occurs more often, for the cost of remaining loyal, even to our own remembrance of what we chose and why, is too expensive – in time. Instead, we speed up our consumption and vie for ‘consumptivity’, the consumer’s equivalent of the producer’s productivity.

Coda: Time, Remembrance, Memory

Arguments are more than ruminations, and arguments should be presented only after sieving. The book does not stand the argumentative test. For example, the class of arguments on measurable times is very much distinct from the arguments on the concept of time. Concepts may point to measurements, but they are not measurements themselves. Contested concepts are not contested because they cannot, ‘yet’, be measured. Charting the immeasurable is food for philosophy, aesthetics, theology and also common sense. Measurements can be described, with the latest requirements of exactitude as a guiding principle. It is just going through the motions, from simple and numerous, to complex and standardized. Not so for the immeasurable. It consumes more space and time than we have space for, or the stomach. That, again, I take from Musil. If, therefore, we want to give credit where credit is due, and if we want to be as complete as can be, one book on time, measurable and immeasurable alike, cannot suffice. What Broekman sets out to do cannot be done. However much the author has tried on the one hand to provide a bridge between science and philosophy, between the arts and the sciences, between science and the practice of life, on the other hand the lighthouse illuminating it all remains beyond reach. How could it be otherwise?

In the end, Broekman offers us an elementary ‘fundamental’ choice, dressed in the verbiage of trust. When we do the right thing, our gesture will be reciprocated in good faith. If not, then not. Mind you, this is the choice of the economist and so what we get is merely the one best way, the trespassing of which will lead us astray and, worse, into the abyss. The shadow of the economist’s choice is, as Hirschman has it, the fall from grace.

We do not have to skate on such thin ice though. We can loosen the tight negative economic coupling of the scarcity of time and scarce time. We can reverse the order of memory and remembrance. We may succeed in that, succeed a little and we can

fail. And try again. Our menu of choices is not as dismal, fatal and once and for all as Broekman tries to impress on us. There is room for experiments and thus for mistakes and the opportunities to learn from them. Who knows, we might even get a better understanding of what we are talking about when we talk about time. The hour of the hour-glass may yet strike.

Reference

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Barbara Adam & Chris Groves, *Future Matters: Action, Knowledge, Ethics*. Leiden : Brill, 2007. ISBN 1873-7463 ; ISBN 978 90 04 16177 1, 218pp. £39.72.

One crucial difference between the past and the future is that events belonging to the past are beyond the control of our present actions. Although new meanings and interpretations can be assigned to them, the historical course of events is set and cannot be modified. Events can only be submitted to a “retrospective critique” (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001), they cannot be altered or reordered. The past is thus the domain of knowledge, not action; from the point of view of action, it is closed. The future, on the other hand, is subject to social actors’ current doings and the ways they set the agenda in terms of their future aims. It is not “merely imagined but also made” (p. xiii) and the decisions made in the present can have consequences extending very far beyond current circumstances. Indeed, they can affect generations to come. The way the future is related to thus raises very serious social, ethical and political issues. Notably, it begs answers to questions such as: Who has the power to create acceptable representations for events that, being yet to come, are thus also partially “up for definition”? How may future’s definitions ‘work to limit imagination and negotiation to accrue perception of power in the hands of the planner’ (Scollon, 2007)? What is at stakes when we are dealing with events which have not come into existence yet and for which claims made can be brushed aside on the count that they are not falsifiable at the time they are made?

Adam & Groves’ *Future matters: Knowledge, Action, Ethics* embarks on a riveting intellectual journey into these and other questions through an exploration of how the future has been engaged with in the past, how it is engaged with now and how it could be engaged with in alternative ways. The book consists of nine rich and elegantly styled chapters, which contribute to the building of a coherent argument aiming to show how contemporary ways of presenting the future as open, decontext-