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A Geography of Busyness

[. . . pause]
—David Mamet's suggestion for his own epitaph

IF YOU CASUALLY GREET AMERICANS WITH THE QUESTION "HOW ARE you?" they are likely to respond about how busy their lives are, perhaps scrunching up their faces and bodies to show how anxious and stressed they feel. The odd thing about this is that both parties understand the response may be a type of bragging, as in "Look how important I am." This would seem exceedingly curious to visitors from many other cultures—like bragging that you are having a nervous breakdown. It is readily accepted, however, in a culture that assumes time is money and that every moment not doing something is a wasted one. To be busy is to be a worthwhile person.

Compare this to a student from eastern Africa whom I once interviewed about the meaning of wasted time. "How can a person waste time?" he asked. "If you're not doing one thing, you're doing something else" (Levine, 1997).

J. T. Fraser, the founder of the International Society for the Study of Time, wrote, "Tell me what to think of time, and I shall know what to think of you." The temporal norms of a culture—how people conceive, measure, and use time—provide an exceedingly informative window on what the people of that culture value; and no temporal values divide cultures more than those related to busyness. How much and often should people work? What is the appropriate balance between work and play? Is speed a good thing? Should it be work before play or the other way around? Is there such a thing as doing nothing? Can time be wasted?

BUSYNESS = SPEED + ACTIVITY

I propose that the subjective experience of feeling busy has two main components: speed and activity.

Speed refers to the rate at which an activity is performed. It is the amount of activity per unit of time. The speed may be measured over brief and immediate periods of time, as when one experiences rapidly oncoming traffic or an upcoming deadline; or over longer, more sustained intervals, such as when we speak of the accelerating tempo of modern life.

The second component of busyness, activity, is the absence of unscheduled time. It is the amount of time that is consumed with activity; or, the ratio of doing things to doing nothing.

It is easy to confuse speed with activity. For one thing, highs and lows on both dimensions often manifest the same external appearance—movement or lack of movement—to the outside observer. There is also considerable overlap between the two: people with many things to do often move quickly and vice versa. When people have a lot they need to do, they tend to do these things faster.

Nonetheless, activity and speed are not one and the same. Speed is a way of doing more in a fixed amount of time. Activity means simply doing something, at whatever speed. When someone says they are busy, in other words, they may be experiencing a crunch of either speed or activity, or both.

This paper is about cultural differences in busyness. On both the speed and activity dimensions, we shall see, cultures may differ profoundly.

Cross-cultural data, part 1: Speed

For the past two decades my students and I have been conducting cross-cultural studies on the speed component of everyday life. In our most recent studies, we conducted several field experiments in the largest or other major city in each of 31 countries around the world. In one experiment, for example, we timed the average walking speed of randomly selected pedestrians over a distance of 60 feet. Another experiment sampled speed in the workplace; specifically, how long it took postal

clerks to fulfill a standard request for stamps. Each of the measurements was taken during main business hours in main downtown areas.

We found large cross-national differences. Most of these mirrored popular stereotypes. The fastest big cities, for example, tended to come from western Europe and industrialized Asia while those in economically struggling nations (such as Mexico, Brazil, and Indonesia) tend to be slowest. The differences were often substantial. For example, on the walking speed measure we found that pedestrians in Rio de Janeiro walk only two-thirds as fast as do pedestrians in Zurich, Switzerland. (For a detailed description of the methodologies and results of these experiments, see Levine [1997]; Levine and Norenzayan [1999]).

We then asked whether there are characteristics of places and cultures that might be related to their tempo. Are there elements in the "personality" of a place that determine, or at least to some degree predict, how fast or slow people move? From our experiments and the research of others, five principal factors appear to determine the tempo of cultures around the world: people are prone to move faster in places with vital economies, a high degree of industrialization, larger populations, cooler climates, and a cultural orientation toward individualism.

Our conclusions were clear: countries and cultures differ markedly in their overall speed of life and these differences are to at least some degree predictable by the demographic, economic, and environmental characteristics of these places.

The findings from our studies only tap the first component of busyness. For a more complete portrait it is important to note what we had not studied. It is here that the activity component of busyness comes into play. We measured the speed of workday life. But what about the duration of this tempo? To what extent do people pause between activities? How long are their off-hours? Do they take vacations? What is the balance between hard work and leisure?

Cross-cultural data, part 2: Work time versus playtime

Probably the best available cross-national data concerning these activity questions come from work statistics. The number of hours people

work may, of course, reflect different motives depending on the situation. This article is concerned with peoples' busyness as it reflects on their cultural values. For many people, however, busyness may have a very different meaning. Factory workers in third world nations who work long hours, for example, may be driven less by the value they place on achievement than by simply trying to earn enough money to feed their families.

It is informative, however, to compare the work-hour patterns of industrialized nations. In these places, it may be assumed, at least some degree of personal decision-making underlies the number of hours people work and, consequently, these patterns may reflect on the cultural values of these places. To the extent that this is so, these data informatively complement the speed data from our experiments.

Perhaps the best example is the United States. One of the most surprising results in our speed studies found that the United States, represented by its classic speedster New York City, scored an unexpectedly slow sixteenth in overall pace—right in the middle of the list. We were so surprised by the relative slowness of New York's scores that, as a reliability check, we sent out a second experimenter to collect a new set of observations; these turned out to be virtually identical to the first. We were initially frustrated by the New York data because they muddied our pre-experimental hypotheses. Could the stereotype of *La Dolce Vita* that has characterized European life (at least in the eyes of Americans) now be more aptly applied to New Yorkers? This conclusion becomes unlikely when we look at work-hour data. There is considerable evidence that in this realm the United States outpaces most of the world.

The work week. The average workweek in the United States is the longest of all industrialized countries. A 1999 report by the International Labor Organization found that the average annual paid working hours in the United States was 1,966, compared, for example, to 1,656 hours in France, 1,560 hours in Germany, and 1,399 hours in Norway (ILO News, 1999). Workers in the United States, in other words, put in an annual average of 310 more hours than their counterparts in France, 406 more

than workers in Germany, and 567 more than those in Norway. Taking a 40-hour week as a base, these figures indicate that the average U.S. worker labors almost 8 weeks more than workers in France, 10 more weeks than those in Germany, and more than 14 more weeks—over three months—than those in Norway.

It is notable that the difference in working hours between western Europe and the United States is widening. Until the 1940s the average hours in both Europe and the United States had been declining in tandem for nearly a century. In the United States, as in Europe, the issue of shorter hours was at the heart of the labor movement from the beginning; the question of work hours was once the "cause of the awakening" of the American laborer. "Eight hours for work, eight hours for sleep, eight hours for what we will," was the cry of turn of the century unionists. Many of the most dramatic and significant events in the labor movement's history—the strikes of 1886, the Haymarket riots, and the steel strike of 1919—targeted the length of the work day. At first, even employers supported shorter hours, not out of any particular idealism, but because they were convinced that overwork and fatigue were counterproductive; that safety, health, rest, and a semblance of family life would pay for themselves over the long run. As a result, there was a gradual and steady decline in work hours in the United States throughout the latter nineteenth century, and a dramatic reduction—from ten-hour days to eight-hour days—during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Later, the average workweek was cut from six to five days, resulting in the 40-hour week (Hunnicutt, 1988).

For a time it appeared that the downward trend in Americans' work time would continue. In 1930, for example, during the depths of the depression, economic visionary W. K. Kellogg (as in corn flakes), announced a revolutionary experiment: nearly every employee in his huge Battle Creek plant would thereafter work a six-hour day. The reduction in hours was accompanied by only a minimal cut in pay, since Kellogg believed that hard work would replace long hours. Labor historian Benjamin Hunnicutt, in his book *Kellogg's Six-Hour Day*, shows how the program was an instant success. It was lauded by the media and by

business and labor leaders and President Herbert Hoover himself. The front cover proclamation of one business magazine that this was "the biggest piece of industrial news since Ford announced his five-dollar-a-day policy" typified the reaction (Hunnicutt, 1996).

For nearly two decades, Kellogg's brainchild was considered a brilliant success by nearly every yardstick. Workers appreciated the extra time. Women, especially, reported that they enjoyed the added hours for activities like gardening, sewing, canning, caring for family members, and helping out in the neighborhood. Kellogg was equally pleased with the results. He reported that, as a result of the short schedule, overhead "cost was reduced 25% . . . labor unit costs reduced 10% . . . accidents reduced 41% . . . (days lost per accident) improved 51% . . . [and] 39% more people [were] working at Kellogg's than in 1929." Kellogg concluded that "with the shorter working day, the efficiency and morale of our employees are so increased, the accident and insurance rates are so improved, and the unit cost of production is so lowered that we can afford to pay as much for six hours as we formerly paid for eight" (Hunnicutt, 1996).

But in an increasingly work-obsessed nation, Kellogg's idyllic experiment was eventually doomed. In the aftermath of World War II, management came to subscribe to the view that, as one former Kellogg worker observed, "only an idiot would think you can get as much working less instead of more hours a week." Following the war, the company promoted a new policy that linked higher wages to greater productivity. Workers, hoping to cash in on the nation's postwar consumer bonanza, began to demand eight hours of work. Even the union fought for a return to eight hours. In a telling reflection of the national mood, Kellogg workers, management and the union began to trivialize the notion of leisure; time off work was "wasted," "lost," "silly." Working shorter hours acquired a demeaning, feminine label. "Six hours was for the women," recalled one worker. Those who held out for the old six-hour standard were "sissies," "lazy," or just "weird." Throughout the 1950's and 1960's, Kellogg employees steadily moved to an eight-hour workday. In 1985, the few remaining holdovers, more than three-

quarters of whom were women, surrendered. The milestone was barely reported in the media. The Kellogg story helps explain why the United States leads all industrialized countries in weekly work hours.

The agendas of labor unions. In the United States as a whole, the average workweek has remained unchanged for more than half a century. In fact, many experts believe that leisure time has actually been decreasing. Historian Juliet Schor, for example, in her widely publicized book *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure*, argued persuasively that the average American has less time than 20 years ago. Schor presents evidence that this loss of leisure is not an accident and that, as in the Kellogg case, one reason is the lack of attention unions in the United States have focused on the question of work time (Schor, 1991).

In Europe, on the other hand, the downward trend in work hours has persisted, albeit with increasing challenges. Unlike the United States, organized labor in Europe has kept the issue of shorter working hours at the top of its agenda throughout the postwar period. When economic crises hit, workers have fought the pressure for longer hours. In Germany, a series of bitter strikes in the 1980s earned a contract for a 35-hour workweek for members of the large German union IG Metall. This standard subsequently spread to much of the German labor force (Schor, 1991). The French successfully fought for even more lenient contracts. In 1996, after French truck drivers snarled the country with a series of bitter strikes, the government conceded to lower their retirement age to 55. (For people like dancers and musicians in opera companies, the retirement age in France is now as low as 45 years). With that issue settled, unions focused their attention on the length of the workweek. In January 2000, a 35-hour workweek was adopted (Smith, 2003).

The emphasis on free time is typical of the agendas of labor strikes in Europe. In Denmark not long ago, in the biggest labor strike in more than a decade, 510,000 workers shut down schools, disrupted mass transit, and limited hospital service. As in the French strikes, the volatile issue in Denmark was time: Denmark's labor unions were demanding a sixth week of annual paid vacation.

In the United States, strikes are virtually always about more money, rarely about more time. Contrary to labor trends in France, the percentage of Americans over 65 who still work has been rising in the last two decades. In 2000, it was higher than at any time since 1979, according to government statistics (Walsh, 2001). And so, after nearly 100 years of simultaneous decline, U.S. work hours, days, and years have at best remained flat over the last half century, while in Europe they have persisted in declining.

Vacation time. If we look at vacation time, the gap between western Europe and the United States is even wider. In Switzerland, for example, agreements mandate between four and five weeks of paid vacation for workers. Every country in Europe has collective bargaining agreements guaranteeing minimum paid vacations ranging from four to five and one-half weeks. In most cases, these mandated vacation periods are for as much as six weeks. In Sweden, it ranges up to eight weeks. According to recent statistics from the World Tourism Organization, Italy currently leads the world in average vacation time at 42 days a year (Infoplease, 2004). Generous leave time is also provided for other purposes. In France it is official national policy to allow women 22 weeks of paid maternity leave and an additional year of unpaid leave (Levine, 1997). The social welfare states of Scandinavia, where enhancing the psychological quality of life has long been a focus for both officials and the populace, go even further. In Sweden, new parents have in the past been entitled to a combined 12 months leave of absence at virtually full pay, and another 3 months at reduced pay. Swedish parents are also entitled to 60 days per year (120 days in some cases) at 80 percent of their normal pay to care for a sick child (Hadenius and Lindgren, 1992). Policies like these have become increasingly difficult to maintain with the new economic demands of the European Union. However, they persist. In the United States, vacation time for most workers remains limited to the traditional two weeks—that is, if the employee has been fortunate enough to avoid being shifted to seasonal contracts, in which case they may get no paid vacation at all (Levine, 1997). An even more extreme case of vacation deprivation is Japan, where even fewer days are taken off

than in the United States. Although the average number of paid vacation days offered in Japan hover around a respectable three weeks, the Japanese Ministry of Labor reports that only about half of this time is actually used. In 1990, for example, an average of 15.5 days of vacation time were authorized, of which 8.2 days were taken. In most cases, the unclaimed vacation time reflected employee choice.

The Japanese aversion to vacations took an even odder twist a few years ago when the Japanese government launched what must be a world's first: a government media campaign to persuade workers to take their full vacations. The reasoning behind the campaign was that fewer vacation days meant less consumer spending, which, in turn, was hurting the national economy. Even the phrasing of the government messages would have been startling in most other countries. Workers should take vacations, the government urged, out of loyalty to their companies. Advertising campaigns blanketed the country with slogans such as: "To take a vacation is proof of your competence." One summer, posters went up across the nation showing an idyllic mountain scene with two relaxing Japanese in safari suits lying on the ground next to a reclining leopard. On each poster was the summer's slogan, "Hotto Week"—the Japanese word for relaxation and a pun on the English word "hot." Alongside that was a more direct message in Japanese from the Labor Ministry, which essentially translates as: "We order you to take one week of vacation." The *Asahi Shimbun*, a large Japanese newspaper, plastered its walls with a poster showing a ferocious looking boss screaming into a telephone: "If you come to work, you're fired." But media campaign was no match for Japanese workaholism. The rate of used vacation days barely changed after the government's campaign began: 50 percent in 1986 versus 53 percent in 1992. It would be interesting to hear a Japanese worker explaining his decision to skip his vacation to a worker from Italy.

NATURE, EVENT AND CLOCK TIME

The examples I have been discussing so far pertain to systematic, quantitative comparisons of cultures and places. Even more profound differ-

ences emerge from anthropological case study research on individual cultures.

One of the most significant findings from this research is that cultures often measure time completely differently. Busyness—at least the type we generally talk about in the Western commercial world—is an offshoot of fixed schedules and marking the moments by a clock. As my student from Central Africa explained, time can only feel wasted when it is equated with money. To equate time with money, however, requires measuring the moments of the day with objective timepieces.

Much of the world, however, lives with minimal regard for clock time. In many cultures, the most important events in life continue to be governed by the clocks of nature—when to plant, when to sow, when to take the animals to the fields and when to bring them home. Lauer (1981) describes the Nuers from Sudan, whose calendars are based on the seasonal changes in their environment. They construct their fishing dams and cattle camps, for example, in the month of kur. How do they know when it is kur? It is kur when they are building their dams and camps. They break camp and return to their villages in the months of dwat. When is it dwat? When people are on the move. There's an old joke about an American on a whirlwind tour of Europe who is asked where he is. "If it's Tuesday," he responds, "this must be Belgium." If Nuers are asked the same question they might answer: "If it's Belgium, this must be Tuesday."

The Andamanese of India have constructed a complex annual calendar built around the sequence of dominant smells of trees and flowers in their environment. When they want to check the time of year, the Andamanese simply smell the odors outside their door (Rifkin, 1987). Monks in Burma have developed a foolproof alarm clock. They know it is time to rise at daybreak "when there is light enough to see the veins in their hand" (Thompson, 1967).

Birth, in his book *Any Time is Trinidad Time: Social Meanings and Temporal Consciousness* (1999), surveyed rural residents and farmers whose days are dictated by natural events, such as sunrise and sunset,

about Western time adages. Although most of them had satellite TV and were familiar with Western popular culture, Birth found that few recognized the phrases "time is money," "budget your time," or "time management."

Keeping time by natural events has become increasingly less useful, or even impossible, in most contemporary urban cultures. There is, however, a variation on this type of timekeeping, what we might call "event time," that continues to be dominant in much of the world. In clock-time cultures, the hour on the timepiece governs the beginning and ending of activities. When event time predominates, scheduling is determined by activities. Events begin and end when, by mutual consensus, participants "feel" the time is right. The distinction between clock and event time deeply divides cultures. Sociologist Robert Lauer (1981) conducted an intensive review of the literature concerning the meaning of time throughout history. The most fundamental difference, he found, has been between people operating by the clock versus those who measure time by social events.

Anthropologists have chronicled many examples of contemporary event-time cultures. Bock (1964) analyzed the temporal sequence of a wake conducted by the Micmac Indians of eastern Canada. He found that the wake can be clearly divided into gathering time, prayer time, singing time, intermission, and mealtime. But it turns out that none of these times are directly related to clock time. The mourners simply move from one time to another by mutual consensus. When do they begin and end each episode? When the time is ripe and no sooner.

Many people use their social activities to mark time rather than the other way around. In parts of Madagascar, questions about how long something takes might receive an answer like "the time of a rice cooking" (about half an hour) or "the frying of a locust" (a quick moment). Similarly, natives of the Cross River in Nigeria have been quoted as saying "the man died in less than the time in which maize is not yet completely roasted" (less than fifteen minutes). Closer to home, not too many years ago the New English Dictionary included a listing for the

term "pissing while"—not a particularly exact measurement, perhaps, but one with a certain cross-cultural translatability (Levine, 1997).

The international business standards of clock time and calendar scheduling play a role in most contemporary cultures, of course, but often they are not the dominant role. In Mexico, for example, there is a popular saying to "*darle tiempo al tiempo,*" or "give time to time." In other words, let time breathe; allow room for spontaneity and the unplanned to emerge by not overscheduling. Across the globe in Africa, it is said that "Even the time takes its time." In Brunei, people often awake with the question, "What is not going to happen today?"

Let me close this section with an anecdote from the writer Mark Salzman about his experiences as an Anglo teaching in China (Salzman, 1986):

> My students told me again and again that if I ever wanted to see them I could walk into their homes any time of day or night.
>
> "But what if you are busy?"
>
> "It doesn't matter! If you come, I won't be busy anymore!"
>
> "But what if you are asleep?"
>
> "Then wake me up!"

The notion that being busy, rushed and on a tight schedule, are virtues is difficult to comprehend when one lives in an event-time culture.

TOWARD A TAXONOMY OF BUSYNESS

Busyness is a broad term that may take multiple forms and serve many different functions. The particular form of busyness that predominates in a given culture may also tell us a great deal about what its people value. I'd like to suggest three categories that may be especially applicable to understanding these differences:

Busyness may fill a psychological need. Some individuals simply prefer staying busy over doing nothing. "Our nature consists in motion," wrote Blaise Pascal in 1660. "Complete rest is death . . . Nothing is so

insufferable to man as to be completely at rest, without passions, without business, without diversion, without study. . . . Men so much love noise and stir."

At a negative extreme, the psychological need to stay busy may take the form of compulsive activity that protects one from facing an existential void. By continuously focusing outward, a person may avoid facing him or herself. This type of busyness, in a sense, shuts down consciousness. It removes an individual from awareness of the present moment.

One would predict that these types of manifestations of busyness should be more common in affluent cultures. It would also be interesting to explore other predictors of this dynamic. In our speed studies, we found an imperfect relationship between speed and economics: some poor countries scored quite fast on our measures and some affluent ones were relatively slow. Is compulsive busyness better predicted by the economic productivity of a culture or by other variables that predict speed norms?

Busyness may be an instrumental strategy. This can have many variations. For example, busyness that takes the form of steady progress is a means for accomplishing a goal without having to rush. It may avoid stress, sloppy errors, burnout, and so on. Think here of "slow and steady wins the race."

As another example, busyness may be a practical strategy for avoiding hard work. If one looks busy it may discourage others from distracting them with new demands. Passive-aggressive workers (or their spouse) may stretch out a task because they know a new one is waiting for them to begin as soon as the first as completed. The person needs to appear to be busy, however, or it will be obvious they are dawdling in which case the strategy will backfire.

"The two most powerful warriors," Tolstoy once observed, "are patience and time." It would be interesting to see how these uses of busyness compare across cultures.

Being busy makes a social statement. This is especially true in cultures where time is money. Through a curious intellectual exercise, the civilized mind has reduced time—that most obscure and abstract of all

intangibles—to the most objective of all quantities: money. With time and things on the same value scale, it is possible to calculate how many working hours equal the price of a new refrigerator.

It also means that time is governed by the usual rules of economics. Consistent with the most basic of these rules—the law of supply and demand—the busier a person is, the more valuable is their time. This has profound social consequences. People wait longer and pay more for those whose time is scarce. Busy lawyers and performers, for example, not only charge more for their services but people are willing to wait longer to see them. Important people are usually seen by appointment only; and while those of higher status are allowed to make people below them wait, the reverse is strictly prohibited. The inverse is also true: your position in the waiting hierarchy often determines your importance The value of the lawyer or performer is enhanced by the simple fact that they are booked well in advance. This leads to even greater demand for their time, and so the cycle continues.

For the people doing the waiting, on the other hand, there is nothing like a long delay to put them in their place. They need not be reminded that the original meaning of the term "waiter"—as the French term "*attendant*" makes clear—was one who serves the whims of a superior. People who are busy, in other words, are perceived as more important and more valuable than those who are not.

In many parts of the world, however, this logic would make no sense. When I presented this busyness-equals-importance equation to a student from Burundi, he observed: "Central Africans generally disregard the fact that time is always money. When I want the time to wait for me, it does. And when I don't want to do something today—for any reason, whatever reason—I can just decide to do it tomorrow and it will be as good as today."

BUSYNESS CULTURE

The act of being busy, in other words, can have very different implications depending on the person and situation. To say that people in one culture are busier than those in another conveys little about the mean-

ing of those differences. Does the level of busyness reflect an underlying valuing of work versus play? Does the busyness suggest a cultural preference for doing things slowly and carefully? Is it mindless, compulsive movement? Is it a status symbol?

The answers to these questions provide an exceptionally clear window into the psyche of a culture. As the philosopher Oswald Spengler observed: "It is by the meaning that it intuitively attaches to time that one culture is differentiated from another." There is no better example of this than a culture's conception of busyness.

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