

Where Does the Time God?

BY L. ROGER OWENS

How have we become addicted to speed, to having what we want right now? Is the ever increasing speed of our world good or bad? And if it is bad, what can we do about it? The three books reviewed here take up these questions in very different ways.

I knew when I left for work this morning that a closed bridge would increase the traffic on my usual route. My preferred alternate route had road construction and a detour. So I consulted my Google Maps app on my iPhone, which proposed a third route – a mile shorter and, at least today, seven or eight minutes faster than either of the other two. I gladly went Google’s way.

Popular wisdom says our lives are speeding up and we have technology to thank or to blame. If life is speeding up and becoming more efficient, shouldn’t we have more time for relaxation and to pay attention to our lives and the lives of those around us? But we don’t. We endure longer commutes to work longer hours, spending less time enjoying leisurely meals with our families. How did we get here and where do we go next? Is the ever increasing speed of our world good or bad? If it is bad, what can we do about it? The three books reviewed here take up these questions in very different ways.

Mark C. Taylor, a professor at Columbia University, has written an at times maddeningly a-linear book: *Speed Limits: Where Time Went and Why We Have So Little Left* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014, 396 pp., \$22.00). While the subtitle suggests Taylor will tell a simple story, his account ranges through the history of theology, the industrial revolution, modern-day capitalism, and global climate change. The book ends with a doomsday scenario: “The growth and speed required to maintain growth are fast approaching the tipping point, which threatens not only economic and financial systems but also the conditions of human life on earth” (p. 330).

Far from telling a simple story about how individuals and families are pressed for time, Taylor wants to show how technology and speed have brought us to the brink of catastrophe.

His story begins with Martin Luther. Luther's challenge to the Catholic Church created the modern subject and the conditions for modernity's fixation on speed: privatization, decentralization, deregulation of economic structures, and literacy. What started as a protest against what Luther viewed as a corrupt economic and theological system, created the structures for the invisible hand of Adam Smith's capitalism to displace the invisible hand of God. The stage was set for modernity's rapid acceleration.

The road from Luther to what Taylor believes is our current unsustainable hyper-efficient but irrational capitalism passes through the Industrial Revolution. Two things happened in the Industrial Revolution that set the stage for today. The first was the development of scientific management whose obsession with efficiency dramatically increased production. The second, less often noted, was the "burst of new technologies" (p. 80) that sped up and made efficient the dissemination, storage, and retrieval of "immaterial flows," that is, information and eventually capital. These technologies, including blotting paper and the filing cabinet, "created a revolution in the production, reproduction, storage, and searching of data and information that was every bit as transformative as the changes taking place in workshops and on factory floors" (p. 81).

This transformation was so important because money became one of these immaterial flows and the rapid searching of data, now done by massive computing power, made possible the current capitalist system that deals less in material production and more in the trading of financial fictions like securities in a fraction of a second—the very system that made possible the financial meltdown of 2008. "[T]oday's algorithmic trading has completely changed financial markets and, by extension, is transforming the world" (p. 243).

The reason is this: our financial system has become an "emergent complex adaptive network [ECAN]" (p. 249). There are a number of features to these systems, but Taylor focuses on the way these networks "are distributed and not subject to any centralized control mechanism" (p. 252). When that distributed nature is combined with the instability of speed, volatility becomes endemic and complete collapse becomes possible. He writes that, as an ECAN, "the market, which emerges from the activity of individual investors or increasingly different algorithms, loops back to nudge them toward endpoints of which they are not always aware" (p. 253). One such nudge—whether we are talking about the ECAN that is the global financial system or the ECAN that is the global climate—can push the whole system over a disastrous cliff.

This doomsday scenario seems a far cry from answering "where time went and why we have so little left." Taylor's real concern is how techno-

logical speed is changing human brains, our financial systems, and our world – and not for the better.



If Mark Taylor breathes the rarified air of the philosopher, Judy Wajcman, a sociologist at the London School of Economics, comes down to earth to study technology and speed where it really matters – in the ordinary lives of human beings. Her book *Pressed for Time: The Acceleration of Life in Digital Capitalism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015, 215 pp., \$24.00) questions the perceived wisdom that our lives are speeding up by looking at how technological innovation actually functions in people’s ordinary lives.

One of Wajcman’s chief aims is to cast doubt on what she calls “technological determinism” – the story of the unidirectional and thus deterministic influence of technology on our lives, the belief that the acceleration of time is *caused* by advances in technology. I suspect she would charge Taylor with falling prey to this myth without examining the data. As a sociologist, examining the data is exactly what she does.

The other question she seeks to answer is the question of a temporal paradox: *If life in digital capitalism is speeding up, why do we feel like we have less of it?* On the basis of her own research, along with her examination of the research of others, she argues that the answer to the myth of technological determinism is the answer to the paradox of speed.

For example, Wajcman takes on the seeming verity that people are working increasing hours, partly because technology has made us accessible 24/7 and blurred the boundaries between home and work. The picture, she suggests, is more complicated. Research has shown that individual work hours have not increased in the last few decades, but the “widespread perception that life has become more rushed...has as much to do with real increases in the combined work commitments of family members as it is about changes in the working time of individuals” (p. 66). Furthermore, the perception that parents spend less time with children is caused not by objectively less time but the cultural pressure toward more intense parenting. The sense that we are increasingly harried with less leisure time comes from what she calls increased “temporal disorganization” and “temporal density” – the increased difficulty of “coordinating social practices” with others (p. 74) and the attempt to do many things at the same time. Far from being caused by technology, Wajcman argues that technologies like iPhones can actually help in managing temporal disorganization and density.

For Wajcman, technology impacts our lives but that impact is influenced by the way we adopt and shape the technology in our lives. The washing machine, for example, did speed up washing clothes; but then we used the washing machine in a way that raised the expectations of cleanliness, so women were doing laundry more often. The mutual influence of the technology and its use in our lives creates the time paradox: things speed up, but we feel like we have less time.

All of this means, for Wajcman, that we are not at the mercy of these machines. New slow movements are not the answer, neither is moving off the grid, both of which assume technological determinism. Rather, we can use and shape new technologies in ways that improve our lives and do not just accelerate them.



Taylor tells an interesting if sometimes hard to follow story from thirty-thousand feet. Wajcman looks at the details of that story as they happen on the ground in people's ordinary lives. Paul Roberts offers a different take on the story. Writing with a journalist's clarity and felicity in expressing complex ideas, Roberts's book *The Impulse Society: America in the Age of Instant Gratification* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014, 308 pp., \$28.00) synthesizes his research to tell the story of how we became an "impulse society," what impact that has had, and what we can do to fix it.

In our impulse society, as Roberts sees it, a culture of production has turned into a culture of consumption where the "gap between wanting and having, between who we are and what we love" is approaching zero (p. 60). What we consume, primarily, are means of self-realization. We have become unfettered from the kinds of community strictures that might temper our wanting, so that we believe we should have whatever will fulfill us, and we should have it *now*. Roberts calls this "therapeutic consumerism" (p. 26), and it is at the heart of the impulse society.

The hyper-individualism and instant gratification of the impulse society is paralleled in the financial economy. There was a time, Roberts argues, when corporations took care their employees, their chief asset, invested in dependable products and long-term innovation, and shared profits with workers. The "shareholder revolution" of the 1980s, when deregulation made it increasingly possible for a company's share price to be the sole determiner of the company's value, allowed keeping the price high for the shareholders to become a company's *raison d'être*. Shareholders and CEOs, now compensated with shares of the company, became impatient for short-term profits at the expense of long-term investment and innovation. The same drive toward instant gratification that possessed individuals had come to dominate the market.

The results of the growth of this impulse society has been dramatic and largely negative. One consequence is that myopic business plans aimed at increasing short term-profits by reducing wages have left labor in the lurch. "But just as consumers had been enabled by innovation to pursue their own interests independently from the larger society, companies, too, had discovered how to use innovation to separate their own fortunes from those of their workers" (p. 154). A more serious consequence is our current polarized politics. "Political parties operate like well-funded public relations firms while voters are encouraged to treat politics as another setting for self-expression, identity creation, and emotional fulfillment" (p. 200). Political parties have

harnessed the efficiency of micro-targeting, which, while effective at getting the right message to the right people, contributes to the country's growing ideological ghettoization.

One of the appeals of this work is the way it displays an almost Augustinian account of contemporary society both in the individual and in culture writ large: the market takes advantage of the "bottomless psyche of the consumer" (p. 25), offering what the consumer wants as cheaply as possible but denying the consumer a share in the profits of that consumption, the majority of which goes to the endless appetites for wealth of the shareholders.

When looked at this way, Roberts's own proposals for healing the impulse society—change the way we measure GDP, institute campaign finance reform, end brand politics—all have the feel of too little too late. Because, at least for Augustine, the heart curved in on itself—an apt description of the impulse society—does not have the willpower to turn itself outward.



My commute home today, whether it is fast or slow, will give me the chance to ponder further these things—how, for example, the healing from our addiction to speed might happen if our wills have become too used to having what they want right now. One thing none of these authors imagines is the possibility of counter-cultural communities, not just slow-movement communities that separate from wider society, but communities like churches woven throughout the culture that in their practices of liturgy and work of patiently observing the Christian year, in their seasons of anticipation and repentance, might have resources on which to draw to save some from the addiction to speed and instant gratification and leaven our culture in a positive way.



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