

PUNCTUALITY

AN INQUIRY INTO THE PSYCHOLOGY

OF MODERN MAN

Modern man in the western world is constantly afraid of wasting time. He therefore measures time, uses it in small quantities, and conducts his activities in such a way as to waste as little as possible; he arranges his appointments with a remarkable degree of precision, his offices are known for their scrupulous punctuality, and the word “urgent” is nowadays used a great deal. Sportsmen are intent on breaking the kilometre record by a few tenths of a second, and the omnipresent instruments for measuring time—watches, clocks, chronometers, also agendas, calendars, etc., reveal the preoccupations of modern man. Civilization today shows itself acutely conscious of the value of time, and regards it as a sign of economic rationality that

Translated by Nicolas Slater.

everyone should attempt to divide his time economically between all the tasks of which his existence is made up. "Time is money," says the popular proverb, and one meets hundreds of people who express their anxiety "not to waste time" on activities of lesser importance, which "can afford to wait" or do not "deserve to have too much time spent on them." So that the importance of a matter is measured in practice by the amount of time one is willing to spend on it. Equally, time itself gains in precision and exactness, and we try to fit into an incompressible period of time a mass of activities which would formerly have been spread over a longer period. Our civilization is the civilization of impatience. The procedures for rationalizing our existence by economizing on time are manifold and widespread: time-and-motion studies, detailed timetables, advance calendars, daily appointment-diaries, work-programmes plotted on a calendar... at every moment of our life we find this need to calculate our time, and this must correspond to a very intense need... Technical progress can be described, in one of its aspects, as a means of saving time: rapid transport, labour-saving devices to lighten the burdens of a woman's day, telephones which accelerate communication (the post being a relatively slow method), computers which can carry out so many operations per second... It seems as if man is now considered too slow, in comparison with the "acceleration" of the world: his reflexes are not fast enough, as can be seen in the case of car-accidents; his long deliberations before making a decision can be dangerous in an emergency. So he has constantly to accelerate his movements and his reactions; ultimately, he will have to react instantaneously to a given situation or a given problem. This is the principle of tests aimed at discovering the spontaneous character of a person. It is well known that this is the century of speed—the speed of the worker at his machine, or of repartee in the drawing-room, or of the sportsman in the arena, or of the artificial satellite, or of the first-aid squad on the road. Man "must live at the rhythm of his age;" it is necessary for him to be permanently in a hurry—this is becoming a mark of his present condition. If we look at evolution in literature, we see that the *American Digest*—universally imitated—conveys the essentials of Balzac in twenty pages or less; the detective story, with no psychological

Punctuality. An Inquiry into the Psychology of Modern Man

analysis, no depiction of society, consisting merely of the account of an action executed with drums beating, is a more successful form than the three-hundred-page novel; in journalism, banner headlines replace analyses, and photographs—instantly taken in—replace the study of political problems; in culture, the historical or scientific quiz is more successful than literary or scientific studies which take up time; in music, we have the modern record, whose chief characteristic is that it is short by comparison with classical works... One idea unites all these observations: the desire not to waste time, now become an obsession, is conditioning our professional life, our enjoyment of works of art, our manner of thinking, of feeling, and to a certain extent also our private lives. We must observe that this preoccupation is not the privilege of any one social group or of any one nation: it is bound up with the extension of the "technological milieu" (G. Friedmann), and is one of the determinant conditions of it. Faced with the importance of this phenomenon at the present time, affecting as it does every element of our existence, and exerting as it does a considerable influence on the psychology of modern man, we should like first of all to discover the origins of this passion, and then to study some of its most remarkable effects on our existence. There is no question of our exhausting the subject, but merely of establishing a connection between certain phenomena that have so far been regarded as independent, and of demonstrating the part played by punctuality as a general principle of the rationalization of existence (as Max Weber puts it).

I. THE ORIGINS OF MODERN MAN'S TASTE FOR PUNCTUALITY

The taste for punctuality is the convergent product of two desires: the desire not to lose time, a commodity very highly valued in our day, and the desire to arrange, organize and spend it in a rational way. On the one hand, we find a belief that every minute counts, a passion for speed "as such," and on the other hand we find the rational spirit, opposed to unforeseen events, to the chances that destroy its projects... Existence must therefore be oriented towards a known goal, without allowing

the unforeseen and the irrational to break in. There is in some sense an opposition between the desire for immediate enjoyment, the romanticism of swiftly-ebbing time, which justifies the exalted value set on the instant of time, and the thirst for cold calculation, for rational foreknowledge of the future, for the systematic organization of tasks to be performed... But experience shows that the desire to go ahead faster leads on to rationalization: the two tendencies develop simultaneously. While exact punctuality breeds monotony and boredom, the wish to save time keeps man constantly in a state of fecund tension, even as it submits him more slavishly to this obsessive idea. How have we arrived at this paradoxical situation?

A. Modern life multiplies the number of "dead periods" of time and drives one to seek punctuality

Modern life is essentially urban. In large centres, we observe an enormous wastage of time of which individuals are scarcely conscious. We must count, first of all, the time needed for transportation, made necessary by the size of the town, by the distance between home and work: an obligatory expenditure of time, but one which is considered to be a piece of irrecoverable social wastage. We must also count the instances of collective discipline occasioned by the size of the population and by the need to facilitate a degree of communal life by strict regulations: from parking restrictions to office time-tables. What is tolerated good-naturedly in a little town cannot be tolerated in a great city with problems of traffic congestion, of overcrowding of canteens and restaurants at peak hours, or of mass invasion of the department stores on the days when housewives are free, and so forth. If one does not want the town to be paralyzed, there must be strict punctuality in all our daily activities. It is typical of the great city that people have similar requirements at similar times: in the morning they need transport, at the week-end they need to get away, at midday they need a place to eat, and in the evening they need a seat at the cinema. Unless we act on the needs themselves, we are bound to provide satisfaction for everyone, and this can only be done in one way:

Punctuality. An Inquiry into the Psychology of Modern Man

by rigorous economy of time, increased speed of all services, and so on. Sandwiched in between minutely timed activities, our private life is only possible if it submits to the constraints of punctuality. If we do not arrive by such and such a time to see a particular person, we do not see him at all. Appointments must be kept punctually if one wants to see the person involved, and so forth. In the same way, promises must be kept and actions performed on the date arranged, or else all plans are upset and social relations completely disorganized. Private life is only possible today on condition that it does not encroach on the professional or social timetables that everyone knows and accepts. The "lateness" complex is a considerable one in present-day society. To arrive late is a fault, an evil, an impolite act. We must note that punctuality exists everywhere, even if it sometimes seems to disappear: the senior person who arrives at ten in the morning is not late, his clocking-in time is merely delayed with respect to other people's, and hence the principle of punctuality is not infringed. Population density creates the system of queues, the ransom of urban life. It always appears due to the concentration of many needs at one particular time, when it is physically impossible to satisfy everyone at the same time. Hence there is waiting, sometimes resigned and sometimes impatient. In an office whose closing-hour is fixed, waiting is a more anxious business, for people are afraid of having to come back. Queues are ill-tolerated, for they represent a waste of time, and time is held to be of inestimable worth. People who do not wait are privileged people: instantly recognized as such, they are possessors of a "magic" card. One also has to wait on the roads, behind a line of traffic, where one loses one's self-control. This is a sign of the importance attributed to time: by waiting, we risk missing an appointment for later on, etc. In order not to have to wait, we arrive in advance so that we can leave at the proper time. Here, too, the myth of punctuality rules our common behaviour and thought. In short, modern man, who is in demand everywhere, feels that he no longer knows where to turn. His moments of leisure are poisoned by this fear of being late; he shows a kind of terror of being "overwhelmed" by events. One might advise him to moderate his activities, to temper his needs, to devote himself only to questions that are

“worthwhile,” and we could also show him how much time he wastes for questionable reasons: this argument will fail, for he feels himself carried away by an ever-speedier current, feels that he cannot refuse to participate in all the activities that modern life multiplies around him, he is put on his mettle by the action in progress, and he is tormented by the fear of not being able to do everything. This passion must have roots that go very deep...

B. *The responsibility of technical progress*

Technical progress, as it is most simply defined, is the replacement of human or animal effort by the effort of machines, whenever this results in greater speed, accuracy, or continuity, or less expense; in short, whenever the action is made more efficient. Technical progress has three features worthy of note: machines are frequently renewed, which leads to an accelerated rate of replacement of equipment; machines require to be watched by men, who have to be able to follow their tempo of activity; and machines eliminate men whenever men show themselves inferior in competition with them. In consequence their creator is himself modified (cf. the works of Friedmann). We should like here to show what effect these features have on the taste for punctuality. As we know, the achievement of machines generally lies in performing an incredible number of actions or operations in a limited space of time: from computers, which astonish the uninitiated by their intellectual feats, to precision instruments that can make screw-threads at great speed. It is quite clear that the cult of technical prowess rebounds onto man himself: sport, which is at bottom merely the representation, in the context of a game, of this rivalry based on speed, is immensely popular and unleashes the enthusiasm of the crowds from Japan to the United States, including Europe on the way. Political decision is regarded as an optimal reaction to a set of circumstances that invite immediate responses: the myth of political urgency is particularly active as being the other face of the “lateness” complex. In order to make up for the inconvenience occasioned by urgency, we prepare dossiers, classify our information, set dates and organize our time. In order to win the free time without which no

Punctuality. An Inquiry into the Psychology of Modern Man

initiative can possibly be taken, we are obliged to curtail our other activities to the extreme; we can see how this preoccupation leads to the most rigorous punctuality. Man submits to the constraints of the clock in order to fulfil all his tasks. And this arises in part because of the rivalry inherent in machines, which can respond instantly to any demand, are never tired, and whose use is rigorously planned. Machines cannot work on their own: they need men to start them, an intelligent brain to supervise them, repair them when they break down, to introduce new routines. Hence individuals are obliged to follow the tempo of operation of machines. On the other hand, machines are costly; their rate of depreciation means that they must be utilized continuously, by one shift after another, day and night: so the universe of machines is really the universe of organized shifts, optimal utilization of machine running time, and so forth—all of which brings us by another route to the need for punctuality. Machines demand this kind of “programming,” which affects the professional life of agents and technicians, and hence affects their reflexes, their thought-processes, and their psychological reactions to their work. It is also evident that technical progress is becoming global in character, if we consider the interactions and the relations between the different forms of technology: transport, organization, information, etc. In this global form, it represents the penetration of economic rationality: the desire for the most effective action possible with limited means, in daily life. This desire gives rise to the need for punctuality, since the notion of “time to be spent” is one of the essential variables for action. Finally, technical progress also affects the instruments for measuring time, and hence our common perception of time: our measurement is refined, it increases in precision, and in scientific value. If time is impalpable, and knowable only by the reflective consciousness (as Bergson, among others, certainly sees it), time in our modern age is almost a thing, something measurable, something that can be economised, distributed, or lost. This objectivisation of time in modern days, due to the improvement of the instruments for measuring it, is one of the principal phenomena of our age, which obliges us to reconsider the ancient categories of philosophy (on this subject, see L. Mumford *Technique et civilisation*).

C. Office productivity and the cult of punctuality

The bureaucratic revolution consists in the fact that attention has come to be paid to the notion of a *return* (or, as G. Ardant puts it, "State productivity"). Bureaucracy, the synonym for hopeless slowness, legalistic formalism, *petit-bourgeois* habits of life, has been replaced by a system that pays heed to efficiency and to returns, placing economic imperatives in the first rank of importance. This has contributed to the development of the taste for punctuality, given the additional fact that offices are passionately keen on rational organization, calculation and classification. Control over the Administration is not aimed primarily at picking up juridical irregularities, but of passing on this concern for efficient action, and of preventing the staff from wavering at their tasks. The multiplication of forms to be filled in, cards, files, and the like, has increased the impact of the office on daily life, and daily life has therefore been subjected to the new trends of bureaucracy. The telephone, which brings the client, or the man who "is administered," within the walls of the office and thus speeds up administrative procedure, by shortening the path followed by the various files, and hastening the moment of decision, has transformed the traditional psychology of the Administration: previously, there was no need for it to take any account of the delays and the waiting that it occasioned. This superabundance of time was one of the Administration's prerogatives and contributed to its prestige. Today, the time required for any procedure is detailed in public notices, and laws lay down terms and limits for the receipt of requests. Bureaucratic regulations sometimes appears as a justification of additional delays: one could therefore suppose that the public, too, was in a hurry. The administration shares this mentality; and at two levels: that of the agents and that of the public.

First, that of the agents. The office is the place where timetables are most important of all. A large clock everywhere keeps everyone informed about how far the day has progressed. Since the height of each employee's stack of files varies in the course of the day, decreasing as his work progresses and increasing again when a new sheaf of files arrives to be dealt with, his

Punctuality. An Inquiry into the Psychology of Modern Man

superiors can get an approximate idea of each agent's productivity. Developing teamwork and the establishment of precise timetables are two factors in the speeding-up of the work done. We can also observe that technical progress in a particular service—for instance, the use of punched cards to handle information—allows, and therefore demands, more rapid treatment of an increasing number of files; and in order for this treatment not to be superficial, calculations must be made very precisely, timetables compressed, and so on. Moreover, work-study bureaux are naturally out to stimulate the more backward services, which hold up the work of the Ministry as a whole—a truly intolerable thing to do. Hence modern bureaucrats believe in the value of measuring minutes, following programmes and timetables; and they follow the natural bent of their nature in wanting to measure time everywhere—at home, on holiday, etc. They make themselves, unconsciously, ardent propagandists of the movement.

Secondly, for the “administered” public, the office is ridiculously slow in comparison with the factory. It is true that files are used for bringing different administrations into contact with each other, making enquiries and calling in expert opinions, making checks and calling meetings of committees which all take time. On the other hand, offices are fond of their time-tables (their opening and closing hours), and of their time-limits (which often cannot be extended); these are the signs of their almost discretionary powers. They would not agree to depart from this system of rules and traditions on which their authority rests. Today, they are under the double pressure of the public (which resents delay and waiting, and welcomes all promises of reformed procedures and a reduction in the journeys each file has to make), and of the chiefs, (who try to calculate their financial allocations as exactly as possible and therefore demand greater productivity from their services). The office responds to this double demand by an ever-increasing degree of precision and punctuality, and thus transforms the behaviour of the public that deals with it. It is a two-way process: the offices nurture the taste for precision, and effectively enable it to become a part of existence.

D. The “economic spirit,” and time as a valuable commodity

The “economic spirit,” as studied by W. Sombart, is based on a small number of simple dogmas which bring out the importance of time as an element in the acquisition of riches. “One must know how to pick the right occasion”—from which we can infer that fortune is identified with the judicious choice of the right moment; “little by little, the bird builds its nest”—that is, by accumulating riches, even modest riches, one will become opulent (a justification of savings). Time is thus the source of riches (for instance, interest earned on capital). The economic spirit is characterised by the desire to calculate everything in terms of money, the universal denominator—including the passage of time; and by the fear of wasting one of the commodities one has at one’s disposal—time being one of these commodities. As so well analysed by Sombart, the modern economic man (*Le Bourgeois*) has always tried to make proper use of time, his means of coming by greater gains. The taste for punctuality is the direct issue of this economic passion. Time is first of all seen as impossible to save in the way that money is saved... and yet it is a source of riches, because it allows accumulation to take place (witness the tree which grows and bears fruit each year). The wasting of time must be proportional to the magnitude of the intended action—there must be some correspondence between this waste or loss, as measured by clocks etc., and the profit made, which in effect measures the magnitude of the action in question. Technical changes are constantly cutting down the time needed for such and such operation or mechanical or quasi-mechanical act; and the liberation thus afforded gives one the opportunity to engage in a larger number of activities—in other words, it increases our chances of enriching ourselves. Thus, time becomes an economic commodity like other commodities, and like them it can fluctuate in value depending on the nature of the activity to which it is being devoted. Here we are closely bound up with the taste for punctuality. However, time cannot be saved up in the way that other commodities can. Time spent in waiting, without action, therefore represents a loss. It is natural for the general reduction of losses—a synonym of economic progress—to

Punctuality. An Inquiry into the Psychology of Modern Man

coincide with the most precise measurement of time, that is to say the optimal distribution of activities for the suppression of "dead periods"—these representing an irreplaceable loss. In business life, punctuality has become more than the politeness of kings—it is the most imperious necessity. Time is worth more than money: when it is not used, it is wasted and cannot be recovered. Hence one has to seek for thousands of opportunities of using it; one must rage at unexpected hold-ups: great financiers are often in an abominable temper when a piece of news is late in arriving. Economists find it hard to indulge in long-term thinking, in which the idea of a precise calendar loses its importance—for practical economic action is for them always a race against the clock, so that if there are no clocks, they have no landmark, no rational guide to their action. Economic anticipation—the way in which those involved foresee the development of prices, business, wages, calculate interest on bank credits, deal in futures on the Stock Exchange, thus having to make forecasts, etc., all this is a central preoccupation of modern economic theory. Economic theory also recognises the notion of "delay" in a reaction, of the evolution of stocks, which simply represents the introduction of the element of time into economic analysis, and hence implicitly the concern for exact timing. Thus the cause is understood. This concern for exact timing has an effect which will have to be analysed in greater detail: reflection, mature meditation, discussion, all take a great deal of time. It is not certain whether modern man ascribes sufficient importance to these intellectual activities to justify spending time on them. Furthermore, reflection can only be carried out by a calm and relaxed mind: passion for precision is opposed to this state of affairs. Hence we find significant changes in people's behaviour, which will be studied in the second part of this paper. In any case, economic man assimilates precision and rationality, and introduces the taste for it into his whole existence; he is the living embodiment of the principle: his business appointments, recorded conversations, his division of his time into business time, which is serious and important, and shows, which are of secondary importance and which exist merely in order that he should not be idle in his spare time, his taste for snappy headlines in

the newspapers—everything is governed by the double principle of precision and of speed, which characterise the “dynamic” personality of which he is so proud. Here we may note the union of precision and of personal ability, based on the fact that a rational distribution of one’s time is an achievement, and time itself a commodity of dominant importance. Moreover, the economic man is “overloaded,” overburdened with responsibilities, papers to sign, clients to meet, decisions to take, files to review, administrative staff to control, and so forth. Such an abundance of tasks is beyond the capacity of a normal being. The important man can only hold his own against this flood of demands by demanding that appointments be punctually kept, etc. Punctuality is therefore more and more imperative as one rises in the scale of responsibility or power, and then by a process of imitation it spreads to and contaminates the rest of the social body. If the man of importance is in a hurry, the man in a hurry can give the impression of being important; sometimes it is the only way to get himself taken seriously. So that “overloading” is sometimes a mere excuse, a social lie; and it is important to observe that it is preferred to other excuses because it appears more plausible—which throws a revealing light on the real life of modern society.

E. Present-day social life: increased numbers of acquaintances, and punctuality

In large towns we observe that each person belongs to an increasing number of social groups. We also find a strong trend towards collective constraint, due to the coincidence of many people’s needs at the same time; for people watch television, feel the need to go off to the country, or to see a film, at the same times as their fellows. The moment one attempts to organize any kind of social life for oneself (even if it is only to manage to arrange a meeting between individual who are—apart from such a meeting—going their separate ways), the rules of punctuality have to be respected, for two simple reasons. Each person has his own list of obligations to fulfil; and therefore he cannot wait too long for the others to turn up. So if a few individuals

Punctuality. An Inquiry into the Psychology of Modern Man

are keen on punctuality, that is enough to make the whole group adopt it, if it wishes to show its understanding of these individuals. Since everyone belongs to a variety of groups, clubs, etc., all dominated by the same concern for punctuality, it is certain that the group in question will have to subscribe to this universal obsession. It is important to stress how much people claim to be "very busy" with their various obligations. To visit a particular club, and then a particular informal group, and then a particular association, obliges one to fix one's schedule in advance in order to be present at each of these meetings and to spend no more time on each than is compatible with one's other social activities. The group, too, understands that its members are "busy": it arranges its meetings sufficiently far apart to ensure a reasonable attendance. Insofar as the dates of meetings are regulated—for instance, by fixing monthly or two-monthly meetings—the group institutionalises itself, and its members are able to make advance arrangements to keep themselves free for them; thus precision is the condition for attendance. In a sense, such collective rhythms are preferable to the anarchy that would be caused by incompatible choices: if everyone watches television in the evenings, then it is a simple police matter to prevent whatever inconveniences might arise from this "mass activity." But if these collective disciplines were infringed, society would cease to exist. Precision is the cement of society, for it is the passion common to everyone, and allows everyone to organize his existence to conform with the tyrannical collective demands and contractual obligations of society. To be punctual is to believe that one's friends do not want to be kept waiting; it is a form of practical respect for others. And nothing would be more shocking than to appear indifferent to the impatience of others: that would mean questioning the correctness of their calculations and the principle on which their life is led. Thus punctuality is both a need and a virtue simultaneously. We judge people by their punctuality, everywhere, in all milieux. There are few people indeed for whom punctuality means nothing. These people no doubt live outside present-day society, untouched by its passions, its rhythm, its technical progress, which is leading it towards a destination whose nature no-one knows for certain.

F. Conclusion of part I: Time as an obstacle

In fundamental terms, time is seen as an obstacle to man's aspirations, as one of the only barriers to a varied life, to the insatiable immensity of his desires and his aspirations. While he aspires to culture, devotes himself to sport, plans journeys, dreams of taking up a profession of great prestige, or takes pride in all the groups he frequents and in his many friends, his ambitions, dreams and desires come up against one limitation: time. There is no longer any talk of material obstacles: transport has suppressed distance, which has now become a reality only in the abstract, and technology has mastered natural phenomena, such as night—conquered by electric lighting; weight—conquered by the aircraft; etc. His psychological limitations disappear, now that his imagination is stimulated by specialists in the art, his suppressed libido is excited, an appeal is made to the most secret inclinations of his being, and found a thousand incentives to drive him to action. Riches, culture, prestige, happiness, love, these words symbolize the world of advertising which supplies the real world with its obsessions (cf. Henri Lefebvre). But time, the barrier, the wall, the limit, remains: every action requires time; one cannot do two things simultaneously, in time; projects are transformed, initial ideas modified, and the beginning does not resemble the end. Precision is aimed at making an ally of time, treating it as the milieu for action, objectivising it, making use of it, annexing it. It aims at bringing some order into its existence by regulating the rhythm and the sequence of its activities: perhaps this is an unfortunate illusion. What we now have to show is how the effects of this passion have influenced various facets of life.

II. SOME EFFECTS OF PUNCTUALITY ON DAILY LIFE

The concern for punctuality expresses itself in practice by the frequent, ritual consultation of one's watch, by an exaggerated degree of touchiness as regards unnecessary waiting, and by the feeling that any activity is scheduled to end at a specific time, which cannot be overstepped without a compelling reason. The

Punctuality. An Inquiry into the Psychology of Modern Man

specific feature of our time is the fact that this principle has spread far beyond the domains where it was objectively necessary—that is to say, professional life—and has penetrated those sectors of life which used to be ruled by chance, fancy, and freedom of action; leisure time, for instance—which is becoming a sociological concept as it gradually loses human reality. We therefore intend to analyse the perceptible consequences of the cult of punctuality in each great domain of human activity: we cannot afford to make a profound and precise analysis, for there are a vast number of domains to be dealt with.

A. Professional life: the geometrical multiplication of tasks

The quest for punctuality has as its prime and incontestable aim the freeing of time taken up by unnecessary waiting, which is to be eliminated. But this newly freed time allows one to carry out more operations than before in the same space of time, and hence to increase the work done per day. This increase in the number of operations performed means that the expenditure of time has to be calculated more rigorously, in order to face up to the new load: and this frees yet more time, which can be used for yet more tasks. The process is circular and autochthonous. Of course, one might imagine that the time thus freed could be used for leisure, meditation, or rest. But this would go against the twin trends of “industrial society”: at the personal level, the desire for more pay drives people to speed up even further the process of freeing and finding new uses for time, since this promises them a constantly increasing income. And at the social or collective level, economic growth is only possible by a high rate of work and by an increase in total productivity without any alteration in working hours; in other words, the rationalisation of time only frees time in order that it can be taken up in new tasks, which themselves demand nervous attention, reflection, the understanding of machines. It must also be noted that productivity is regarded as an imperative patriotic duty: in the USSR (Stakhanov) as well as the USA (Taylor and some others), so that it would be a piece of anti-national behaviour if one were to enjoy this newly freed time personally, forgetting the national

interest. Furthermore, it must be noted that the working day of men in positions of responsibility is much longer than the legal working hours of offices or factories. The work to be distributed or checked has first to be prepared; the engineers must try to think what progress can be made with their teams of men and machines, so that a minute per hour can be gained—a by no means negligible advance; the administrators must try to simplify the forms that are filled in, which would allow them to increase the number of forms in each file without arousing the anger of the public. Everywhere we see a general drive among working people towards a shorter working day: so that in order to keep production at least level, and if possible to increase it, by a deliberate policy, the time spent must be made more productive, that is to say it must be spent more intensely, checked more exactly, occupied more fully, by suppressing unnecessary or secondary tasks; and this is a new factor favouring the spread of precision and punctuality as an important professional quality. One's rate of work—as a typist, a skilled worker, or an engineer—is a virtue that is particularly honoured by modern society, and with good reason; it means that more work is done in an equal time. This is clear and obvious enough. There is a central problem in all this: punctuality may be a means of enriching one's personality, since one can indulge in a variety of occupations, go beyond the narrow universe of one's special field, discover curious new aspects of the world, go from one activity to another, and so on. In theory, this increased number of possible actions, brought about by strict precision which enables one to know how to deal with the inevitable duties implicit in one's economic condition, ought to be recognised as an advantage. But in real life, we find that these possibilities are never realised, and that the margin of time liberated by technology and calculation is only used to develop technology and calculation still further. Even "off-work" time is not free time; for "recuperation" has to be subtracted from it—being necessary merely to maintain the human machine and prevent it from giving out; "professional training" must also be subtracted, as must "recycling" and so on—all directly oriented towards professional activity in the future; one must also subtract the time needed for meetings and appointments that

Punctuality. An Inquiry into the Psychology of Modern Man

are necessitated by some professions (for instance the writer's); and thus we see that the margin of time that is actually left to be freely disposed of is extremely small—which explains why this time is used with parsimony, care and economy;—here, too, the principle of precision reigns. At the same time, this principle, which has now become essential, makes a critique of the content and the aim of the activities themselves of little interest: it is not so much the goal of my action, the way I tackle it, the effort I devote to it or the results I get, that count, but the reduction of time spent to an irreducible minimum, which is constantly being lowered by technical progress. The science of work-study, which is merely the formal version of this trend, is interested essentially in time, intervals and the like, and very little interested in the less measurable aspects of human activity. Attention is therefore concentrated almost exclusively on the time element—a new, strange and surprising state of affairs. Our new activities can be quite unimportant, and our propensity for calculating our time everywhere and always can sometimes be seen as fundamentally very childish (if we follow W. Sombart, in the conclusion to *Le bourgeois*); but that only makes it all the more surprising that this passion dominates our existence, not only within the constraints of professional life but in our leisure, our emotional life, our perception of what is going on, our political life and even our system of unquestioned beliefs.

B. *The organisation of leisure*

Leisure is most simply defined by identifying it with play: a conventional activity that brings together a number of beings, according to “ritual” forms, with the aim of deriving a certain pleasure from the activity (in the terms of J. Huizinga, *Homo ludens*). And indeed, the cult of photography as well as that of holidays can be fitted into this definition; it would take too long to prove this for each instance. It is certain that the principle of precision and punctuality is present in the notion of play from the very beginning, since this notion presupposes a beginning and an end, and a distinction between the world of play and that of everyday life; but progressively, this principle comes to

condemn the love of the game for its own sake, it opposes its principles and alters its content. Games are gratuitous, that is they have no object, no aim, they are indulged in for the pleasure they afford, irrespective of any concrete result of them. But the cult of punctuality assigns portions of time to different activities according to their respective importance; and play is therefore denied by the modern mentality. It has to justify itself all the time, for the modern spirit embodies a powerful utilitarian approach to which all else must yield. The first type of justification is the "cultivation of one's personality," the "enrichment of one's being" by reading, travel, plays and films, etc. This creates a distinction between useful, positive, fertile leisure, and negative leisure, wasted time, impoverishment of the personality (cf. e.g. J. Dumazedier): but this serious leisure, which conforms to the expectations of society, essentially boring, intolerable, ridiculous in its vanity, does not necessarily fit in with the essence of liberty, which consists in voluntary choice, escape from the utilitarian world, indulgence in a freely chosen activity, not for its economic value but for subjective reasons which reflect personal taste. Now, punctuality and precision, in their attempt to abolish everything that is gratuitous, or useless, and in their social nature (for punctuality or lateness are measured by appointments and schedules), are opposed to the very essence of leisure. Add to this the typical ardent curiosity of modern man: arriving in a strange town, he wants to see everything, know everything, visit all the sights mentioned in his guide, collect postcards and souvenirs, etc. So tourism today is organised, exactly timed, with its planned routes, its systematic allocation of time—how long one is to stop in front of the Abbey, the Cathedral, etc.; then travelling time, then the evening, "Paris (or Amsterdam) by Night"... How much does this calculation of time prevent one from really knowing the countries one visits—which requires long hours spent walking round the Old Town to recapture the impression of mediaeval life, or examining all the statues adorning the cathedral, the expressions of an intense Faith and the varied symbols of religious sentiments; and all this is out of the question today. Insofar as leisure is identified with enjoyment, whether it be of a work of art, a novel, a poem, a concerto, or a film, it implies recep-

Punctuality. An Inquiry into the Psychology of Modern Man

tiveness, the giving of one's being, forgetfulness of the material circumstances of everyday life, and exaltation of the soul by art; and when precision finds its way into an attitude of composure, expectancy and openness, it suppresses the very conditions of enjoyment and leaves only the outer husk, the appearance, and the "opinion." It is important to note the part played by talk, by secondhand discussion of art, architecture or music, which replaces the experience of them by the senses; and this is understandable, for rhetoric can obey the rules of punctuality while aesthetic experiences are outside time and oblivious of its progress. We find that aesthetic enjoyment, which is not reserved to the "cultured classes" as the bourgeoisie pretends—for it used to take popular forms—festivals, mediaeval mystery-plays in front of the cathedral, carnival disguises, collective emotions with frequently a religious pretext were common features of mediaeval Europe—all this is being replaced by sport; and while sport is certainly at the outset a competitive game, it is seen above all as a way of obtaining honour and glory, of sublimating local, ethnic or national quarrels, it is becoming an instrument of propaganda in the hands of the State, and of advertisement for big business; and it is no longer a pleasure enjoyed for its own sake. The dominant part played by sport in modern leisure is a symbol of the penetration of punctuality into the pleasures and joys of people of our time. This is particularly so since one is interested primarily in the result of a match rather than in the meeting of the teams; in the record of the achievement rather than in the joy of jumping or running; and that biology, medicine and pharmacology are being used to the full in order to achieve "artificially" good results. Sport has become a serious and profitable industry; leisure has been denatured. It is most significant that this is the most popular international pleasure. Through it, punctuality and precision are adorned with new charms and made even more seductive; the game, in its essentials, has disappeared. Is this an irreversible process? No doubt this phenomenon is related to the evolution of social relations under the influence of punctuality.

C. *The drama of non-communication: obstacles to the knowledge of other beings*

For people to meet each other, the relations thus established must have a "content": conversations must transmit ideas, intentions, impressions, questions, curiosity or experience, in both directions; in short, relations between two beings are inconceivable without some substance that can support the sentiments that are thus born, developed, or transformed. One cannot imagine a relationship that is purely formal. But for this content to be transmitted in words, gestures, looks, etc., there must be patience, interest in other people, an awakening of attention, availability of one's own being—in other words, a great deal of time. On the other hand, personal relations have their ups and downs, crises of confidence or lack of understanding, clashes of will, and the like; there is no emotional relationship that is insensible to the effects of time, which is sometimes propitious for its "happy" development, and sometimes kills it at birth. Punctuality, which appears as a necessary constraint, is not always desirable in this type of relation. Nothing is more opposed to spontaneity of response, to the pleasure of "chance" encounters, or to the virtues of the sudden and unexpected, than the periodic rendezvous, which institutionalizes monotony and mutual boredom. To know that one must meet such and such a loved person every Sunday would certainly kill any pleasure in seeing him. Even at this level, punctuality is capable of extinguishing our natural tendency to spontaneity and sincerity, since we have to hide our boredom, born of habit, from those we meet. Passion in any form makes one unconscious of material surroundings, and makes one forget for a time the necessities, concrete conditions and problems of life, because one is close to the radiant presence of a loved person; and punctuality reintroduces into the heart of the encounter this spirit of care and awareness of necessity. Anyone who keeps looking at his watch cannot be paying attention to his friend at the same time; the two activities give rise to violent internal contests of attention. Punctuality justifies itself by the wish to see *several* people in one day, in order to meet one's many obligations. This makes it harder to think much more about

Punctuality. An Inquiry into the Psychology of Modern Man

any one person, and since memory is the lieutenant of emotion, emotion finds it hard to survive in an overcrowded life. As a result we find a remarkable absence of emotion in modern relationships. A comparison with the passions of Balzac's novels, for instance, is instructive. In the 19th century, the young ladies of high society had time to think about their admirers, and this explains their livelier sensibility, their more romantic imagination, and their intrigues—more skilful and more complicated than today. Courting, in the last analysis, was a "social game" (J. Huizinga), and in order to play one must be possessed of a certain inclination of mind, and also of a great deal of time. Hence we are now witnessing an evolution of emotional relationships: we make a virtue of necessity and make do with the superficial and ephemeral exchanges that young people refer to as "friendship"—this word to be taken in its negative sense, as the absence of love in the most ordinary sense. Of course, people develop attachments, and do so very fast: the time for meeting is so short that one has to manifest a spontaneous liking for friendly conversations, one must fraternize and be "nice" without delay. Françoise Sagan is highly representative of this evolution in behaviour due to lack of time and the desire not to waste it—that is, to the passion for punctuality. She is the mistress of men's hearts. They are her only true passion. Since we have no time, and since communication demands delicacy of hearts, subtlety, intelligence (a "spirit of finesse"), we let ourselves be satisfied with wild communion to the rhythm of a modern orchestra. Communion in the sense of collective drunkenness, with consciousness suppressed by the music, and people confused in a sort of rhythm of gestures, movements and perhaps cries. This is all well known and generally well analysed: the philosophy of non-communication, which is "more of a symptom disguised as a system" (L. Mumford on Sartre) than a true philosophy, merely provides a representation of this transformation of behaviour. It is characteristic that this theme is now part of everyday metaphysics, as if people had come to feel its profound truth. And it is likely that the passion for punctuality is at the root of this non-communication, although punctuality itself is caused by a variety of factors and is itself, therefore, not autonomous.

D. *The perception of reality and the influence of punctuality*

In theory, precision and punctuality allow one to represent the evolution of an action or a series of actions as a succession of phases whose relative duration and order is known. This geometrical concept of time was quickly applied to the large-scale movements of society. It is true that the variations in the human phenomena of history—such as the changes in a nation's birth-rate or in its morals—seem to obey certain regular patterns, which vary according to what is being observed, and whose synthesis is described as “the course of History” (cf. the works of G. Bouthoul on social dynamics). It is tempting to find such patterns in the recurrence of similar phenomena at certain dates, or in the regular succession in time of the phases of a particular evolution, which all amounts to an empirical confirmation of the metaphysics of geometrically rationalised time. Thus, for instance, calendars inform us about the return of periodic festivals, and of celebrations and commemorations which indicate that time has completed a circle and is starting again—this fits in well, of course, with the notion of punctuality and scientific precision in dates and times. On the other hand, we find a sort of general belief in the speeding-up of history: historical phenomena last shorter, like the three generations of IBM machines; the number of phenomena observable at any one time is increased: one has only to read the newspapers, full of catastrophes, stirring news and extraordinary events. The general rhythm of progress is being accelerated, and therefore we grow old faster; there is more difference, we are told, between the world of 1950 and that of 1960, all in all, than between that of 1880 and that of 1910. This indicates convincingly that history is at present moving forward faster than all observable phenomena: at the extreme, change is taking place every second, and there are therefore no landmarks by which to orient oneself, or durable criteria to judge ephemeral events by—there is not even any way of knowing the reality of the present, since it becomes obsolete too fast. Our perception of present reality then becomes either dramatic or lyrical, depending on one's personality: for some, society itself, as a relatively stable structure enclosing durable human relationships,

Punctuality. An Inquiry into the Psychology of Modern Man

in the form of customs, professional relations, family ties, etc., has ceased to exist, and punctuality and precision themselves become the only possible reference-point, the only invariant: but it is a formal invariant which is incapable of controlling the Brownian movement of society. For others, our age is truly marvellous, it breaks all bonds asunder, allows human beings and objects, tastes and ideas, total mobility; and the promise of the future is sufficiently exciting for one to abandon the stupid pessimism of the sceptics. Both camps or doctrines in the last resort subscribe to the same concept of present reality, but they offer contradictory judgements and prognoses on it. Here again we find the opposition and the link that we have already analysed, between the cult of speed—which leads to the negation of any regularity, monotony or enslavement by time—and punctuality, which is this enslavement itself. We have seen that there is a dialectical link between the two, since one travels fast in order to arrive in time or not to be late. Here, too, it is true to say that in order to “keep up with our time,” either in order to follow its evolution or in order to be carried away by its current without falling behind—woe to those who cannot keep up—one must adopt the rhythm of the age. It is of little importance that History is in fact objectively accelerating; in practice, the collective consciousness believes in the reality of its rapid changes, and unless one excludes oneself from this society, one must share its beliefs, at least externally. Today, punctuality is becoming everyone’s common rule; it is the “secular” law (F. Hetman, *L’Europe de l’abondance*), and it must by definition regulate every activity, since one’s health in society depends on one’s submission to it. Furthermore, the whole of present-day reality is conceived as a repetition or melodic variation on invariable themes: revolutions spread by imitation and by the will to repeat what has been done, and States imitate each other’s mores, technology and forms of government. From this point of view, History is merely an account of the progressive imitation of creators, which implies that there are definite patterns, and that every moment is simply a barely modified duplication of an earlier one. Although M. Weber is against such a philosophy of history, opinion in general is strongly in favour of it: so much is punctuality the enemy

of chance in history, uniqueness of historical events, or originality in its phases.

E. *The political universe: urgency, repetition, and the strategies of time*

Politics, fundamentally, provide the opportunity for confrontations, unions, domination and relationships between dissimilar—adverse or allied—forces, according to fortuitous circumstances, in which a durable advantage enabling one to attain certain definite objectives is sought. The analysis of the relations between the forces within a particular national or international “camp,” or of the rise and fall of particular powers are the essence of the subjects studied by political science (cf. Julien Freund, *L'essence du politique*, particularly fertile despite the generality of the author's observations). It is within this camp or this tissue of relations (or of this “system,” as certain imitators of functionalist sociology *à la* T. Parsons like to say) that the protagonists compose their strategies, calculate attacks and replies, offer threats and counter-threats, and the part played by time in all this cannot be overestimated. We know for a start that government policies are merely scales of urgency: every question merits examination, but some questions cannot wait, either because public opinion puts pressure on the Executive, or because the dangers or risks involved are very immediate, or that each day's delay makes the problem harder to solve; the important thing is for the people in power to be persuaded that this particular question must be taken up at once and given all the attention it deserves. Two parties may profess the same overall doctrine but disagree on the urgency of the questions to be dealt with, or on their order of importance. The converse is also true. But the decisive factor for an understanding of the actions of governments is the order of priority in fact chosen; this explains the reactions, the initiatives, et cetera, that are observed. Now politicians are not isolated; they enter into relations—often relations of conflict—with each other, and they subscribe to different scales of urgency, which is the root cause of misunderstandings and false steps, but,

Punctuality. An Inquiry into the Psychology of Modern Man

no less, of rectifications, corrections and modification of their policies. The scale of urgency is essentially mobile; it varies with situation and circumstance and expresses a subjective judgment of a situation which is by nature unstable and uncertain: and it is the banal world of rectifications, approximations, discussions, contestations, commentaries, and corrections of previous choices, that feed political debate and the life of governments. At such times it is necessary to resist crises, *coups de théâtre*, and dramatic developments such as devaluation or the authoritarian modification of a piece of legislation, where speed of action is essential for success. The mastery of time is a condition of political success. This is true of the moment of action; here one must be able to await one's adversaries' reactions and parry them at the most favourable moment; one must be able, for example, to deploy the various decisions which together make up one's overall policy, together with the effect of surprise—thus coordinating the various factors each of which in its own field contributes to the total result. But it is also true in subsequent stages. One must retain control of the consequences of one's action, and keep up one's efforts in spite of an initial phase of euphoria (which lies at the root of many setbacks); one must pass beyond one's partial successes keeping the achievement of one's initial aim in view. And this aim itself must be integrated into a more general long-term policy. The time needed to link two operations, the adaptation of one's technical aims to circumstances which may be unforeseen, and the rapidity of this adaptation—these are some of the chapters of the "political technique" that statesmen learn intuitively. Too rigorous precision is dangerous here; for it indicates a disregard for practical conditions, a degree of rigidity that endangers action, and too much attachment to the formal or chronological aspect of one's operations. Hence one may conclude that the introduction of punctuality into the political universe brings about profound changes in it, and presents definite dangers to the actions of statesmen. Of course, a great proportion of public affairs can be put on the calendar; e.g. "current affairs," "technical problems," in which the expert is master. This is explicable by the existence of certain patterns—a five-year plan, a budgetary calendar, a limiting date for the

formation of the agricultural Common Market. To a large extent, the politics of management can be run with rigorous precision, for here confrontation is less important than good execution by an efficient apparatus; and this agrees well with the frequently economic nature of the matters involved. But there remains an important domain of strategy here—parliamentary, nuclear and diplomatic; this is an attempt to use time for one's own advantage. Three strategies can be distinguished. First that of bilateral waiting (e.g. the Cold War), in which one wears out one's adversary, lulls his suspicions to sleep as time goes on, and lets him feel that one will never pass from threats to action, but which stays on the brink of drama all the time. This strategy of exhausting the adversary's patience lies between two limiting forms of behaviour: a refusal to take the initiative or the offensive (which would be morally unacceptable) and the fear of being taken by surprise without using one's possibilities of reprisal. It also rests on a number of key concepts: the concept of the scenario with its different possible dispositions (H. Kahn); the theory of preventive dissuasion (Gal Beaufre); the theory of communication in times of crisis (R. Aron); and the graduation of reprisals (R. McNamara). These concepts rely heavily on the possible or desirable speed of reaction when faced with aggression, and on the variety of imaginable counter-offensives—simultaneous or successive—that can be adopted. But in the last analysis this strategy is based on a philosophy of action in time, in which one hopes that time will work on the side of one of the two parties—the more skilful one. The second possible strategy is a rigorous plan of one's system of defence (if one takes this domain into consideration) which comes into action the moment the alert is given, without relation to the intentions and actions of one's adversary—in this case precision in the process of execution of the plan is an absolute necessity. One may wonder what value such a disposition has; it offends our consciousness which is used to an unstable relation between adversaries, leaving open the possibility at least of a temporary agreement between them. In this strategy, perception of time plays a very secondary role. Ultimately, the most persevering, powerful and attack-resistant party will triumph. The third strategy lies in the absence of

Punctuality. An Inquiry into the Psychology of Modern Man

logic in the succession of one's actions in order to discourage prediction on the part of one's adversary and to hide one's true intentions. Here, since it is impossible to maintain any relation between a particular act and a particular world situation, one wastes one's time guessing one's adversary's true aims: here the effect of surprise is most marked, so long as policies zigzag at great speed, without clear reason and thus without any internal rhythm or regularity. Precision and punctuality is disastrous here. This ought to convince us that the political domain, full of fluctuation, uncertainty, simultaneous polarization and depolarization, subjected to ambiguity and subjective judgement, becomes completely denatured when it submits to the rule of punctuality. Punctuality remains extraneous to its innermost dynamics, and up till the present time it has given rise to more setbacks than successes. Time in politics is unequal—it is sometimes fast and sometimes slow, sometimes tense and dramatic and sometimes desperately slow; if we introduce artificial patterns into it, we mistake its specific essence (cf. my forthcoming essay on "The Spirit of Strategy and Calculated Timing").

F. The myth of punctuality—from necessity to weltanschauung

Human actions apparently fit in ill with the principle of punctuality, and only accept it as a necessity of present life. Since it is universally admitted to be a necessity, our social exchanges are ruled by punctuality, in their most general form. Is this not perhaps an attempt to bind ourselves to Chronos, the god of Time? There are so many legends about time stopping for the hero's benefit, about Time eating his children (i.e. irreversible ageing and death), and there are too many poems about the flight of time, too many philosophies of the irreversible and the irreparable, and too many myths of the Eternal Return, the Spring of Youth which travels backwards in time, and God is too clearly defined as eternal outside time which alters living beings and transforms the world, according to Heraclitus—for us not to see an ancient archetype in this idea. Since his origins, man has suffered from the disease of time, and his one aspiration

has been to cure himself of it. He is afraid of being taken by surprise by time, he knows that every hour brings him closer to his own end, the very Universe is a spectacle of universal ageing—trees grow tall and die, animals, too, meet their ends, and even mountains of granite are worn down by rain. The recurring cycles of Nature—the seasons, the phases of the moon—lead him to conceive of patterns in life, to set dates to his existence, to make a calendar, and to know this invisible, secret and all-dominating Power that is Time. To be punctual is to command time, enslave it to our actions, use it for our activities and abolish its mystery. The future, above all, arouses metaphysical questions among men. Shall I still be alive tomorrow? Who can tell me where I shall be in three months, in a year? The Pythian oracle of Delphi, the ancestor of our planners, was no less ambiguous than today's forecasters. Unable to unveil the mystery of this fearful or disturbing Future, which defies our minds—over-fond of certainty—we can at least create programmes that will restrict the future, use it for action, “furnish” it with different activities, and make it a little more familiar. Any action or project takes the form of a bet on the future—for who can know for certain what its consequences, effects and repercussions will be? It is to combat this anguish that attacks him, that man falls back on calendars, plans and programmes that appear to chart the future. Our modern age believes that it has succeeded in integrating the future into its domains; it believes that it can master the time that is not yet come. By this means it would escape from its present state. What a paradox, this future so precisely calculated that it cannot but resemble the present from which we would flee. Is the age of the foreknown future, stripped of its mystery, already upon us? It is not for the author to risk an answer.

Punctuality. An Inquiry into the Psychology of Modern Man

BRIEF BIBLIOGRAPHY

Some different points of view and some further developments of certain aspects examined in this article will be found in a vast number of works, of which a selection follows.

- GEORGES FRIEDMANN, *Sept études sur l'homme et la technique*, Paris, Gonthier, 1966.
- LEWIS MUMFORD, *Technics and Civilization*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967.
- JACQUES ELLUL, "L'ambivalence du progrès technique," *Revue administrative* (issue of July-August), Paris, 1965.
- MAURICE LE LANNOU, *Le déménagement du territoire*, Paris, Seuil, 1967.
- PIERRE GEORGE, *Sociologie et géographie*, Paris, P.U.F. 1966.
- WERNER SOMBART, *Der Bourgeois. Zur Geistesgeschichte des modernen Wirtschaftsmenschen*, Berlin, Duncker & Humblot, 1923.
- BERNARD CHARBONNEAU, *Dimanche et lundi*, Paris, Denoël, 1966.
- PITIRIM A. SOROKIN, *Time-budgets of Human Behaviour*, Cambridge (Mass.), 1939.
- MAX WEBER, *Wissenschaft als Beruf*, Berlin, Duncker & Humblot, 1967.
- GASTON BOUTHOU, *Sociologie dynamique* (Traité de sociologie, t.2) Paris, Payot, 1954.
- SIEGFRIED GIEDION, *Mechanization takes Command*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1948.
- JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH, *Affluent Society*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1958.
- HENRY GUITTON, *Maîtriser l'économie*, Paris, Fayard, 1967.