

Dictatorship of Fast-Running Time Within the Society of Experience

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ABSTRACT:

The circumstances of transition of the society of deficit into the society of welfare have been a subject of intense sociological studies. The society of material abundance creates specific life conditions, increasingly focused on non-material values and subjective experience. In this relation, we talk about the concept of the society of experience, where the main drive of many human activities lies in the search for experience and increasingly more intense need for experiencing the own physical. The society of experience advocates a pleasure-seeking lifestyle; experience thus becomes a target of immediate satisfaction. Preferring instant gratification has to do with an explosion of offers related to all types of entertainment and experience as well as with the onset of an information era which has introduced an unprecedentedly fast-running time into the human life.

KEY WORDS:

welfare, instant gratification, fast-running time, society of experience

Introduction

Approximately since the 1950s, concepts of a society relying on the presumption that concerns for material subsistence are replaced with the orientation of people in Western societies on a number of alternative goals and values, often of non-material nature, characterized by the need to saturate various individual aspirations and wishes, have been clearly winning recognition within the sociological discourse.¹ Many sociological studies thus primarily focus on the circumstances relating to the transition from the society of “deficit” to the “affluent” society.² The society of affluence, welfare, or abundance has been the subject of great sociological interest in the past decades, particularly due to the fact that it represents an absolutely unprecedented social model, where similarly unprecedented forms of identities, lifestyles, consumer behaviours, individual expectations or subjective wishes shape. Last but not least, unique changes of the social movement, transformations of the social structure and forms

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² GALBRAITH, J. K.: *Společnost hojnosti*. Praha: Svoboda, 1967; INGLEHART, R.: *The Silent Revolution. Changing Values and Political Styles among Western Peoples*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977; SCHULZE, G.: *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft – Kultursoziologie der Gegenwart*. Frankfurt/M: Campus Verlag, 1992; ERIKSEN, T. H.: *Syndrom velkého vlka. Hledání štěstí ve společnosti nadbytku*. Brno: Doplněk, 2010.

of the social organization also take place. According to Schulze, the society, where the majority lives in prosperity, has totally different goals in life and value preferences compared to societies of “deficit”, where the primary concern of people is the physical survival (existence). It is not about achieving objective goals of material nature as it is about pursuing the satisfaction of subjective emotional needs. The meaning of life then lies in the level and overall quality of such satisfaction. In this context, Schulze emphasizes the dominating orientation of the society on experience, which is subject to the onset of the society of material abundance, where concerns for material survival are replaced with concerns for finding subjective happiness, transforming life into the “experience project”.³

Society of experience and the instant gratification culture

The lifestyle of people within the society of experience is mainly characterized by an irresistible longing for adventures, where the practical importance of objects of purchase or use ceases to be relevant, with their aesthetic value offering experience dominating.

The problem is that experiences in Schulze’s “society of experience” are generally subject to immediate utility, i.e. to something economists and psychologists describe as instant gratification.⁴ Experiences predominantly become an object of instant consumption, current moment, subject to urgent action, whereas people find it difficult and are unwilling to postpone and push experiences back for later. In the society of experience, hedonism becomes the dominant lifestyle form, based on volatile appetite for various experiences that must be alternated as quickly as possible. “Hedonists understand well the risks associated with the waiting, postponement of delights, enjoyments, and rewards, i.e. of all that can transform quickly from the originally desired and attractive to something ordinary and unappealing. Hedonists wish to live, ‘right away’, live for themselves, here and now”.⁵ The choices regarding the type of entertainment are less constant and more impulsive, and they bear no delay, as the objects of experiences change quickly as a result of explosion of virtually unlimited supply of new and new opportunities.

Moreover, experiences may hardly be consumed in parts and it is difficult to save some part of an experience for a “rainy day”. Now or never – this is the culture of the society of experience. It is a culture, which can most likely be described as the culture of the moment, with dominating hedonistic mentality of collectors of experiences, worshippers of the instant gratification cult.⁶

In this atmosphere, application of the instant gratification strategy dominates a strategy that can be described as delay gratification. At the same time, the culture of the moment is characterized by an unprecedentedly vast supply of opportunities, it is becoming the over choice culture.⁷ A world of unlimited opportunities is a world that also provides unlimited resources in terms of experiences and entertainment. The marketing industry presents subjective values of potential experiences too convincingly and media images of seduction are too sophisticated for us to be willing to postpone experience for the future, delay joy and pleasure for an uncertain future. In this regard, marketing strategies are timeless and very successful, because simultaneously transmit often appealing messages that it is possible to get “A” without having to do “B”.

The culture of the moment is sufficiently illustrated in a number of advertising campaigns universally referring to the fact that it is “EASY” to get, achieve or experience something. In the culture of the moment, a number of marketing campaigns communicates this key message rather latently; however, with a clear content, often based on dichotomies of mutual logic contradiction, for example “Lose weight without activity”; “Profit without risk”; “Return without investments”; “Reward without work”; “Performance without preparation”; “Action without plan”.

3 SCHULZE, G.: Společnost prožitku. In PONGS, A (ed.): *V jaké společnosti žijeme?* Praha: ISV, 2000, p. 205.

4 KAHNEMAN, D.: Evaluation by moments: Past and future. In KAHNEMAN, D. & TVERSKY, A. (eds.): *Choices, Values and Frames*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 693-708.

5 ROUBAL, O.: *Difficulties with Identity – Art of Self-creation and Problem with Recognition*. In *Communication Today*, 2011, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 34.

6 BAUMAN, Z.: *Umění života*. Praha: Academia, 2010, p. 15.

7 CLARKE, M.: *Challenging choices. Ideology, consumerism and policy*: University of Bristol: Polity Press, 2010, p. 17-37.

The point is: do not postpone anything and take action right away. Note that, in some cases, it basically concerns dichotomies depicting relation of something that takes place quickly and of something that takes place slowly. The quick activities should prevail over the slow ones. Specifically, prolonged planning should give way to quick action, thorough and time-consuming preparation should give way to quick performance, diligent and patient work should give way to immediate reward, etc.

Invasion of fast running time

What we label as the culture of the moment may not fully develop until the fast-running time starts winning over the slow-running time.⁸ In situations, when the slow ones give way to the quick ones, when acceleration makes it impossible to slow down.

What Clarke describes as the over choice culture or Grosse describes as the society of multiple opportunities may most probably only take places in fast-running times of constant changes, mobility, and flexibility, because a world of unlimited possibilities and opportunities is, by nature, always a world in motion.⁹ It is hardly possible to imagine the plurality of the world of opportunities as something still, constant, designated once for all. Such world is inevitably dynamic, following trends, developments, and changes. Even the instant gratification cult, as the symbol of the culture of the moment, may not be promoted in slow-running time characterized by delays and waits, postponement and procrastination; it definitely comes into existence and continues in the context of fast running time.

According to Eriksen, the situation when the fast-running time became the dominant force that determines the pace and direction of the social movement in many regards, took place approximately in mid-1990s, in connection with a rapid onset of new information and communication technologies. The decisive factor of these changes is, in particular, an unbelievable amount of information that takes up increasingly more space and from which there are virtually no reliable “sanctuaries”.

The quantity of information is constantly increasing, and it also becomes more and more accessible. For example, the use of digitalized networks is increasing at a breath-taking speed. While the number of internet users was marginal in 1997, it already exceeded 2.5 billion in 2010. In 2006, email communication generated 20 percent more information – specifically one Exabyte – than any human language since the beginning of time. By the end of 2006, more than 50 million blogs were registered on the worldwide web, whereas, on average, the number of blogs increases by 175 thousand each day.¹⁰

There is a risk that lives might transform into a hysteric succession of exuberant moments, where the differences between “before” and “after” would cease to exist, where the borders between “here” and “there” would be eliminated. Each subsequent moment then comes at such speed that it will apparently be more and more difficult to live in the present. According to Eriksen, the consequences of the extreme hastiness of modern lifestyle are vital; tyranny of the moment, as Eriksen describes the atmosphere of today, is to directly endanger not only the category of past and present tense, it is also to transform the mental categories of all those that are recklessly affected by the tyranny of the moment in the information age.

Eriksen believes that dictatorship of the moment is to represent new paradigm in the form of a set of rules, with a risk that it could get a dominant role within the contemporary culture, gaining full control over the possibility to manage one’s own time. People will consequently fall victim to the information overload; more intensive and aggressive forcing of information on people will also result in the struggle for every free second in their lives.

8 ERIKSEN, T. H.: *Tyranie okamžiku*. Brno: Doplněk, 2009.

9 GROSS, P.: *Die Multioptionsgesellschaft*. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1994.

10 ROUBAL, O.: *Internauti: generace, která vyrůstá na síti*. In *Psychologie Dnes*, 2013, Vol. 19, No. 1, p. 49.

E-communication within the context of fast-running time

The onset of the fast-running time is mainly apparent in the perception of modern digital and electronic communication, information transfers and transmissions. One example is electronic mail, which is characterized by unique syntax and writing style reminiscent of some hybrid form of written and verbal communication. Often informal, incomplete or even missing salutations, fragmentary statements, incomplete sentences, and illogical sentence constructions result from the speed, with which we use this form of communication, as well as the amount of information we both distribute and receive. While senders of information compete for every spare moment of target groups of addressees, recipients of information are – as a result of overflowing electronic data – forced to sort such information more and more, decide about its importance, and ignore some of it entirely. On the one hand, email correspondence started a fight among senders for every spare second of the recipients' attention and, on the other hand, it presented the recipients with an uneasy test of persistence in terms of organizing the information.

Communications via emails are, unlike traditional letters, also used for several addressees simultaneously; this is usually reflected in the generally impersonal and vague content of the communication intended for “all and no one”. It is a completely different task to compose and send a letter compared to writing an email and sending it with a mouse click. The same applies to recipients: it is a different experience to read a letter than to read an email. Letters usually require greater effort and personal involvement than an ordinary email. The number of letters usually lags behind the number of communications sent electronically within the context of fast-running time. The difference between a letter and an email is roughly the same as the difference between a pipe and a cigarette. A pipe represents a symbol of a slow-running time, it gently burns, and it is usually enjoyed at rest, with an effort to postpone the moment when the tobacco burns out – because it is very difficult to smoke a pipe while rushing. On the other hand, a cigarette represents the fast-running time; it is smoked dynamically, with rapid frequency of inhaled and exhaled, often while walking and compliantly observing the shortening cigarette. The age of pipes and letters has given way to the age of cigarettes and emails. However, even cigarettes have gone electronic...

It is interesting to observe how fast-running time that controls the world of communication gradually interferes with the time, which was relatively abundant when some time was necessary from the moment information travelled from the sender to an addressee. This time, which filled the currently almost non-existent space necessary for the transfer of data and information, may be included in the category of a slow-running time. This “no man's time” is what is absent today; however, no one is willingly looking for it, no one misses it – it has simply ceased to exist for many people. The point is that, by overusing email correspondence, we have deprived ourselves of that time. We have voluntarily – and some of us even enthusiastically – minimized the time that can be used for meaningful activities, not compromised by the risk of the addressee's immediate reaction, invoking compulsive need for a similarly prompt reply. As a result of rapid email communication, the time for deliberation and thinking has been maximally condensed, whereas such time should be available for every longer and more respectable answer. Email communication often forces us to react in a matter of seconds and minutes, which certainly leads to superficial nature of this form of communication in many cases. At the same time, it knows no spatial limitations; email communication has perfectly tamed not only space, but also users present in such space at an ever growing pace. Emails do not knock on doors or sit quietly in mailboxes; they do not wait for our invitation or appear on request. On the contrary, they brazenly apply carpet bombing to attack our workplaces as well as homes. They usurp attention of addressees on the road, anywhere and anytime, ignoring time zones, during the day and night. With emails, there is no room for leisure, a time so pleasant. Idle time has been slowly disappearing within the context of the online electronic communication.

Email communication may be viewed as one of the symbols of the tyranny of the moment, amplifying the atmosphere of fast-running time, where the preservation of slow-running time seems hard to imagine and probably even impossible. However, a question remains whether anyone actually feels the lack of the slow-running time, whether there is a general will to return to the slower alternatives of time.

Conclusion

During the onset of the fast-running time era, not only the intensive ejection or displacement of slow-running time takes place, but other areas of the human life have also been transformed. Certain changes into uncertain, authentic experiences change into artificial experiences, unambiguous identity changes into an ambiguous and ambivalent identity, understanding and orientation are transformed into chaos and disorientation.¹¹ However, these are not only the consequences of the onset of the fast-running time era and results of the tyranny of the moment, which Eriksen believes are brought about by the information time era, but they also result from a more general cultural-social transformation of late modernity, which brings more independence and individual freedoms on the one hand, coupled with greater uncertainty and risks on the other hand.¹² Therefore, Eriksen's perception of the tyranny of the moment and onset of the fast-running time must always be seen in a wider social, psychological, and cultural context of more general transformations of the society within the liquid times era of late modernity.¹³

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