

*The Temporal Misadventures of a
Social Psychologist, or
How Every Culture Keeps Time
Just a Little Bit Differently*

A
GEOGRAPHY
OF
TIME

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PREFACE

TIME TALKS, WITH AN ACCENT

Every culture has its own unique set of temporal fingerprints. To know a people is to know the time values they live by.

JEREMY RIFKIN, *Time Wars*

Time has intrigued me for as long as I remember. Like most young Americans, I was initially taught that time is simply measured by a clock—in seconds and minutes, hours and days, months and years. But when I looked around at my elders, the numbers never seemed to add up the same way twice. Why was it, I wondered, that some adults appeared to be perpetually running out of daylight hours while others seemed to have all the time in the world? I thought of this second group of people—the ones who would go to the movies in the middle of the workday or take their families on six-month sabbaticals to the South Pacific—as temporal millionaires, and I vowed to become one of them.

When planning my career, I ignored my peers' unwavering concern with the amount of money a job would pay and tuned in instead to the temporal lifestyle it offered. To what extent would I be

able to set my own pace: How much control would I have over my time? Could I take a bike ride during the day? Thoreau spoke to me when he observed, "To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts." I chose a profession—that of a university professor—which offers the temporal mobility I sought. And to my good fortune, I encountered a specialty—social psychology—that has allowed me to pursue the very concept of time that fascinated me as a child.

I trace the beginning of my scientific journey to an experience early in my career. Until then, my research had been focused on what was at the time the hot topic in social psychology, attribution theory. I had confined my experiments to rather technical problems, such as how men and women differ in their explanations for success and failure, what conditions cause people to attribute their successes to external causes, and how self-confidence affects one's attributional style. You get the picture: these were significant issues within my own academic sphere, but I couldn't help noticing how my friends' eyes glazed over when I described my research.

My interest in these technical questions ended abruptly in the summer of 1976. I had just begun an appointment as a visiting professor of psychology at the Federal University in Niteroi, Brazil, a midsized city across the bay from Rio de Janeiro. I arrived anxious to observe at first hand just what characteristics of this alien environment would require the greatest readjustment from me. From my past travel experiences, I anticipated difficulties with such issues as the language, my privacy, and standards of cleanliness. But these turned out to be a piece of cake compared to the distress that Brazilians' ideas of time and punctuality were to cause me.

I was aware before arriving, of course, of the stereotype of the *amanhã* attitude of Brazilians (the Portuguese version of *a mañana*), whereby it is said that whenever it is conceivably possible the business of today is put off until tomorrow. I knew I'd need to slow down and to reduce my expectations of accomplishment. But I was a kid from Brooklyn, where one is taught at an early age to move fast or get out of the way. Years ago I had learned to survive life in the foreign culture of Fresno, California, a city where even

laid-back Los Angelenos must learn to decelerate. Adjusting to the pace of life in Brazil, I figured, would call for no more than a bit of fine tuning. What I got instead was a dose of culture shock I wouldn't wish on a hijacker.

My lessons began soon after arriving. As I left home for my first day of teaching, I asked someone the time. It was 9:05 A.M., allowing me plenty of time to get to my 10 o'clock lecture. After what I judged to be half an hour, I glanced at a clock I was passing. It said 10:20! In panic, I broke for the classroom, followed by gentle calls of "*Alô, Professor*" and "*Tudo bem, professor?*" from unhurried students, many of whom, I later realized, were my own. I arrived breathless to find an empty room.

Frantically, I exited the room to ask a passerby the time. "Nine forty-five," came the answer. No, that couldn't be. I asked someone else. "Nine fifty-five." Another squinted down at his watch and called out proudly: "Exactly nine forty-three." The clock in a nearby office read 3:15. I had received my first two lessons: Brazilian timepieces are consistently inaccurate; and nobody seemed to mind but me.

My class was scheduled from ten until noon. Many students came late. Several arrived after 10:30. A few showed up closer to eleven. Two came after that. All of the latecomers wore the relaxed smiles I later came to enjoy. Each one greeted me, and although a few apologized briefly, none seemed terribly concerned about being late. They assumed that I understood.

That Brazilians would arrive late was no surprise, although it was certainly a new personal experience to watch students casually enter a classroom more than one hour late for a two-hour class. The real surprise came at noon that first day, when the class came to a close.

Back home in California, I never need to look at a clock to know when the class hour is ending. The shuffling of books is accompanied by strained expressions screaming: "I'm hungry / I'm thirsty / I've got to go to the bathroom / I'm going to suffocate if you keep us one more second." (The pain, I find, usually becomes unbearable at two minutes to the hour for undergraduates and at about five minutes to the hour for graduate students.)

But when noon arrived for my first Brazilian class, only a few students left right away. Others slowly drifted out during the next fifteen minutes, and some continued asking me questions long after that. When several remaining students kicked off their shoes at 12:30, I went into my own hungry/thirsty/bathroom/suffocation plea. (I could not, with any honesty, attribute their lingering to my superb teaching style. I had, in fact, just spent two hours lecturing on statistics in halting Portuguese. Forgive me, *meus pobres estudantes*.)

In the hope of understanding my students' behavior, I made an appointment for 11 A.M. the next morning with my new *chefe*, or department head. I arrived at her office on time. Neither she nor her secretary were there. In fact, I had to turn on the lights to read the magazines in the waiting room: a year-old copy of *Time* and a three-year-old copy of *Sports Illustrated*.

At 11:30 the secretary arrived, said *alô*, asked me if I wanted a *cafézinho* (the traditional Brazilian drink consisting of one-half-thick coffee and one-half sugar, which, as best I can tell, gets everyone so wired that they no longer bother to move), and left. At 11:45 my new *chefe* arrived, also offered me a *cafézinho*, and also went off. Ten minutes later she returned, sat down at her desk, and began reading her mail. At 12:20, she finally called me into her office, casually apologized for making me wait, chatted for a few minutes and then excused herself to "run" to another appointment for which she was late. I learned later that this was no lie. It was her habit to make lots of appointments for the same time and to be late for all of them. She apparently liked appointments.

Later that day I had a meeting scheduled with several students from my class. When I got to my "office" two of them were already there and acting quite at home. They seemed undisturbed that I was a few minutes late and, in fact, were in no hurry to begin. One had kicked his feet up on my desk and was reading his *Sports Illustrated* (which, I noted, was only three months old).

Some fifteen minutes after the scheduled conclusion I stood up and explained that I had other appointments waiting. The students stayed put and asked pleasantly, "Who with?" When I listed the names of two of their associates, one fellow excitedly reported that

he knew them both. He rushed to the door and escorted one of them from the waiting area—the other hadn't arrived yet—into my office. They all then proceeded to chit-chat and turn the pages of the *Sports Illustrated*. By the time his associate sauntered in, five minutes before the scheduled conclusion of our appointment, I was beginning to lose track of who was early and who was late—which, I was eventually to learn, was exactly the lesson that I should have been learning. For now, though, I was just plain confused.

My last appointment of the day was with the owner of an apartment I wanted to rent. This time I thought I could spot the little train coming. As soon as I arrived I asked his secretary how long I would have to wait. She said that her boss was running late. "How late?" I asked. "A half an hour, *mais ou menos*," she replied. Would I like a *cafézinho*? I declined and said I'd be back in twenty minutes. Upon my return, she said it would be a little while longer. I left again. When I came back ten minutes later, she told me her boss had gotten tired of waiting for me and had left for the day. When I began to snap out an angry message to give to her Sr. Landlord, the secretary explained that I'd left him no choice but to skip out on me. "Don't you understand, he's the owner and you're not. You're an arrogant man, Dr. Levine." That was the last time I tried to outmaneuver a Brazilian at the waiting game.

During my year in Brazil, I was repeatedly bewildered, frustrated, fascinated, and obsessed by the customs and ideas of social time that Brazilians sent my way. The reason that Brazilians' rules of punctuality so confused me, it soon became apparent, was that they are inseparably intertwined with cultural values. And when we enter the web of culture, answers come neither simply nor cleanly. Cultural beliefs are like the air we breathe, so taken for granted that they are rarely discussed or even articulated. But there is often a volatile reaction when these unwritten rules are violated. Unsuspecting outsiders like myself can walk into a cultural minefield.

No beliefs are more ingrained and subsequently hidden than those about time. Almost thirty years ago anthropologist Edward Hall labeled rules of social time the "silent language." The world

over, children simply pick up their society's conceptions of early and late; of waiting and rushing; of the past, the present, and the future. There is no dictionary to define these rules of time for them, or for strangers who stumble over the maddening incongruities between the time sense they bring with them and the one they face in a new land.

Brazil made it clear to me that time was talking. But understanding what it was saying was no simple matter. After several months of temporal blunders, I designed my first systematic experiments about time in an attempt to understand Brazilians' beliefs and rules about punctuality. This work, at first to my frustration but eventually my appreciation, raised more questions than it answered. What I found so intrigued me that I have spent most of the past two decades continuing to research both the psychology of time and the psychology of places. My research has evolved from studies of punctuality to those about the broader pace of life; further study has raised questions about the consequences the pace of life has for the physical and psychological well-being of people and their communities. This work has taken me through many of the cities of the United States and across much of the rest of the world. It has confirmed my earliest intuitions: that how people construe the time of their lives comprises a world of diversity. There are drastic differences on every level: from culture to culture, city to city, and from neighbor to neighbor. And most of all, I have learned, the time on the clock only begins to tell the story.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PLACE

As a social psychologist, I have come, on many levels, to appreciate the value of studying time in general, and the pace of life in particular. The discipline of social psychology casts a wide net. Unlike our colleagues in the fields of personality psychology and sociology—the first of whom tend to focus on the private, internal functioning of people, and the latter on their social groups—social psychologists are concerned with the give and take between indi-

viduals and the groups that guide their behavior. We study with no small arrogance what our founding father Kurt Lewin called the "life space," the sum total of the behavior of individuals as they exist in their environments: The whole nine yards.

The work reported in subsequent chapters begins with the assumption that places, like people, have their own personalities. I fully concur with sociologist Anselm Strauss that "the entire complex of urban life can be thought of as a person rather than a distinctive place, and the city can be endowed with a personality of its own."² Places are marked by their own cultures and sub-cultures, each with their unique temporal fingerprints.

I have pursued these fingerprints through studies of the time sense of geographical locales. My goal has been to systematically study how places differ in their pace of life, and how great these differences are. Classifying the social psychology of places is an inherently messy enterprise. My charge, I believe, is to reduce the noise as much as possible. The goal is not to discover invariant differences between places; it is to describe whatever differences do exist as carefully as possible. These studies are, in a sense, objective, empirical tests of the raw material of popular stereotypes.

To an empirical researcher, the enormity and diffuseness of the concept of pace of life can be problematic; it often leads down dauntingly murky paths. The topic sets off chains of associations and tangents about so many aspects of time—for example, the time of physics, biology, health, culture, personal relationships, music, art—that it sometimes creates a mass free association about experience itself. Asking about the experience of time is a little like the question "What is art?" Both themes probe so deeply and broadly into personal experience that they often evolve into questions such as "How should I live my life?," or its cousin, "What is the meaning of life?" These are interesting topics, to be sure, but a bit unwieldy for a researcher striving for methodological precision.

There are dangers in making generalizations about the characteristics of places, particularly when they are directed at the collective "personalities" of their people. The notion of applying a single set of characteristics to an entire population, or to any group for

that matter, makes for sloppy thinking. The fact is that individuals in any setting differ vastly. Assigning global labels to the people of a particular city or country is overstereotyping; as such, it is potentially malicious.

But while it may be careless to overgeneralize about the people from a single place, it would be naive to deny the existence of significant, overall differences between places and cultures. Of course, many Italians resemble the time-focused stereotype of the Swiss more than they do Marcello Mastroianni (just ask the Milanese); some Brazilians are more driven than the average New Yorker. But there is evidence that, taken as a whole, the Swiss do tend to be more clock-conscious than the Italians and that the Cariocas of Rio are generally more laid back than New Yorkers. In any given situation, the most driven Type A may be more relaxed than the highest scoring Type B. All things being equal, however, the reverse is more likely to be the case.

The degree of variation in a culture may be viewed as a telling characteristic in itself. In Japan, for example, conformity is considered a virtue. There is a well-accepted Japanese saying: "The nail that sticks up is quickly hammered down." As a result, there is considerably greater public uniformity in Japan than within an individualistic culture such as the United States, where "The squeaky wheel gets the grease." The extent of cultural tightness represents a significant difference between these two countries.

My studies compare the pace of life of different places, and range from early experiments comparing Brazil and the United States to recent ones comparing 31 different countries. One goal of this research has been to rank the paces of different cities and countries—to create a sort of social psychologist's places-rated guide to the fastest and slowest places to live. These lists follow an old American tradition. As early as the seventeenth century, promoters of Maryland were trying to persuade colonists to choose their state over Virginia by compiling statistics showing heavier turkeys, more deer, and fewer deaths from foul summer diseases and Indian massacres—all theirs for settling on the northern shores of Chesapeake Bay. Today's ratings of places provoke more

debate than ever. As a *Time* magazine reporter put it, "Whether the subject is the beefiest burger or the biggest corporation, Americans have a penchant for making lists of the best and the worst, then arguing about the results. No rankings have inspired more disagreement than those about home sweet home."³

But whereas most places-rated studies have relied on statistics concerning objective living conditions (housing, health care, crime, transportation, education, the arts, recreational facilities, jobs), my research has explored the social-psychological quality of peoples' lives. How accurate is our stereotype of laid-back Southern Californians? Of Type A New Yorkers? How does the pace of life in Japan compare to that in Indonesia? In Syria versus Brazil? In which cities are people more likely to take the time to help a stranger? These are some of the questions I have asked along with my colleagues.

My own overriding goal in rating places has been more than deciding the "best" or "worst" cities. Rather, it has been to understand the consequences the pace of life holds for the quality of peoples' lives. Are people in slower places happier than their Type A counterparts? Are they healthier? Do they invest more time in their social responsibilities? My colleagues and I have examined the consequences of the pace of life on several levels, which range from the economic and social characteristics of cities to helping behavior to mortality rates from coronary heart disease.

Differences in the pace of life turn out, as we shall see, to have far-reaching consequences. This shouldn't be surprising. After all, the pace of our lives governs our experience of the passage of time. And how we move through time is, ultimately, the way we live our lives. As J. T. Fraser, the founder of the International Society for the Study of Time, wrote, "Tell me what to think of time, and I shall know what to think of you."

This book is *not* intended as yet another statement about the "overworked American," or the "time crunch," or "urgency addiction"—although I will touch on these subjects. And it is certainly not designed to be a time-management or self-help book—though here again I will try to offer a few suggestions that have come out

of my work. Many fine books already exist on these subjects.⁴ My interest is broader. In *A Geography of Time* I seek to understand the richness and complexity of views about time and the pace of life among cultures and cities and people around the world. Since time is the very cornerstone of social life, the study of a people's temporal constructions offers a precious window into the psyche of culture, including our own.

In researching other places I have learned as much about my own culture as I have about those of others. The social scientist's exploration of other people and places is not very different from any other type of travel writing in this respect. Both, if they are any good, should ultimately shed new light on life closer to home. As the writer Russell Banks once said at a symposium on the literature of travel:

All travel writing that's of lasting interest—writing that we continue to read, writing that is written by writers as travelers, not travelers as writers—is really written to make a point about home. The essential purpose of diligent and brave observation of the other is to clarify the nature and the limits of the self, which leads one to conclude that the best travel writers are people who, needing that clarification, are at bottom unsure of the nature and limits of home and their relation to it. They move out of the house. So that like Hawthorne's Wakefield, they can look back and see what's true there.⁵

If I have done my job well, this book will set a clearer focus on the pace of our own lives as well as that of others. How do we use our time? What is this use doing to our cities? To our relationships? To our own bodies and psyches? Are there decisions we have made without consciously choosing them? Alternative tempos that we might prefer? Perhaps we can be led, like Hawthorne's Wakefield, to "look back and see what's true there," and, in our own ways, to achieve temporal prosperity.