

The Conception of Time

and

Social Progress

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Time and how different peoples perceive it and dealt with it have affected people's lives and the degree of progress they made. No nation could escape the imperatives of time and no future could be constructed without a clear conception of time. However, time has never been innocent and people's relationship with it has never been easy.

Wherever time was perceived a valuable asset, people tended to utilize it efficiently and make the best use of whatever was available of it. And that, in turn, helped people produce more goods and services, develop their physical and socio-cultural environments, get more enjoyment, and make much progress in all areas of human endeavor. And wherever time was perceived as having little or no particular value, people tended to ignore it or waste whatever was available of it. And this, in turn, has caused the ability of people to produce more goods and services, develop their cultures and community life, and make progress in most areas of human endeavor to be vastly limited.

While most people tend today to appreciate the value of time, most peoples throughout history have had little respect for it. In fact, until recently in human history, time was perceived more of a liability and less of an asset. Most people, therefore, were happy to waste time; they were even ready to exert themselves to see it vanish. But time does not vanish; it only disappears and in its disappearance it punishes those who fail to respect it and appreciate its role in shaping their lives and future careers and dreams.

The tribal society, which appeared in its primitive form about 95,000 years ago, had no particular conception of time and, therefore, could not understand the challenge time posed and the role it played in human life and community development. Tribesmen, instead of facing the challenges of time, tended to unconsciously ignore it and go around it. Keeping their

traditional way of life and freedom to wander dictated that tribes move from one region to another, seeking more hospitable environments and better life conditions. No attempts were made by tribesmen to remake their physical environment or transform their traditional way of life. Having no clear conception of time has helped tribal society to keep its freedom; yet it denied it the opportunity to transform its social environment, develop more efficient means of survival, and enhance physical security.

When agriculture was developed about 10,000 years ago, people began to settle down, build villages and towns and develop new ways to manage their land holdings and water resources. Consequently, agricultural society, slowly but surely, developed a clear conception of time; it realized the challenge time poses and the role it plays in human development. In order to improve their chances of survival in good and bad times, farmers began to develop new farming and irrigation systems, build better houses more resistant to cold and hot weather, and develop new ways to preserve and store food. State building, construction of roads and dams and developing new systems to provide and enhance security followed, causing the physical and sociopolitical environments to become more hospitable and enjoyable. Realizing the challenge posed by time, agricultural man responded by making changes in his social life, economic system and political organization. And in so doing, he was able to make progress in most aspects and areas of human endeavor.

Nevertheless, time throughout the agricultural age and among all agricultural societies was perceived as a liability, not an asset. People waiting for the planting and harvesting seasons to arrive wished that time passes by as fast as possible. And to make sure that time goes by fast, ideas to waste time or kill it began to appear and claim priority in peoples minds and daily activities. This conception of time led people consequently to invent ways and games, not to utilize time but to dispose of it. The challenge posed by time, therefore, was small and agricultural society consequently made little progress.

Arab society, being largely agricultural, continues today to invent new, more costly and health damaging ways to waste time. The spread use of the water pipe (Argilah) in the Middle Eastern Arab countries is the latest and probably the most socially damaging invention that

has so far been invented to waste time. Its destructive effects go far beyond the financial cost and the creation of serious health problems. It produces a new generation of Arab youth devoid of work ethics and environmental concerns and respect for the rights of others. It is a generation that sees self-destruction and waste of time as a source of pleasure that weakens its will to resist other temptations of life. Reading, working, helping the needy and planning for future careers have become secondary issues. And what makes the argilah smoking sad and troubling is the fact that a high percentage of parents encourage their teenagers to engage in it and live its fantasy.

When the industrial society arrived about 250 year ago, a new conception of time slowly emerged that considered time as good as money. Farmers who lost their land to the established European aristocracy of landlords had only their physical power to sell and their time to utilize to make a living and survive. As a result, the phrase “time is money” was coined and people began to seek new and creative ways to maximize the utility of time. Capitalists and Managers, meanwhile, began to think of new management and disciplinary systems to maximize the output that each worker produced in a given time. Competition among companies and industries, productivity of labor, and efficiency of machines became magic words motivating managers to save time and workers to maximize the utility of it.

Today, in the emerging age of knowledge, people who are living the age and contributing to making it a reality are engaged in the most intensive processes to invent new ways to utilize the fraction of a second. Time, as a result, became the most valuable asset that workers, scientists, researchers, engineers, inventors, media companies, lawyers, advertisers, physicians and all other professionals have. And with this much awareness of the value of time and the need to utilize every little bit of it, the gap between the tribal and agricultural societies on the one hand, and the industrial and knowledge societies on the other, has continued to widen and deepen.