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# “The Assault of the Present on the Rest of Time”: Optimization and the Dissolution of Temporal Boundaries in Accelerated Modernity

*“El asalto del presente sobre el resto del tiempo”: optimización y disolución de límites temporales en la modernidad acelerada*

*“O assalto do presente sobre o resto do tempo”. Otimização e dissolução de barreiras temporais na modernidade acelerada*

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## Abstract

Given the cultural dynamic of acceleration in present-day modernity, restricting one's attention to the macro-level of faster social change or everyday experiences of increasing tempo is no longer an adequate response. To understand the impact of the temporal and optimization imperatives bound up with these phenomena, it is imperative to extend one's purview to encompass their intersubjective and intergenerational consequences. Another major concern is to achieve a finer conceptual and empirical grasp of the nature of the translation between societal demands and individual coping strategies. The discussion is illustrated by three case studies from a major empirical investigation on “Aporias of Perfectionism in Accelerated Modernity”.

**Keywords:** Optimization; Acceleration; Aporias of Perfectionism; Intergenerational Relationships; Care.

## Resumen

Dada la dinámica cultural de aceleración en la modernidad presente, ya no resulta adecuado restringir la mirada en el macronivel de cambios sociales más rápidos o las experiencias cotidianas de velocidad creciente. Para comprender el impacto de los imperativos temporales y de optimización asociados a estos fenómenos, resulta imperativo expandir la mirada hasta abarcar sus consecuencias intersubjetivas e intergeneracionales. Otro tema de interés es el alcanzar un entendimiento conceptual y empírico más fino acerca de la naturaleza de la traducción entre demandas sociales y estrategias individuales de adaptación. La discusión es ilustrada por tres casos de estudio que provienen de una investigación mayor acerca de "Las aporías del perfeccionismo en la modernidad acelerada".

**Palabras clave:** Optimización; Aceleración; Aporías del perfeccionismo; Relaciones intergeneracionales; Cuidados

## Resumo

Devido à dinâmica cultural da aceleração na modernidade atual, não é mais adequado restringir a observação ao macronível de mudanças sociais mais rápidas ou das experiências cotidianas de velocidade crescente. Para a compreensão do impacto dos imperativos temporais e de otimização associados a estes fenômenos, faz-se necessário ampliar o olhar até abranger suas consequências intersubjetivas e intergeracionais. Outro tema de interesse é conseguir um entendimento conceitual e empírico mais aprimorado da natureza da tradução entre demandas sociais e estratégias de adaptação. A discussão é ilustrada por três casos estudados numa pesquisa ampla sobre "As aporias do perfeccionismo na modernidade acelerada".

**Palavras-chaves:** Otimização; Aceleração; Aporias do perfeccionismo; Relações intergeracionais; Cuidados.

## Introduction

Talking about time, says historian Reinhart Koselleck,<sup>1</sup> necessarily means talking in metaphors. Further, "the metaphorical power of all images of time emerges initially from spatial visualizations", not least when it comes to reflecting on the relations between past, present, and future. The metaphor that cultural studies scholar Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht employs is that of the "broad" present.<sup>2</sup> Mainly for ecological reasons, he argues, the future "no longer presents itself as an open horizon of possibilities".<sup>3</sup> Nor can we succeed in "bequeathing anything to posterity".<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, the present has become "a dimension of expanding simultaneities".<sup>5</sup> With uncanny foresight, German film director Alexander Kluge traced such a development back in 1985 in his movie *The Assault of the Present on the Rest of Time*, the title itself a telling metaphor.<sup>6</sup> In his engagement with the phenomenon of time, Kluge presents a whole kaleidoscope of examples illustrating momentous shifts in the relationship between the present and "the rest of time". One of the movie's essential concerns is to demonstrate that the overarching present engulfs both the past and the future, thus mounting an assault on "the rest of time". Things genuinely different and new will be nipped in the bud if the present thwarts potential development. One such productive development would be "opening oneself to the passage of time".<sup>7</sup>

One of the phenomena held up for perusal by the movie is that of "empty time", i.e. time that is devoid of meaning because the protagonists are trapped in a treadmill of unremitting constraints and emergencies involving the pressing necessity of dealing with momentary and immediate priorities "before it's too late"<sup>8</sup> and leaving no scope to identify and opt for the things that are significant and truly relevant. The relentless pressure of time increasingly dictates not only the sequence of the actions undertaken by the protagonists but also their content and quality. They are deprived of meaning by a species of breathless haste that rules out any in-depth response to experience.<sup>9</sup> In the movie, this shallowness of experience is personified by the "hasty ones", who rush unceasingly from pillar to post, making snap decisions that are usually overtaken by the passage of events. Restless haste turns into an incessantly repetitive handling of time disfigured by the absence of any profound sense or meaning. Kluge's movie insists that thinking of any substance rests on an opening to the unknown. "Truth is a child of time" is one of the assertions a scholar in the movie resorts to in his attempts to explain to a

<sup>1</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories* (California: Stanford University Press, 2018), 12.

<sup>2</sup> Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Our Broad Present: Time and Contemporary Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Kluge, *The Assault of the Present on the Rest of Time* (1985). Available at [https://www.edition-filmmuseum.com/product\\_info.php/info/p43\\_Der-Angriff-der-Gegenwart-auf-die--brige-Zeit--amp--Vermischte-Nachrichten.html](https://www.edition-filmmuseum.com/product_info.php/info/p43_Der-Angriff-der-Gegenwart-auf-die--brige-Zeit--amp--Vermischte-Nachrichten.html)

<sup>7</sup> Heinz Weiß, *Trauma, Guilt and Reparation: The Path From Impact to Development* (London: Routledge, 2020), 15.

<sup>8</sup> Vera King, "Die Macht der Dringlichkeit. Kultureller Wandel von Zeitgestaltungen und psychischen Verarbeitungsmustern", *Swiss Archives of Neurology and Psychiatry* 164, no. 7 (2013): 223-31.

<sup>9</sup> Andreas Dörpinghaus, "Bildung: Plädoyer wider die Verdummung", in *Glanzlichter der Wissenschaft 2009: Ein Almanach*, Deutscher Hochschulverband ed. (Stuttgart: Lucius & Lucius, 2009), 39-48.

natural scientist what the ancient Greeks thought about time. The scientist groans that he has *no time* to listen to long-winded explanations because he is already *behind time* for the lecture he is scheduled to deliver – on the subject of “time”.

The movie is a far-sighted and subtly satirical work, an astonishingly prophetic statement about the cultural and individual consequences of acceleration as we witness them today. The perspectives on time that Kluge adopts with such virtuosity can be understood as an expression of keen societal awareness, notably with regard both to the unflagging acceleration of social change and the upsurge of tempo and to the dissolution of temporal boundaries in people’s everyday lives.<sup>10</sup> Subsequently, acceleration has become more and more headlong due to the technological and socio-economic developments bundled together under the catchwords *globalization* and *digitization*. Constant upgrading and acceleration makes it possible to process, evaluate, communicate, and trade vast amounts of data in no time flat, a development without which the operative logic of global financial economy with all its unprecedented temporal imperatives could never have asserted itself.<sup>11</sup>

In the global competition both for market segments and also for scientific or technological innovations, minimal time differences have become more crucial than ever before. The first-past-the-post mentality, efficiency enhancement, and instrumental forms of optimization designed to increase dividends all gear their options to the prospects of success.<sup>12</sup> Together, they constitute a strategy for coming out on top in the rivalry for control of the global markets, in individual self-assertion on the labor and education markets, in institutions, and in the way we lead our lives.<sup>13</sup> This preoccupation with time affects institutions and individuals, jobs and families. As science theorist Helga Nowotny puts it with ironical succinctness, “the fast group” are the ones who get it right.<sup>14</sup> According to this logic, most of those who really do “get it right” are willing to permanently enhance their own performance and come to terms with the blurring of boundaries – for example, the increasing dissolution of life-work distinctions – or, encouraged by the digital media, themselves actively propagate such blurring.<sup>15</sup> In short, there are many who not only tolerate these changes, but openly welcome and actively espouse them.

<sup>10</sup> Hartmut Rosa, *Alienation and Acceleration. Towards a Critical Theory of Late-Modern Temporality* (Nordisk Sommeruniversitet: NSU Press Aarhus, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Nicole Aubert, “Dringlichkeit und Selbstverlust in der Hypermoderne”, in *Zeitgewinn und Selbstverlust. Folgen und Grenzen der Beschleunigung*, Vera King and Benigna Gerisch eds. (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2009), 87-100.

<sup>12</sup> Eve Chiapello, “Optimisation in a Context of Financialisation”, in *Last in Perfection. Impacts of Optimisation on Culture and Psyche*, Vera King, Benigna Gerisch and Hartmut Rosa eds. (London: Routledge, 2019), 85-104.

<sup>13</sup> Andreas Reckwitz, *Das Ende der Illusionen. Politik, Ökonomie und Kultur in der Spätmoderne* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> Helga Nowotny, *Time: The Modern and Postmodern Experience* (Cambridge/Malden: Polity Press, 1996), 32.

<sup>15</sup> Vera King, “If you show your real face, you’ll lose 10 000 followers’ – The Gaze of the Other and Transformations of Shame in Digitized Relationships”, *Communication and Media* 11, no. 38 (2016).

## Collective, individual, and generational dimensions of acceleration

Given this affirmative attitude, the question that poses itself with particular urgency is what are the cultural and individual motives that fuel this acceleration dynamic. On the cultural plane, i.e. in terms of collective discourses, symbols, and interpretation patterns, plus the individual constructions of meaning bound up with them, acceleration has been largely regarded as an attempt to make the most of the restricted life-time available to us. Accordingly, acceleration is widely interpreted as a strategy with which modernity does its best to find a substitute for the Christian consolation of eternal life after death. In the course of modernity, Koselleck suggests, the Here-and-Now and the Hereafter have been replaced as significant time-markers by the past and the future, a future that, as Blumenberg emphasizes, is individually restricted by the finite nature of human life.<sup>16</sup> After the demise of salvation as promised by Christianity, we, as "beings with limited lives but unlimited desires", chafe at the discrepancy between life-time and world-time.<sup>17</sup> Acceleration can thus be an attempt to compensate for, and come to terms with, mortality by cramming more and more faster and faster (and often simultaneously) into the one life at our disposal –another dimension in the blurring of boundaries. "Gaining time in order to get more out of the world" is the name of the game.<sup>18</sup>

Paradoxically, acceleration is a strategy that constantly undermines its own success by redoubling its efforts: the yawning gap between permanently expanding options and the stubborn stasis of available time gets wider all the time. The more time is gained, the more processes and everyday life are condensed. The more we *could* do in theory, the more we miss out on in reality. But there is another reason why this permanent acceleration falls over its own feet. A striking feature of discourse on acceleration is the unmistakable element of egocentricity inherent in it. Frequently, the tension between life-time and world-time is regarded monadically, i.e. from a purely individual perspective. But how can this be, if time is also the central resource on which relationships and attachment flourish and thus a crucial condition for sociality in general?

Having time for someone else is an intrinsic component of affection; and indifference or hatred are instances of disaffection *in time*. Taking time or giving someone one's time is invariably a *gift*.<sup>19</sup> Time is the very currency of social relations, an elemental feature of reciprocity and an indispensable basis for love, friendship, and the caring connections between generations, for the solicitous way we "lay up treasure" for our children and grandchildren. Accordingly, we need to be much more precise in our analysis of the *intersubjective* and *intergenerational* consequences of acceleration. Another challenge is to

<sup>16</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2018); Hans Blumenberg, *Lebenszeit und Weltzeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, [1986] 2001), 183.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 71f.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>19</sup> Vera King, "The Generational Rivalry for Time", *Time & Society* 19, no. 1 (2010): 54-71.

achieve a finer grasp of *the kind of translation* that takes place between societal conditions and both intergenerational and individual coping strategies. The reason why I use the word "translation" is that in their impact the repercussions are usually not direct, but indirect. The ways in which we typically lead our lives are both the results of societal conditions and the expression of forms of engagement that follow their own logic and cannot be simply deduced from the sum of the givens.

Another issue has to do with our *conception of the relation between normality and pathology*. For a long time, such psychic disorders as depression or burnout were classified as the consequences of excessive "wear and tear" caused by time-stress and the pressures exerted by optimization and the bid for success, very much in line with Alain Ehrenberg's analyses of the "weariness of the self".<sup>20</sup> In the following, I shall be advocating a different view, one that focuses on the imperatives of acceleration and optimization not merely as diagnostic sources of disorders. Instead, we should pay much closer attention to the *normalization* of harmful constellations and reject simplifying theories about the effects of social change in favor of differentiation at various levels. First we need to take a closer look at the complexity of the connections between social conditions and intersubjective, intergenerational, and psychic dynamics, then at the subjectively congenial and sometimes willfully underrated consequences of the "higher-faster-better" ideal, proceeding from there – thirdly – to a clear-sighted view of cultural and individual patterns of defense against restriction(s).<sup>21</sup>

## Psyche and culture: the aporias of accelerated modernity

Connections of this nature between the social sector and the individual psyche were one of the subjects of the case analyses undertaken in the framework of a sociological-cum-psychoanalytic research project on the *Aporias of Perfectionism in Accelerated Modernity* (APAS) funded by the Volkswagen Foundation.<sup>22</sup> In the qualitative sample, some 100 persons were interviewed and the transcripts of the interviews analyzed. The sample included both a group of patients with depression/burnout and a group with no diagnosis. All these persons were asked to tell us their life stories. I propose to look more closely at three of these open interviews exemplifying different kinds of adaptation to the pressures of time and optimization: a.) one tending to play down the pressures experienced, b.) one responding with depression and suffering, and c.) an affirmative variant reflecting a response geared to an enhancement of autonomy and efficiency.

<sup>20</sup> Alain Ehrenberg, *The Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age* (Québec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> King, "The Generational Rivalry for Time".

<sup>22</sup> The APAS project was directed by Vera King, Benigna Gerisch, and Hartmut Rosa, cf. King, Gerisch and Rosa, *Lost in Perfection*; Vera King, Benigna Gerisch and Julia Schreiber, "...to really have everything completely perfect': On the Psychodynamics of Contemporary Forms of Body Optimization", *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 37, no. 2 (2020): 148-157. Also, visit <http://www.fb03.uni-frankfurt.de/45643730/forschung>.

One significant finding was that acceleration and the blurring/dissolution of temporal boundaries not only produce the kind of optimization pressure associated with shortage of time or time-stress. We also find a significant minority of defense patterns in which not only heteronomy but also restriction or transience are phased out.

As we shall see, the three examples are expressions of temporal boundary dissolution in work contexts displaying different interactive effects between external conditions and the conscious and unconscious motivations operative in the way individuals handle those conditions.<sup>23</sup> In addition, I shall be examining the consequences for relationships, including parent-child relations, and the way they define the conditions in which individuals grow up. Also, the case analyses are designed to illustrate typological differentiations relating to the manner in which external conditions (e.g. time pressure and efficiency/optimization pressures in the work context) intermesh with psychic features. For reasons of space, the reconstruction of the methods used will need to be very concise, but verbatim citation gives the protagonists the chance to "speak for themselves". The structures informing these cases are not exclusively, or even primarily, a matter of content. They are reflected equally by the style and shaping of the narratives and the manner in which the protagonists express themselves verbally.

## Playing down the pressures

We begin with the account provided by Paul S., 35, who is prototypic in the sense that the features displayed by his narrative are very widespread. He works in a sector where time pressure and the dissolution of temporal boundaries appear to be completely normal and are accepted as a matter of course. In a staccato style of delivery, he describes his everyday working life as follows:

*"As soon as I got the job, I started accepting every assignment I was offered, standing in for colleagues, and so on. The first three months on the job, I worked non-stop from one end of the day to other. Things have got better now, and this year, like every year, I've decided to make sure that I have more free time for myself, but I've also realized how quickly that good resolution can go by the board. Even if I'm determined not to work on a Saturday so that I can meet up with a girlfriend and go somewhere with her, that plan only holds good until they ask me whether I could come in to the office on that Saturday, and although I know perfectly well that I can't and I don't want to, I hear myself saying: 'Sure, no problem'. And once I've agreed, I have to cancel my*

<sup>23</sup> Vera King, "Die Macht der Dringlichkeit. Kultureller Wandel von Zeitgestaltungen und psychischen Verarbeitungsmustern", in *Swiss Archives of Neurology and Psychiatry* 164, no. 7 (2013): 223-31; Vera King, Julia Schreiber, Niels Uhlendorf, and Benigna Gerisch, "Optimising Patterns of Life Conduct: Transformations in Relations to the Self, to Others and Caring", in *Lost in Perfection: Impacts of Optimisation on Culture and Psyche*, Vera King, Benigna Gerisch, and Hartmut Rosa eds. (London: Routledge, 2019), 61-72.

*private date, which I hate doing because of course it automatically means that I then have fewer private dates because no one can rely on me actually turning up*".<sup>24</sup>

The situation Paul is describing here is one that many of us will be familiar with, perhaps not down to the last detail, but with recognizable similarities. It is an account of the "daily grind", where unforeseen emergencies dictate the course of events and the decisions bound up with it. Resolutions are made only to lapse into oblivion. Some of them are postponed until later, some of them until very much later, because time is pressing, and there are all kinds of other things to be done in the meantime. One thing this does is to whittle down relationships, as Paul tells us. On the other hand, there's nothing he can do about it, and somehow he doesn't even seem to mind all that much. He sums it up this way:

*"There is a definite imbalance between work and leisure-time, and basically I'm dissatisfied with the fact, although, to be absolutely honest, I'm not always sure where I really am dissatisfied or whether I think things should be different because everyone keeps telling me so. Basically, work for me is a kind of leisure-time... of course I'd say yes, I definitely work too much, and I definitely ought to do something about it... but I think that if I were really convinced of that, then I would do something about it... and because I haven't so far, I must be more or less satisfied with things the way they are"*.

Ultimately, this evaluation is in line with the way things have panned out. The operative logic is: in the last resort, things that don't work out (having time for relationships) can't be all that important. To this extent, Paul's response can be regarded both as a case of *shifted priorities* and as an instance of *defensive reevaluation*. At an early stage, sociologist Niklas Luhmann described mechanisms like these as a feature of modern attitudes to time. In his customary dry, faintly ironical style, he writes: "As the number of deadlines increases in the restricted time available, ... the time left for unscheduled activities dwindles ... [aims] ... There is an awareness of neglecting these activities, but at the last they have to be devalued and classified as less important so as to keep destiny and significance in harmony with one another. Thus mere time problems can lead to a restructuring of the whole value system".<sup>25</sup> The more time-pressure there is, the more 'genuinely important' things have to cede to urgent demands and are slowly but surely ousted out of our designs for living and everyday practice. Less time remains for the things that do not have to be "dealt with" immediately, even though we may fully

<sup>24</sup> The transcriptions are verbatim. For the sake of readability they have been simplified here – reduced indications of emphasis, volume, intervals, etcétera. Such features were however included in the analysis.

<sup>25</sup> Niklas Luhmann, *Politische Planung. Aufsätze zur Soziologie von Politik und Verwaltung*, 4. Auflage (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1994), 148.

acknowledge their importance. Time for relationships, as just one example, is frequently subordinated to job-related pressures.

Imperceptible shifts like these have also been observed in family studies. A telling example can be found in a study from the United States, in which researcher Arlie Hochschild homed in on company employees at work and their everyday lives.<sup>26</sup> Hochschild establishes that things initially held to be important (time spent together, leisure-time with the children) were increasingly 'postponed' because of urgent job-associated requirements. When this project or that requirement had been dealt with, then the interviewees finally had time for their partners and their children.<sup>27</sup>

To illustrate her remarks, Hochschild refers to the acquisition of leisure-time paraphernalia by the families investigated. Lying around unused in the attic, these articles embody the unredeemed promises of time to be spent together when things "calm down". The incessant job-related priorities had banished the desire for "quality time" to the attic of family life, where the objects that symbolize that desire lie under a layer of dust waiting to be remembered. At some point, a number of the participants began emphasizing how self-reliant their children were getting, implying that this made it superfluous to spend more free time with them and thus playing down the significance of the whole matter.

In his way, Paul too is a "down-player". First he complains that he has too much to do, but then he floats the suggestion that maybe relationships are less important to him than his job. This deprives general despondency, unflattering conclusions about exploitation, or pain at the withering of personal relationships of much of their sting. But this is not the whole story, nor is it entirely accurate. Analysis of the complete interview reveals with increasing clarity that his job gives him greater security than he gets from emotional closeness to others. He feels that he is more likely to satisfy his need for recognition and acknowledgement on the apparently safer ground offered to him by his work. Other parts of his personal narrative reveal that in his view his parents had never really understood him properly. For his adult self, work unlimited has now become "everything".

In other words, time-constrained, accelerated, and unbounded job worlds can exacerbate psychic dispositions marshaled to blunt the awareness of deficits by means of various kinds of coping and defense mechanisms that serve to uphold narcissistic stability. An indistinct sense of "missing out" on certain things can be offset by perfectionism, espousal of the performance ideal, and references to the unremitting pressure of time. A job context where the boundaries are in a progressive state of dissolution "demands everything" of the individuals caught up in it and thus nurtures the hope of "getting everything" from precisely that context, above all confirmation. Paul represents the kind of individual who functions reasonably well in his working life,

<sup>26</sup> Arlie Hochschild, *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1997).

<sup>27</sup> Hochschild, *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work*, 235ff.

finds the "downside" of his situation eminently tolerable (though his relationships are definitely on the wane), and makes little "fuss" about the stresses and strains caused by constant emergencies and ill-defined working hours. Things are different in our next example, the case of Melanie Z.

## Optimized adjustment and the dissolution of boundaries

Our next interviewee, Melanie Z., is also in her mid-thirties. She studied business management and works for a consulting firm. She grew up in conditions fairly typical of the educated middle classes. The children are given all kinds of opportunities, and more or less implicitly a great deal is expected of them in return. Their parents assume they will make the most of their chances, work hard to get ahead, and be successful in their careers.

*Melanie: "My parents are – er – were pretty encouraging, in the sense that they gave us every opportunity to do what we wanted to do, different kinds of sports, trying out musical instruments (gulps) ... In our – family, we were implicitly expected to do well ? and not be like the kids who hung around in bus-shelters – And this produced – er – a sort of unspoken expectation ... that we should finally manage to get a good job ... I mean, this was never said out loud, but often there were subtle ... hints and things, and – that definitely played a role (hoarsely) in making me try to be particularly good at various things."*

In many areas, the adult Melanie Z. also appears to be highly ambitious about performing well enough to stand out from the mass. She is willing to work very hard to achieve this, but on various occasions these efforts get on top of her, culminating in more than one breakdown. When this happens, she has to seek refuge from the pressures she is exposed to. But that is not all. The interview reveals a permanent, but at the same time negated, desire to be accepted *for what she is*, instead of always having to "deliver the goods". Criticism of her parents for their attitude is invariably tentative and quickly relativized. Mother and father are described as unflinching go-getters:

*"My parents ... are still – er – very fit ... they've stayed young, and they take good care of themselves – and that's something I certainly have from them, – er – this – er – always being on the move, ... keeping fit ... that is important, though of course it can get on your nerves as well, because sometimes you think, – er – can't you just wind down for a while, let yourself go, but – er – on the other hand I'm grateful*

*because they've instilled in me all kinds of things that add up to a ... healthy life-style; I mean, I went to ballet classes for 11 years, my mother was really keen for me to do that because when she was young, they never let her go to ballet classes ... it's often the way, but then I started really enjoying it, and at the end I went several times a week, ... I mean, when you hear 'ballet' you think, oh yeah, prancing around in tights ... But physically it's really, really tough, and ... it taught me a lot about stamina ... and staying-power, because you really feel the pain and ... even as a child you have to stay in there ... yeah, and that was a good lesson in not caving in under pressure".*

This is a typical sequence for Melanie. The cautious criticism of her parents (mother) is quickly withdrawn. After all, her mother's expectations and the pain of the ballet training hardened her for life and kept her soldiering on. This is justification enough for maternal pressure. But in her various jobs Melanie is not in fact conspicuous for her stamina or staying-power. Her job history is remarkable for the to-and-fro between situations where she is exposed to exorbitant, extremely stressful situations and her decisions to quit the job in question. Her sufferings and the ups and downs in her vocational biography appear to be the expression of a kind of protest, albeit one that in the last resort is just as much a rebellion against her own self, i.e. not only a protest against the external pressures, but also against the internalized ideal of being a "good girl", a shining example of self-perfectionism.

This alternation between adaptation and protest perpetuates itself indefinitely. In her next job, she starts off by adjusting as best she can, but then suddenly throws it all in, overpowered by symptoms of exhaustion like insomnia, lack of appetite, and agitation. Hardly has she left this job behind than she is tormented by feelings of emptiness and fears about failing in her professional career. Accordingly, she seeks another job, determined to fulfill the demands made of her and to perfect her performance. But ultimately she is equally quick to buckle under the pressure. This puts her in an increasingly difficult situation vocationally, and at the same time her scope for self-care or care for others dwindles.<sup>28</sup> All the significant others she mentions are primarily experienced as individuals who either have expectations of her at the job level or as rivals with whom she compares herself. Hollow relations are the result, devoid of any specific value that cannot be expressed in terms of job performance.

<sup>28</sup> King, Schreiber and Uhlenndorf "Optimising Patterns of Life Conduct".

## Optimization via excessive autonomy and instrumental rationality

Melanie is vocal and explicit about her own discontents. But just as common – and just as interesting – are those cases where such discontents are never referred to. Persons of this kind have exacting jobs that they are good at, so that in that quarter no explicit dissatisfaction ever rears its head. If at all, they express dissatisfaction about their relationships, and then only at one remove and in a highly indirect manner.

A case in point is Andrea W., 40 years old. She came to us in response to a round-robin email from her daughter Lina's kindergarten, in which an inquiry from our project had been passed on to the parents. The striking thing about her self-assessment in the interview (in which no questions were asked about performance or optimization, only about the respondent's life-story) is that for most of the time she restricted her narrative almost entirely to her vocational achievements. For a long time she had worked in various cities, regions, and companies, always in elevated positions in the travel-management sector. In the meantime, as she tells us in considerable detail, she has struck out on her own and is now self-employed with a firm of her own. The first time she refers to her daughter is in connection with her own experiences at school:

*"Yes, I've got a daughter of my own now, she's 3½, er, and I've started thinking about what kind of elementary school would be best for her – be–because – er – I feel sure that that really has a lot of influence on a child – and how it develops".*

She also mentions her daughter in connection with the difficulty she has in reserving anything like leisure-time for herself. When she's not in the office, she still goes on working and asks herself

*"what other things I might do, job-wise. This state of mind is only dislodged when someone turns up and says: Come on, put that stuff away. It doesn't have to be Lina, it can be my husband or some friend or other: Put your phone away, we're going out".*

In the over-emphatic manner characteristic of her, she stresses that before the birth of her daughter, she spent 24 hours a day thinking about projects. When the child arrived, she quit her job and went self-employed. Since then, as before, she has spent all her time thinking about her new company. She insists that her daughter's birth had no effect whatsoever on her unremitting commitment to her business. Particularly striking is the way in which, when she refers to her pregnancy, she actively *overwrites* the experience

of heteronomy associated with that new condition with her account of the triumphantly autonomous establishment of her firm in that same period:

*"Yes, that was the time when the travel company and the cooperation with my partners were running parallel, and I was heading a team on both sides at once and teaching courses on the side as well. I was earning much more than I'd ever earned before, and it was really tremendous? ... – yes, and then I got pregnant, and I started asking myself how – how that was supposed to work, because driving around all day ... nine or ten hours ... for the travel agency, well, that wasn't on the cards – anymore (draws breath). But then, more or less in my fifth month, (draws breath) – a former acquaintance – yes, that's who it was – put me in touch with a woman... who was a marketing manage... [There follows a detailed account of who negotiated with whom to ensure that at the end she was able to establish a company that cooperated with others]... and that was basically – the perfect solution, because we had – I had – six weeks to go before Lina was due, Lina's my daughter (draws breath), and in that time – er – before her birth, I was still working in the travel company – we just got the last project through in time, and then I had – er – about a month's leave, but during that month I started working out a business plan with the others and – well, yes – developing this whole model, ... looking for names, imagining how it was going to work and ... yeah, all the things you do when you're setting up a new business".*

She enthusiastically fills us in on all the details of what went on during her pregnancy, but solely and exclusively in connection with what it took to establish her new firm. Her vocational motives are another fascinating topic for her. The reasons why she chose to go it alone while she was still pregnant are substantiated rationally and understandably. One of the reasons for setting up her own company, she emphasizes, was that in the travel sector mothers were generally considered to be too inflexible. Either they were not given a job in the first place, or they were systematically ousted from managerial positions when their children arrived.

The way she tells her story reveals that her commitment and her attention to detail were devoted much more exclusively to the subject of her new business and her vocational situation (for example what name she should choose for her new company) than to her (equally "new") daughter and the choice of a name for her, topics she deals with summarily and very much *en passant*. Also, this emphasis completely crowds out the changes associated with pregnancy, including the heteronomy bound up with it. These aspects disappear completely in her account of the activities required by the start-up of the new business.

It seems fair to say that here the figure of the "entrepreneurial self" takes shape not only in a metaphorical/discursive sense but also in a very concrete way.<sup>29</sup> This self is presented as the effective response both to the special challenges posed by the issue of home/work compatibility and to the disadvantages that working mothers in particular are frequently exposed to. But it also derives from a specific biographical orientation and disposition geared to avoiding any loss of self-determination and precluding heteronomy. In practical terms, Andrea W. ultimately appears to work through every hour of the day and also to regulate close relationships in terms of efficiency logics. Bringing up her daughter is another project subjected to highly rational criteria. Andrea W. asks herself how she can encourage the child's independence (say, by means of early self-reliance programs) so that vocational restrictions are reduced to a minimum. The fact that close relationships and partnerships may be adversely affected by radical rationalization and efficiency drives only figures marginally in her narrative. She does mention objections raised by others, but only to dismiss them out of hand.

Quite unlike Melanie Z., Andrea W. experiences both immense temporal pressures and exacting efficiency and optimization demands not as external constraints but as needs of her own. Whereas Melanie Z. describes her situation in terms of suffering and downward spirals, Andrea W.'s narrative has all the characteristics of a success story in which optimization pressure is perceived as a welcome and stimulating challenge. The adjustments to the laws of the market required by the company, its establishment and management are very much in line with her need for self-sufficiency in all the various meanings of the term. In her project-related life-style, the constant need to go one better plays a central role for her as a kind of elixir that appears to enhance her stability not least by enabling her to phase out uncongenial boundaries and dependences.

## Radicalization of the optimization logic and its effects on relationships and care

The case studies quoted above are eloquent examples of present-day versions of what Max Weber referred to at an early stage as the "spirit of capitalism".<sup>30</sup> The expression stands for the endeavor to achieve a life-style geared to ever-greater efficiency and success and dedicated entirely to the methodical, controlled, and permanently enhanced pursuit of profit.<sup>31</sup> Weber rightly assumed that this efficiency-oriented pursuit of profit, the genesis of which he associated with religion (the "Protestant ethic"), would eventually be divested of its religious motivations and undertaken for its own sake. At the

<sup>29</sup> Ulrich Bröckling, *The Entrepreneurial Self: Fabricating a New Type of Subject* (London: Sage, 2016).

<sup>30</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Routledge, [1930] 2001).

<sup>31</sup> Jürgen Straub, "Rationalising Life by Means of Self-Optimisation: The Obsessive-Compulsive Excess of Gustav Großmann", in King, Gerisch and Rosa, *Lost in Perfection*, 153-188.

same time, however, Weber's take on optimization has changed and has in various ways become more universal:

a) Since Weber proposed his views, the logic of economization and competition and the dynamics of the pressures and perfectionist ambitions associated with it have permeated almost all walks of life. In many sectors, faith in optimization and commitment to shareholder values are actively espoused as a way of minimizing the dangers of losing out in an unremittingly competitive world. In many cases, they have become the operative principle behind the way we lead our lives.

b) The logic of competition has individualized itself. Accordingly, its consequences also have to be dealt with individually. This makes new demands on personal self-discipline and self-optimization.

c) As a result, the practices and sectorialities of care, concern, and attachment have also changed. Families have come under increasing pressure to go one better in terms of efficiency, perfectionism, and optimization.

If we compare and contrast the patterns underlying the lives led by our three examples, we can identify typical features, differences, and analogies in the way the interviewees attempt to come to terms with the claims of optimization, adjust to their situation, achieve self-control, and manage time.

Paul S. is permanently on the job. He is not entirely happy with the situation, but nor does he seriously rebel against it. Dissatisfaction is played down. It is only referred to in connection with remarks made by others, interventions reminding him that things could be different. Self-subjugation to the job ethic is made more palatable by revaluations ("relationships aren't so important after all"). Revaluation also suits his purposes from a psychological perspective, helping him to fight shy of the realization that any other course would be a source of anxiety by exposing him to the unpredictable hazards of life outside work.

Melanie Z. is ambitious, relishes challenges, allows them to dictate her conduct and has little defense against overtaxing situations. Her symptoms suggest that she is protesting against a one-sided orientation to the supremacy of efficiency and performance, but she shows little inclination to criticize this in her parents and is unable to change her own affirmative attitude to it. Here we have a species of adjustment in which there is at least an awareness of suffering but no engagement with the causes of it or with potentialities for change.

If we look at the interviews from a vocational/life-practical perspective, Andrea W. appears to come off best. In business-management terms, her reaction to the difficult situation for mothers in her vocational context (women who get pregnant are immediately written off) is ideal. With her new self-employed status she creates additional scope for herself. The downside of this construction, which makes it more or less impossible to take account of needs and dependences (both for herself and her daughter), is offset both by material profit (entrepreneurial success) and the psychic "profit" of the defense mechanisms it provides against boundaries or isolated exposure. It may be that

the factors phased out or held in check in order to uphold practical functionality and the primacy of performance will make themselves felt in the way her little daughter ultimately responds. But at the moment, the impression we get from the story she tells us is of someone who is outstandingly good at keeping her own (and others') needs under control. In Andrea W.'s case, the "relationship remnants" are efficiently rationalized away. The life she leads is a radical instance of social practice geared almost entirely to optimization imperatives and effective time management. What also makes her story highly interesting from a sociological point of view is the way she appears to be a perfect embodiment of the efficiency demanded by the "spirit of capitalism" and the attendant optimization ethic that Max Weber described so prophetically almost a century ago.

Today, we can identify one factor that has come to play a major role in a way that Weber could hardly have anticipated: the fate of *caring relationships* caught up in the vortex of this development. The case histories illustrate very graphically how the time required for care and concern is sacrificed to the demands of instrumental time management and the remorseless machinery of optimization. Andrea embodies the exacerbation of Weber's descriptions of the efficiency-oriented agent. And the specific way she does so also sacrifices intimate relations and parenting to this principle. *In line with* Weber, this manifests itself not only as an *economic* logic but also as a significant *cultural* trend. All three constellations demonstrate not so much that time is scarce but rather that these variations in coming to terms with the dissolution of temporal boundaries –playing it down, suffering in silence, welcoming it enthusiastically– serve at least in part to assure the subjectively attractive and culturally conformist avoidance of acknowledging the presence of restriction(s). The radical orientation of life–practice and close relationships to optimization and efficient time management is sustained by the fiction of "the sky's the limit." At the same time, this attitude can be regarded as a form of "assault of the present on the rest of time" as envisioned by Kluge. The *gift* of time is submerged by the permanent stress generated by emergencies and perfectionisms, plus the repercussions they have on caring relations and the process of "coming of age".

Of course, we need to stress that identifying these collective patterns does not in any way imply that there are no other constellations left standing, no counter-movements, no caring, time-taking parent-child relations. Also, certain aspects, say of Andrea W.'s all-encompassing entrepreneurialism, may appear unusually extreme. Yet we have been able to point the finger at typical mechanisms that thrive under such conditions.

These instances of instrumental time-management and self-optimization not only normalize excessive demands and lifestyles that reduce time resources for relationships and caring. They promote instrumental logics in relation to oneself and others, with correspondingly painful potentials of alienation. Moreover, they have a detrimental effect on the future of subsequent generations and their scope for development. In this way, they engender new relativities between "normality" and "pathology" in the headlong progress of a modernity fraught with optimization imperatives and shot through with the dissolution of temporal boundaries.

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