
We are familiar with empires that originate in the military conquest of territory, but Robert Hassan asks us to consider two periods of temporal colonialism brought about by technological developments. The first of these empires was ruled by the clock. The second is ruled by the temporal dynamics of information and communication technologies. Whether it uses soldiers or technology, the essence of an empire is power, so this book fundamentally concerns the politics of time. According to Hassan, liberal democratic institutions operate so slowly that they are now incapable of regulating the high speed transactions in our postmodern capitalist system. The resulting “asynchronicity” (11) between political and economic institutions makes for a spectrum of social problems, including “a growing political apathy” (16).

Our cultural tempo quickened during the era of industrialization, but Hassan argues that “the present Empire of Speed is a quantitatively and qualitatively new phenomenon” (38). It has emerged only within the last few decades from the confluence of computerized networks, unfettered capitalism, globalization, and a neoliberal ideology. The exigencies of economic competition provide the impetus. “Getting to the market first with a new product or process” (21) is what enables a business to earn sizable profit, which transforms economic activity into “a race against time” (21). We make a virtue of necessity by valorizing that which is fast and au courant. There is, then, constant pressure to accelerate the manufacturing process and change the product. Moreover, “almost every product or service… is now promoted as faster and more efficient” (26). Nearly everyone is in a hurry, and coping mechanisms (such as fast food) merely contribute to the frantic pace.

In the second and third chapters, Hassan summarizes the development of clock time modernity and the networked society. Respectively, they represent the first and second empires of speed. Once the clock dominates our temporal experience, “we accept it unthinkingly as time and proceed to synchronize with its tempo” (48). The standardization of time served as the foundation for capitalism and industrialization as well as the Enlightenment and bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth century. As such, the clock becomes the metronomic basis for modernity. Time becomes a commodity, and there is the diagnosis of a new malady: “nervous exhaustion” (61). The pace of economic activity quickens, but that tempo is restricted by the technological infrastructure of industrial manufacturing as well as governmental regulations. With the introduction of computers and a networked society, the potential speed of
economic productivity is practically limitless. However, if capitalism is to continue growing through globalization (and its intrinsic logic demands that it grow), then it must be freed from governmental regulations. This call for unfettered capitalism is the ideology of neoliberalism. Those are our current circumstances, where there is little or nothing standing in the way of continued acceleration. Indeed, there “is a restless need for speed that . . . changes everything” (68).

Hassan is critical of the “pathologies of speed” (97) that issue from these socioeconomic developments. The dynamics of unfettered capitalism make for automation, outsourcing, and chronic anxiety concerning job security. In addition, anxiety results from too many choices. Which is the right one? How can you tell if there is no time to find out? Ultimately, our epidemic of anxiety is rooted in social acceleration. With things changing so rapidly, it becomes impossible to anticipate the future. Quickly, the pharmaceutical industry offers sleeping pills, as capitalism turns even its problems into opportunities for profit. Another problematic coping mechanism is “abbreviated thinking” (98)—the widespread tendency to think rapidly and incompletely about matters at hand because one lacks the time for serious consideration. In circular fashion, such thinking facilitates our further accommodation to the regime of speed.

It is tempting to conclude that computers are merely tools—that they enable us to play and work in new ways. Opposing this view, Hassan asserts that cyberculture restrains human autonomy and imposes its tempo on us through “technological determinism” (131). From the standpoint of his “temporal political economy” (131), computers and the network society represent “the search for optimal systems of control” (130). Consequently, many of us are now “‘willing slaves’ to a high-tech capitalist system” (146), yet Hassan also avows that the system “is being challenged . . . by millions of people around the world” (148). It is unclear how some of us elude the technological determinism that ensnares others.

Do political institutions have specific forms of temporality? This is “the central question” (154). Hassan answers in the affirmative and declares that there is “a temporal disjunction between politics and the economy” (151). Modern democracy was a product of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Given the requirements of deliberation and debate as well as checks and balances, it is easy for contending parties to impede any progress. In contrast to the accelerating creativity of networked capitalism, our political institutions are characterized by “an increasingly unresponsive inertia” (165). These political