

Melt That Clock

Time is money, as they say, but it's really worth even more. That's where surfing comes in.

Norris Eppes

June 2021

The flat spell has been broken—thankfully, mercifully. And over a weekend, nonetheless. How rare is it that good surf lines up with the time to actually enjoy it?

But today is Saturday, and my time's my own. It's small, but it's clean, and I'll take anything in the Florida summertime doldrums. Anything to snap my flat-spell-induced case of the grays. Anything to balance the paradox of work: I feel lucky that I still have a job, and angry at how the ocean, uncaringly, seems to coordinate its schedule inversely with my own work calendar.

The small neighborhood crew is in the water at the end of the street, along with a few unknown faces. A set stands up in the Atlantic—green base tones that move in gradient along the face up to a silver shimmer, thanks to the low cloud cover—and everyone gets one. A little jolt of joy: clean shoulder, slicing in, finding trim, the lip flickering along, and, eventually, a clean kickout.

As I'm paddling back out to the lineup, one of the unknown faces shouts at another.

"Hey, man, you got the time?"

The other unknown face glances at his wrist and shouts back, "Almost eleven."

The first face nods, thanks the watch-wearer, and makes an unsolicited announcement to the entire lineup that it's about time for him to head in. I immediately feel bothered. I absolutely did not want to know the time. I've avoided wearing a watch in the water lately. It's sort of an experiment. A surfer knows that human time blocks are incompatible with the ocean and when it gets good.

But why is this? What is time, anyway? Where did my twenty-first-century American definition of time come from? Why is it so clearly at odds with the ocean's rhythms? And, more specifically, can surfing without a watch help me understand the way previous generations of humans conceived of time itself?

The consensus among anthropologists, historians, and economists is that there are two types of time: time as money, and episodic time. The former dates its conception to the Industrial Revolution in Europe. The latter is much, much older—and is probably the way all humans viewed time until the invention of time as money.

In his book *Bullshit Jobs*, David Graeber explains that the idea of time as a commodity—something that can be "spent," "used," "blocked off," and thus "wasted" or qualified as "bad"—is one "that would have seemed perverse and outrageous to...most people who have ever lived." He also writes that "in places without clocks, time is measured by actions rather than action being measured by time." From his own anthropological field work in Madagascar, he found that people described the length of a walk in terms of how many meals it took to cook in the same amount of time.

In his essay "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," EP Thompson finds passages from literature and legislation that reference how people once conceived of time itself, and he uses these clues to track the way the concept of time evolved from episodic (in medieval Europe) to time as money (in the Industrial Revolution and up to the present day). He quotes an account from nineteenth-century England that explains that the Court of Admiralty was always left open because "'seafaring men must take the opportunity of tides and winds, and cannot, without ruin and great prejudice, attend the solemnity of courts and dilatory pleadings.'" An exception was even made in legislation "for fishermen who sighted a shoal off-shore on the Sabbath day." Farther inland, medieval field workers lived on episodic time with a work pattern that alternated between "bouts of intense labor and of idleness." Similarly, according to Graeber, "the typical medieval serf, male or female, probably worked from dawn to dusk for twenty to thirty days out of any year, but just a few hours a day otherwise, and on feast days not at all. And feast days were not infrequent."

So why don't we follow this work schedule anymore?

The seeds of change were planted in the fourteenth century, when towns in medieval Europe began building clock towers—usually funded by the local guild of merchants. These merchants also put human skulls on their desks as *memento mori*, or reminders that one day they would die. This is when the idea of time as money was conceived, though it really kicked off in the Industrial Revolution. In the 1700s, the dissemination of domestic clocks and pocket watches began. It took a century to become

widespread, but, once they did, their presence allowed for the merchants' attitude to diffuse among the populace.

Thompson describes the explosion of watches in popularity in terms that are eerily similar to the smartphone boom over the last decade. Was the watch the smartphone of the 1800s? This would explain why the idea of pawning your watch was a bigger deal then than now: It'd be today's equivalent of pawning your smartphone.

Once time became money, our finite amount of it on this Earth in the single life we know we have could be put into blocks and sold and bought and spent. It began seeping into daily life through work, education, religious practice, and the literature, music, and art that humans were making to process their lives.

"Charity schools," writes Graeber, "designed to teach the poor discipline and punctuality gave way to the public school systems where students of all social classes were made to get up and march from room to room each hour at the sound of a bell, an arrangement consciously designed to train children for future lives of paid factory labor."

In short, since the Industrial Revolution, people have been encouraged to see time just like medieval merchants did: as money. Except it's a weird sort of money that's both a possession to be carefully budgeted and also an unchanging calendar grid that can't be altered, regardless of the life hacks or uppers people may engage in to "increase productivity." Instead of trying to resist the new definition of time while it was still evolving—which would have been a strange enterprise, and maybe impossible to comprehend while it was happening—people checked into this new work culture of time as money and left behind their notions of episodic time. Factory owners fiddled with the clocks on the walls to keep workers, who were expected to punch in and out when they arrived and left, on the job longer. Workers—who at first weren't allowed to wear their own watches—began bargaining for shorter workdays, paid time off, and other such "benefits." While the eight-hour workday and the eradication of child labor in factories were improvements, they were made within the limits of a time-as-money culture. In just a few hundred years, the watch explosion caused both moral and neurological changes. People had a completely new way to think about their actions—and thus about their lives.

So what happened to episodic time?

Thompson sees that it "persists among some self-employed today—artists, writers, small farmers, and perhaps also with students," which "provokes the question whether it is not a 'natural' human work-rhythm."

I'd add surfers to his list too. What other pursuits can you think of that demand the near total dismissal of both clocks and an internet connection? Sure, there are things that get you into a flow state—requiring a similar amount of improvisation, luck, skill, and persistence—but which of those can and must mostly be done without technological connection of some kind?

With today's smartphone boom mirroring the watch boom of the Industrial Revolution, surfing can also teach us about how our brains are evolving in response to near-constant use of the internet. Our brains are different from the brains of the humans who worked and lived with episodic time. Since there are new neural pathways being formed in each of our brains due to smart-phones, our minds are different from the past generations that didn't use the internet. To extrapolate this, the neurological makeup of our descendants will assuredly be different from ours.

At the end of his essay, Thompson suggests that humans "might have to relearn some of the arts of living lost in the Industrial Revolution." He sees a world "in which some of the old aggressive energies and disciplines migrate to the newly industrializing nations, while the old industrialized nations seek to rediscover modes of experience forgotten before written history begins."

Which is where surfing, again, enters the picture. It's a special way to tap into an older neural pathway, one that most human beings have lost. The "time spent" surfing is usually defined by the conditions of the surf itself. When you surf without a watch, you're living by episodic time. Thus, surfing rewires your mind to conceptualize time close to how your ancestors thought about their days. And you can take this episodic time back onto land and see your day as a series of actions as opposed

to capita—deciding on the activities that are worth doing for their own sake. Which is why I got so bothered by the unknown faces making unsolicited announcements to the lineup about the time. Sure, they may have had obligations that Saturday. But couldn't they have kept it to themselves? And, while they're at it, couldn't they ax the talk of time as money? No more "spending time," but rather "passing it," if it must be spoken about at all in the lineup.

Thankfully, they left. My agitation disappeared as sets kept coming. Eventually, I forgot what time it was, losing whatever conception I had of the blocks and chunks of a calendared day. Episodic time appeared naturally in its place as I dissolved into the cycling and recycling of the sets, the kick-outs, and slicing into each new one with walls stretching out in front of me. I've ditched my cheapo waterproof watch and lost track of time, finding, in the process, that there was no time to lose in the first place.

The Library of Unconventional Lives

Norris Eppes
Melt That Clock

Time is money, as they say, but it's really worth even more. That's where surfing comes in.
June 2021

The Surfers Journal. <www.surfersjournal.com/editorial/norris-eppes-melt-that-clock>
Alternative title: How Surfing Helps Us Return to Episodic Time. Highlighted quote: Surfing rewires your mind to conceptualize time close to how your ancestors thought about their days.

thelul.org