Zen and the Art of The Snooze Button

or

How time is perceived, used and valued in three world cultures:

The United States

Ireland

Brazil

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Introduction

Throughout history, man has been fascinated by time. Not always in hours, minutes or seconds like today, but in “real” time; night, day, seasons, etc. From when was it time to hunt an animal or to plant a certain crop, to the lunar menstrual cycles of the female to keep the species going. Through the ages, man has built monuments to time. “The obelisks of ancient Egypt, dating from as far back as 3000 BC, were used to measure the progress of the year by the length of the shadow they cast. Stonehenge in Britain was probably built for the same purpose. It measured the year by the sunrise and sunset angle on the horizons” (Measuring Time 2008). Certain stars that appeared in the heavens or certain plants that bloomed all told to the acute observer what “time” it was. As we progressed through the millennia we no longer required natural observation to distinguish time, for man had invented a way to comprehend and see time in minute segments. The natural rhythms of life were captured via the chronometer and the calendar.

In this paper I will examine and discuss the idea of time, through the lens of three different cultures; U.S. American, Brazilian and Irish. I will examine these culture’s ideas of time orientations, time systems and time perceptions. In the text book, Intercultural Competence, it was explained to
us in Chapter Eight how cultures conceptualize time. Different cultures, who on the surface may seem to be very similar, perceive time in completely different ways. This can lead to confusion between persons from a different time orientation, embarrassment or even diplomatic incidences as happened in the hijacking of a TWA flight in Beirut. (Levine p.99). How cultures value time, how their pace of life differs and whether time is circular or linear will be explored. How many of us actually think about time in a “cultural sense”? We probably look at our alarm clocks in the morning, see what time a TV show is on or when will the bus be here and when we put our children to bed at “bedtime”. But as a culture, our view of time can separate us, if not in years but in hours, from other cultures. We speak of some people and cultures of being “behind the times”, others of being “ahead of their time” or others as simply being “in the now”. What does all that mean? Of course inside every culture we have people who see time differently from the whole, the business person may see it differently than the farmer, the student may see it differently than the teacher or even next door neighbors or members of the same family may comprehend time in a different manner. But under the cultural umbrella for a specific country or group, there are a set of esoteric and learned rules of how that culture expects time to be used, perceived and valued.
As a person born in Ireland, and one who lived in the capital city Dublin and who immigrated to the USA, my ideas of time have shifted from those of a boy, to a teenager, to a working person. Although Ireland and the United States may appear to be very similar, as we do share a common language and politically have the same western leanings, the two culture’s idea of time is completely different. So too, is it, when we compare Brazil to the USA or Ireland, in terms of time use. Brazilian cultural identity towards time is different from these other two cultures, even though it would also be considered a Western-leaning country in its trade and politics, etc. So how do all these cultures manage to get along? Does one culture force its ideas of time on another? Do we compromise, or do we simply just accept the differences and enjoy the diversity of the world around us and the uniqueness in all cultures?

“The future’s so bright

* I gotta wear shades”

• Timbuk3
The United States culturally would be described as a monochronic, individualistic, fast pace of life, high tempo, and affluent society, with both a formal and informal time system. As a culture it also places a huge value on time. Along with these points our textbook would say that the United States has a future-time orientation (Lustig, p.225). It has been said that New York is a city that never sleeps. You can get breakfast, lunch or dinner any time of day and you can even attempt to turn back time with medical procedures or even stop time completely in regards to the sports “time out” analogy. Why is this? Why does the United States place such high value on time? Why is its cultural pace of life so frenetic? Perhaps this is partially because of its economic philosophy of capitalism and partially for its cultural identity of “getting it done.. yesterday”. Many U.S. Americans seem to place enormous value on time and it was in here that Benjamin Franklin coined the phrase “Time is money”. In the United States, as in most of the economic developed world, time has been reduced to the most basic intangible; money. Workers are paid by the hour, lawyers charge by the minute and advertising is sold by the second. For some events like the Super Bowl advertising can cost millions of dollars for a 30 second slot. CBS charged $2.6 million per 30 seconds in 2007. (La Monica 2007)
In Robert Levine’s book “A Geography of Time” he would say that the United States is a “clock-time culture” (Levine p. 90). These cultures believe time is fixed, linear and valuable. As a future-orientated culture the US American places importance on investing and sacrificing for future goals. Many parents attempt to have their children placed in a respected kindergarten which they hope will lead to a better junior school, to high school and then to a prominent college which they hope will lead to a respectable career. These are known as elevator schools and they are similar to what is happening in Ireland and Brazil amongst the more affluent citizens. They take great pride in each generation doing better than the previous one. The United States is also an individualistic culture; its people tend to place their own and their immediate families interests above those of the rest of society. They tend to put an emphasis on achievement more then affiliation and focus on the “time is money mind set”. In a book I read, a football coach said, “we pay ‘em more so we want more of their time” (Bavaro p.91). He was referring to the differences between modern players and older generations of football players who had to work “real jobs” while still pursuing football. The modern footballer was paid so well that the team demanded they stay at the practice facility and “earn” their pay check. Here the team was placing a value on the players’ time.
Another idea of time as a valuable commodity in United States would include the invention of the moving assembly plant which was introduced by Henry Ford in Detroit 1913. With the ever growing demand for transportation this new technology would speed up the production of a car from 14 man hours to just 3 hours. This idea has been employed in many other business “to save time” like the fast food industry and the slaughter house. The United States also employs culturally, a formal-time system. This partitions time into seconds, minutes, hours, days, months, years. Here in the US, unlike in much of Brazil, punctuality is expected (Branco p.65). Meetings are set for specific times of the day. Sports events are timed to the second to allow for advertisements. Even in some sports players are allowed to call “time out” so they can regroup and devise a way to win. Socially invitations to events may note the time the event starts and when it concludes. It would be acceptable to be a few minutes late, but frowned upon to be an hour late unless you had some really good excuse. This is termed as a monochromatic time system. This would differ slightly in Ireland. In Irish culture it is acceptable to be early to an event and to stay way past the end time. It is highly prized to be included in a “lock in”. A term referring to been allowed to remain at a bar after closing time. The monochromatic time system can be seen at work all over the United States-
from television shows to golf tee times. The U.S. American would expect that all his/her “events” be they social or business, would get the full and strict attention to the person at whom they were directed. To arrive at a meeting and have the person be distracted by other matters does not sit well with the monochromatic person. It is especially revered in the aviation industry where “on time” arrival and departure percentages are shown to encourage customers to use one specific carrier over another. (Transtat 2008)

Another aspect of U.S. culture is the lack of good public transportation in many places in the U.S. The majority of people in the U.S. own cars and can thus come and go as they please. Of course this can lead to its own problems, especially during “rush” hour when people are departing from work and rushing to get home. Rush hour becomes a log jam and people’s temperaments may get frayed. Here we are introduced to the new physiological phenomenon known as “road rage”. As Levine says while explaining cultural pace of life “slowness is a social norm and ..... it may permeate deeply into accepted codes of conduct” (Levine p.159). Not that all of the U.S. expresses a need for haste.

Given its huge geographical size and population we can see there are pockets of slowness in the United States. Examples can be seen in some of
the southern states or in Hawaii, where they claim to have what is known as “island time”. This slowdown may be due to cultural evolution or to the climate which causes a slower pace of life especially in the humid summers of the south; but again, as a whole, the United States’ culture has a fast pace to it. This fast pace can lead to misinterpretations when people from a monochromatic culture meet those from polychromatic cultures. A sense of disrespectfulness or unfriendliness may be perceived. This can only be remedied by learning about the culture you are dealing with and compromising when it comes to dealing with people of different time sets. Many in Puerto Rico, a U.S. territory, use European-American time during the work day but revert back to “Puerto Rican time” when socializing. (Lustig p 227)

“Oh, won’t you stay we’ll put on the day
And we’ll talk in present tenses”

- Joni Mitchell

Unlike the United States, Brazil would be described culturally as a polychronic, collectivist, slow pace of life, slow tempo, and less affluent society with both a formal and informal time system. Robert Levine
determines the number one reason for a culture’s tempo is economics (Levine, P.9). Brazil, although seen by some to be an emerging nation, would still not be considered a first world country due to its newly acquired wealth, but also due to its large percent of population still living in poverty currently around 30% (IFAD 2008). Brazil differs greatly from Ireland and the USA in its cultural ideas of time. Our text book would place Brazil, along with most other South American countries, as having a present-time orientation. This means they regard current experiences as most important (Lustig, P. 224). Brazilians encourage spontaneity, flamboyance and immediacy. This can be seen in everyday Brazil, but blossoms during Carnival and when the Brazilian soccer team plays. Brazil is a culture made up of several different countries and people’s cultures, from the native Indians to the Portuguese settlers, to the slaves they brought with them from West Africa. According to Brazilian Travel.com “The way soccer is played in Brazil is unique. Its style is the result of the rhythm and coordination from the black people. This unique quality was a characteristic of slaves that developed the capoeira, Brazilian martial arts and samba, which are characterized by footsteps to dance or to play under the rhythm of African drums.” This rhythm and spontaneity can be seen in the way Brazilians conduct themselves in business. Sandra Branco, in her book on Brazil claims
they, “Struggle to be on time... always late”. (Branco p.65). Another difference with the United States would be that Brazil is thought of as having a polychronic time system. This implies they do several things at once. The Brazilian belief is relationships are far more important then schedules. When surveyed, a large number of Brazilians equated lateness with success and power. They also rate people who are constantly late for appointments as been more relaxed and likable all signs of success (Levine P.110). No wonder people from fast-paced societies are driven half mad when dealing with Brazilians. An example of time use difference between the Brazilian culture and the United States culture is in idea of how long is late and how early is early. In one survey Brazilians stated they would consider someone late for a party if they arrived on average 129 minutes AFTER the party had started and early if they arrived, on average 44 minutes BEFORE the stated party time. In comparison, the US American drew the line at 26 minutes for lateness and also ensured the party itself started and ended at the stated times (Levine P.136). Another difference with the more affluent US American or Irish person is the lack of private transportation in Brazil. This means the majority of people in Brazil rely on public transportation and thus the whims of the driver and his or her “schedule”. Many times a bus load of Brazilians have been left sitting on an
idling bus while the driver wandered off excusing himself with the time honored “*um momento*” only to return fifteen minutes later with a bag of groceries a half eaten sandwich (Levine p. 137). Would anyone in New York put up with that? They’d probably drive the bus themselves to get to where they needed to go!

Another aspect of tempo and pace in Brazilian life is the climate. With a number of climate zones the majority of people live in the heat and humidity associated with the tropical rain forests that dominate the Brazilian landscape. This oppressive climate leads to a slow pace of life and the invention of another Brazilian concept, the “*despachantes*” (levine P. 115). These are trained professional waiters, not food servers but people that are go-betweens to help get you through the mountains of red tape and thus the enormous amount of time one would spend dealing with bureaucrats. A similar idea of “time selling” is also taking off in the United States. Here they advertise as a way to “*protect a family’s free time*” instead of wasting it doing mundane tasks like waiting in line at the DMV to running errands. My personal experiences (as an Irish-American) with people from Brazil has been similar. As a manager of a Marin soccer team we were delighted and much better off for having the services of three excellent Brazilian players. There contribution to the team was rewarded with many goals and exciting
plays but to see them arrive minutes before the game was to start, leisurely walking towards us led to many years of frustration. It never occurred to me that they would have a different take on when to arrive or leave and I wish I had known more about the time orientation side of their culture during that period.

“If you know your history,

Then you would know where you coming from”

• Bob Marley-

Ireland has similarities to both the United States and with Brazil. It would be described as a collective, polychromatic, fast pace of life with a fast tempo. When one thinks of Ireland what first comes to mind is that it has a slow pace. The image of farmers, meandering behind flocks of sheep which are blocking country roads might come to mind. When the fast pace of life was pointed out to a Swedish researcher he was amazed and then waved it off to the chilly weather in Dublin that caused folks to move fast to stay warm (Levine P. 131). Ireland is first and foremost an agrarian society, but over that last 15 years it has seen its economy boom more then any other
country’s, even the United States. This has led to an increase in migration from rural counties to the major cities and also a massive influx of migrants from Europe and North Africa. As we have shown with the United States, a culture with a fast moving economy also encourages a fast pace of life, but unlike the United States the Irish and their European colleagues have decreased their working week to allow more time for leisure and social activities. There is also an increase in vacation time permitted through the year and even with these discrepancies in work week lengths and vacation time Ireland is still more productive then both the United States and Brazil.

As an emerging economic nation, Ireland of course uses the same time system as other “Western” countries. Its business meetings are scheduled like in the United States and its education system follows the agrarian calendar. Most schools and colleges get 2-3 months off in the summer in the assumption children will help with the summer harvesting. This may well occur in rural parts of Ireland but has been a while since I have seen hay growing down O’Connell street in Dublin. In my particular school, classes were forty five minutes long and the school day went from 9 am to 4 p.m. In the United States I have heard of children going to school as early as 7 a.m. and leaving at 5 or 6 p.m. The formal time system gives way to a very informal time system when it comes to socializing. Of course, like in the
United States, in Ireland any formal events scheduled will adhere to a strict beginning and end time, like a soccer match or movie, but once you enter the places where the real socializing is done, then time passes in a completely different way. The majority of Irish people meet and relax at bars. People will come and go throughout the evening’s proceedings and once the bar closes they may adjourn to a person’s house for a session as it is called. In these “sessions” is where the “real” Irish culture is found. As a past-oriented society the Irish have a deep connection to past events and especially as a very Roman Catholic country, to religious festivities and traditions. Of course as a country that also prides itself on its old Pagan beginnings they find time to celebrate one or two of those events also. One of the main Catholic observations is Easter and the holy time of Lent. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, the day after “Fat Tuesday” or as our Brazilian friends would say Carnival and in the U.S. – Mardi Gras. But on which date is that and why does it change? According to Western Christianity “Easter is always celebrated on the Sunday immediately following the Paschal Full Moon date of the year”. Those dates are based on a Lunar calendar similar to the Hebrew calendar. Naturally Easter must come after the Jewish feast of passover, since the death, burial and resurrection of Christ happened after that celebration (Fairchild). In other parts of Ireland a glass is also raised
during this time for the heroes of 1916 who participated in an attempted over-throw of British rule. Known as the *Easter Rising* it began on Easter Monday and ended four days later and was punctuated with the execution of its leaders on May 3rd 1916.
Because of the “globalization” of the world it is difficult for cultures to maintain their unique time systems. We have instant communication, 24 hour news programs, next day delivery and watches that can tell us the time in 6 different times zones with the push of a button. But once we leave the shackles of economics behind we can see different cultures slip back into their natural rhythms. This is very important for the survival of humans as a species. It is necessary for us to adapt to our surrounding climates and habitats the error is in the forcing of one culture’s ideas on that of the many other cultures in this diverse world. Each one of us plays a beat to a different drum and it is important for us to find that so we can perform our role in this amazing world. Some see time as a commodity, something that can be bought and sold. Others see it as a healer, where its passing lessens the pain. Others, unfortunately, see it as a curse, especially those incarcerated in our prison system. But no matter how we all see, value and experience time it continues to move and as my dear old mother would say “no matter how your life is going... you’re a long time dead.”
Works Cited


