

‘We simply don’t have time’– LSE Sociology undergraduate trip to the British Museum

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Source: *British Horological Institute*

“I’m sorry, we simply don’t have time, we are pushed for time and we need to make time” – such were the (approximated) words of Professor Judy Wajcman at the start of the SO230 Digital Technology, Speed and Culture trip to the British Museum. The LSE course is concerned with the ways in which technology has shaped society, and the focus of the trip, would you believe, was time; clocks, to be more precise. The British Museum, it turns out, has rooms full of them – something that we learnt as we were hurried down into one of the basement rooms by Oliver Cooke, a curator of horology at the museum.

As our trip to the British Museum confirmed, a simple analysis of a clock from the Victorian era illustrates the fact that the relationship between technology, time and society involves questions of power, class, social order, work, rest and bureaucracy; all sociological elements that we have studied through this course.

Oliver Cooke began his presentation by asking ‘what is time?’, and continued with a basic explanation of how the relationship between the earth, the sun and the moon works to create the ‘natural’ reality that our social construction of time is based around. Using a small plastic rotating globe, a squishy yellow ball, and a white ceramic spherical object, he reminded us that: 1. the Earth travels around the Sun; 2. the moon travels around the Earth; and 3. day and night are caused by the Earth spinning on its axis. Using this model, Cooke was keen to emphasize that the natural spinning of the Earth on its axis does create periods of sunlight and moonlight, and that it is how we as a society name and define these natural occurrences that is the social construction of time.

After the brief recap of basic physics, Cooke explained how awareness of the natural rotations of the Earth, Sun and moon led to one of the first basic measurements of time: the sundial. We were shown a large bronze sundial, believed to have once been a part of Kew Gardens. By simply shining a torch on the dial from a different angle, a shadow would be cast to show a different time. Cooke explained that sundials were made in various shapes and sizes, and showed us a tiny ornate ring, with a range of jewels on the top, that turned out to be a lid that could be lifted up to find a tiny sundial. The dial was too small to work effectively, we were told, but it instead functioned as a show of wealth and knowledge. Built at the time of the Enlightenment, Cooke noted that clockwork was often a show of power, wealth and expertise, rather than anything so practical as a watch to actually tell the time on a regular basis. Cooke also highlighted the fact that

the Arab world was light years (excuse the time-related pun) ahead of the Western world with regards to the mathematics relating to clocks.

The point about the relationship between clocks and the power of the elite led to a discussion of important questions about time and capitalist power in the modern world. Drawing from the insights of historian E.P. Thompson, power relations in the workplace in the early to mid-20th century were heavily reliant on the organising and disciplining nature of time. For example, the production lines at the Ford car factories in America were dependent on time and the workers were encouraged to return home after a day of work and sleep for 8 hours in order to return the next day, fresh and healthy for another day of work. Moreover, we addressed the question of whether time is changing further still, with a rise in the number of night-shifts, and the extent to which capitalism and the workplace is responsible for our current perceptions of time. The comparison made between clocks and objects of time such as the internet and time-space compression through Facetime, Skype, e-mail, or messenger apps, was one of the most interesting parts of our discussion, and an area of modern technology within society that we are continuing to explore in the course.

For a room focused on the preservation of historical objects centred around time, it was ironic that, but for the breeze of the vital air-conditioning to keep the clocks at the right temperature, time seemed to stand still here. None of the clocks in the room seemed to be keeping the actual time, and amusingly, for a room filled with ornate clocks, I found myself left to rely on my digital watch to tell the time. Yet, it could also be said that the hour and a half whizzed by, as the topic of our discussion was fascinating, and we all left with a greater understanding of the social and scientific significance of the development of clocks.

When we think of time in a sociological context, we are often concerned with the speed of the internet, the pace of modern capitalism and the feeling that life is moving ever faster. Yet, looking at the clocks at the British Museum and understanding the slow and steady progress from sundials, to clocks, to digital time, to the internet today, our concept of time was put into perspective. Time is, undoubtedly, a powerful social tool. Too easily, we fail to realise that, like many elements in society, time is a social construction despite being based on a real, natural occurrence. Our trip to the British Museum was further confirmation that time is extremely useful, but that this does not mean that we should not question and investigate the positive and negative consequences that come with this fundamental element of human life.

About the author: *Georgia is in her final year of a sociology undergraduate degree at the LSE. Between 2015-16, she completed an exchange year in France as part of the LSE-Sciences Po exchange programme. She is primarily interested in the way that sociological enquiry has the potential to shape future society, and has found that her sociological training has forced her to see many situations from an alternative perspective.*

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