

'Who owns time? This may seem like a simple question. Time is ours, you would think, because everybody gets their brief sojourn in time. How long that is depends on the amount of time granted to you; some are given thirty, others fifty or eighty years. Time ticks away a slice of your life with every second, while also bringing whatever is still in store closer by the minute. Whether you emphasize the ticking away of the available amount of time to an ever-expanding past or the heralding of a future that is slowly coming within reach depends on your character, age and circumstances. Do you yearn for what has been or do you look forward to what is still to come? Is time something like "hope" (Bloch) or "the greatest innovator" (Bacon) or does time open "a relationship with the infinite" (Levinas)? These three philosophical positions say something about our possible approaches to time, but they tell us little about the actual experience of time in everyday life. Over the past 150 years this experience has undergone a fundamental change. So much so, in fact, that we might ask ourselves if we can still regard time as something that is ours.

This difference in time and in the experience of time has been the subject of several essays of mine, which I am rewriting this summer in the French countryside. While the temperature reaches unprecedented heights and time appears to retreat just that little bit further every day, I reread everything that I have written on this complex but fascinating topic. This secluded place is perfect for the job because I have tried to trace another, less common experience of time and to convey the repercussions and richness of this other time. Our hectic lives in modern, Western society gets often in the way of our ability to distinguish between what I call 'clock time', with its universal rules and rigid divisions, and this other time, which flows beneath our clocks so to speak, calmly and imperturbably, and which appears to touch on a more personal, more internal time.

It's an experience of time difficult to label or pin down because it cannot be expressed in common units such as hours or minutes. It's a time without hours, but only different gradations of light: from the delicate morning light to the intense and blinding blue light of noon and the dusky pastel shades of the evening which are gradually engulfed by the pitch-black darkness of night. That's all there is to it. Day in day out. The sun rises and sets again. This is the cosmic clock that governs life around here. The remarkable thing is that as the day wears on in this seemingly monotonous way, this uninterrupted flow of time is gradually permeated by a profusion of thoughts, fantasies, experiences and memories. Although I do not know what time it is, I do feel that the hour is mine. Instead of being driven by appointments and nervous glances at the clock, I feel more in synch with an internal time.

The law that governs the regime of clock time is the law of economic returns, whereas the dimension in which the other time carries us is that of our inner self, as philosophers like Henri Bergson, Hannah Arendt and Ernst Bloch have argued. The point is not to exchange one time for the other, but to recapture this other time and to restore the balance between the two. "Only when the clock stops does time come to life" is a quote from William Faulkner to which I wholeheartedly subscribe. Enhancing our sensitivity to this "true time" with which we can enrich and broaden our time-bound existence is, in short, what I had in mind when I wrote these essays.