

THE TEMPORAL PREDICAMENT OF FREEDOM IN SOCIAL ACCELERATION: AN INQUIRY BASED ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF TIME AND CRITICAL THEORY

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Abstract

Under the combined pressure of technological innovation and capitalist logic, contemporary societies are marked by social acceleration: technological change and everyday life continually speed up. While productivity gains and the shortening of necessary labour time seem to create more “free time”, the cult of efficiency, the attention economy and algorithmic governance colonise this time and weaken the conditions for substantive freedom. Drawing on Marx’s theory of free time, Hartmut Rosa’s account of social acceleration and Erich Fromm’s diagnosis of the “escape from freedom”, and placing them in dialogue with Chinese reflections on *ziru* (composed self-possession) and *daofa ziran* (following the way of nature), the article examines how temporal structures constrain or enable freedom in the age of digital capitalism. It shows how capitalist temporal colonisation extends from labour into leisure and cognitive time, and how information overload and AI-driven filtering undermine subjectivity and make temporal sovereignty increasingly fragile. On this basis, the article outlines a pathway of civilisational breakthrough that rethinks temporal norms, cultivates slow and resonant practices and calls for institutions that protect temporal rights. It is argued that improving the qualitative dimension of free time, rather than merely expanding its quantity, is crucial if

Culture Crossroads

Volume 34, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol34.738>
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ISSN 2500-9974



modern civilisation is to move beyond its temporal impasses and promote the free development of human beings.

Keywords: *social acceleration, freedom, temporal predicament, civilisational breakthrough.*

Introduction

Driven by a new wave of technological revolution represented by the internet, artificial intelligence and digital platforms, contemporary forms of production and everyday life have undergone dramatic change. On the one hand, automation and digitalisation have significantly reduced the intensity of physical labour and expanded the amount of disposable time available to individuals. The brutal deprivation of time experienced by workers in the age of the industrial revolution, as described by Marx and Engels, seems to have receded to some extent. On the other hand, technological progress, in the form of social acceleration, has far exceeded the natural rhythms and psychological bearing capacity of human beings, placing subjects in a state of being chased by time and filled up by tasks. In a statistical sense, the quantity of free time has increased, yet under the penetration of efficiency worship, the attention economy and algorithmic governance its qualitative dimension slides towards colonisation and alienation. A striking paradox thus emerges: in an era that possesses more time, individuals commonly feel that they have less; within a technological system that claims to unleash freedom, freedom is compressed and blocked in new ways.

In terms of existing research, both Chinese and international scholarship have produced rich discussions around such themes as freedom, time and modernity. Much of this work, however, remains at the level of empirical description of the accelerated pace and fragmentation of modern life, or focuses on the temporal management mechanisms of a specific technology or industrial sector. Against this background, the present article centres on one core question: under conditions of social acceleration driven jointly by technology and capital, in what kinds of temporal structures does human freedom appear, and how might it be reconstructed within a time order that is being accelerated and colonised? Unlike studies that primarily describe the acceleration of everyday rhythms or analyse time management in particular technical domains, this article seeks to build a cross-civilisational dialogue among Marx's theory of free time, Hartmut Rosa's critical theory of social acceleration, Erich Fromm's analysis of the escape from freedom and Chinese time wisdom concerning *ziruo* [Chen 2013: 718] (composed self-possession) and *daofa ziran* [Tang & Wang 2014: 95] (the Dao following nature). On this basis, it constructs a programme of temporal reconstruction oriented towards "civilisational breakthrough", exploring

how to rebuild temporal sovereignty and substantive freedom under accelerated social conditions at the levels of ideas, practice and institutions.

In this article, “free time” primarily denotes the amount of time in which individuals are released from compulsory labour and can dispose of their activities autonomously. The “temporality of freedom” emphasises whether the temporal structure itself allows subjects to construct a coherent life narrative and realise themselves; it is the temporal condition and experiential form in which freedom unfolds. “Temporal colonisation” refers to the process through which capital and technology, via the logic of efficiency and the attention economy, re-incorporate time that ostensibly belongs to the subject back into the production–consumption cycle, so that individuals nominally possess more leisure but are in practice unable to attain substantive freedom. “Civilisational breakthrough” denotes the attempt, in an era of social acceleration and temporal colonisation, to challenge a time order centred on capitalist efficiency and to reconstruct a civilisational configuration oriented toward the free development of human beings through the re-articulation of ideas, practices and institutions.

1. Social acceleration and the temporal paradox of constrained freedom

The essence of freedom has a distinctly social dimension. It is generated and realised within networks of interaction between individuals and others, and between individuals and society. It manifests as a web of interdependence and mutual support and inherently involves the dialectical unity of choices and environments, rights and obligations, responsibilities and consequences. From an ontological point of view, human beings, as free beings, conduct their core life-activities by making choices under the guidance of their own will. Such choices, however, are neither capricious nor unconditional. Subjects must take into account environmental constraints, the demands of others and social norms, and they must assume responsibility for the consequences of their actions. This requires that the process of choice carefully considers the conditions of success, real possibilities and the capacity to bear risks. The contemporary process of social acceleration is profoundly rewriting this basic logic of how freedom is realised, drawing freedom into a temporal paradox in which the expansion of space–time is accompanied by a shrinking of capacities.

German sociologist Hartmut Rosa argues that contemporary modernity has entered a new stage of “social acceleration” in which the technological acceleration of society, the acceleration of social change and the acceleration of the pace of life mutually reinforce one another to form a self-propelling loop of acceleration. Among these three dimensions, technological acceleration is “the most obvious and also the most readily measurable form of acceleration”; in essence, it changes

the “space–time regime” of society by transforming how space and time are perceived and organised in social life [Rosa 2018: 13–14]. The acceleration of social change manifests itself in the fact that attitudes and values, fashions and lifestyles, social relations and obligations, and the forms of groups, classes, milieus, discourses, practices and habitus are all undergoing change at an ever-increasing rate [Rosa 2018: 16]. It is the combined resonance of these three types of acceleration that shifts the core feature of modern society from “more and more” to “faster and faster”.

The core driving force of this social acceleration lies precisely in the widespread application of innovations such as the internet, artificial intelligence, 5G technologies and automation. At the level of temporality, these innovations both empower and constrain human freedom. From the perspective of empowerment, technological innovation follows the logic of technological acceleration and opens up new spatio-temporal possibilities for freedom. It greatly improves the efficiency of social practice by compressing spatial and temporal distances in transportation and communication, and by dramatically enhancing the capacity to produce, transmit, store, retrieve and recombine knowledge and information. Through high-speed, precise and low-consumption production processes it multiplies the effectiveness of mental and physical labour by hundreds or thousands of times, massively liberating and compressing the labour time required for specific products. Such changes in the space–time regime not only provide individuals with more disposable time, but also propel social subjects to master natural and social laws in deeper and broader ways, increasing the necessity content of freedom and pushing society further towards the “realm of freedom” [自由王国] [Marx, *Capital*, vol. III, 1894/2009a: 928] envisioned by Engels in *Capital Volume III*. In this sense, Rosa’s critical theory of social acceleration can be seen as a deepening of Marx’s analysis of free time: the liberation of labour time brought about by technological empowerment appears as the preliminary realisation of Marx’s ideal of free time in the contemporary world.

In lived reality, however, the alienated side of technological acceleration pushes freedom into deeper predicaments. This is precisely the “speed alienation” [Rosa 2018: 139] diagnosed by Rosa. What is alarming is that the time saved by technological progress has not been transformed into leisure and contemplation, but has instead been filled with more tasks and more intensive rhythms, leaving subjects in a constant state of time scarcity. This is the radicalisation and generalisation of what Marx criticised as the colonisation of time in contemporary society: not only labour time but also non-labour time is thoroughly penetrated by the principle of efficiency, so that free time is functionally alienated and becomes a mere extension of the production process. Rosa vividly describes this situation: “our moments of experience grow ever richer, but our life experience becomes ever poorer; time seems to meet a double fate in that it rushes past ever more quickly yet leaves ever fewer traces in our memory.

The time we experience and the time we spend on experiences both become alien to us, resulting in severe self-alienation.” [Rosa 2018: 139]

In the new technological environment, the coercion of time is particularly salient and forms a core manifestation of speed alienation. Artificial intelligence and similar algorithmic systems can store, output and recombine massive amounts of information, yet they also require subjects to make rapid judgements and choices in an ocean of data, placing them in continual states of urgency. The modular way in which AI processes information forces subjects to “choose without choice” and frames patterns of attention allocation and mental predispositions in highly standardised ways. Algorithmic recommendation systems thereby constrain or even strip away the subject’s freedom of choice, producing “temporal hijacking” and the enclosure of consciousness. Under conditions of high-speed operation this leads to a collapse of freedom. Moreover, the pervasive use of digital technologies strips events and problems of their lived context and filters out the multiple variables and possibilities that arise in conditions of contingency and chaos, producing a form of digital control that devours the responsiveness and creativity of subjects. Whilst, social and economic platforms use data monopolies to establish digital despotism, turning users into data points or “digital labourers” governed by an overarching system, simultaneously information processing and intelligent surveillance systems exercise comprehensive control in the name of security, eroding privacy and hollowing out human freedom in the utopian narratives of technology. In this way, time is no longer a neutral backdrop, but becomes a core mechanism through which the freedom of subjects is reshaped and constrained.

2. Temporal colonisation under capitalist logic

The foregoing analysis of social acceleration and the predicaments of freedom reveals that capitalist logic is the deep structural driving force behind the deformation of temporal structures. Capital does not merely intensify labour time; through the expansion of an efficiency-centred culture and consumerism it carries out a systematic colonisation of human lifetime. This temporal colonisation provides the basic background against which freedom is constrained in today’s accelerated society.

Within the classical Marxist framework, freedom is not an abstract mental state but a concrete capacity and form of life embedded in specific historical and social relations. In his 1878 work *Anti-Dühring*, Engels famously defines the essence of freedom as follows: “freedom does not consist in any dreamt-of independence from natural laws, but in the knowledge of these laws and the possibility of making them work towards definite ends” [Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 1878/2009b: 120]. Extending this insight into the temporal dimension, Marxism regards time that is at one’s own

disposal in accordance with one's will as the core vehicle of freedom. In *Capital, Volume III* (1894), Marx writes: "the realm of freedom begins only where labour determined by necessity and external expediency ends" [Marx, *Capital*, Vol. III, 1894/2009a: 928]. In *Wages, Price and Profit* (1865) he further stresses that "time is the room of human development. A man who has no free time at his disposal, whose whole lifetime, apart from the mere physical interruptions by sleep, meals, and so forth, is absorbed by his labour for the capitalist, is less than a beast of burden" [Marx, *Value, Price and Profit*, 1865/2009c: 70]. From this perspective, time is not a neutral, natural dimension but a historical category constantly formatted by capitalist logic and social structures. Who possesses time, who allocates time and to what ends time is directed constitute the basic dividing line between freedom and unfreedom in modern society.

On this basis, Marx reveals, in his analysis of the reproduction of surplus value, the inner temporal logic of capital accumulation: surplus value arises from surplus labour time beyond the necessary labour time of workers. In contemporary capitalism, capital accumulation is pursued mainly by raising labour productivity through technological innovation, thereby compressing necessary labour time and extending surplus labour time. As the advancement of civilisation makes the crude and open devouring of free time less tolerable, capital turns to more subtle and structural means, quietly transforming workers' free time into auxiliary labour time for the production of surplus value. Under this logic, free time is largely alienated into two forms: time for consumption and time for reproduction, trapping individuals in the illusion of a false freedom.

More concretely, temporal colonisation unfolds through at least three mechanisms. First, consumerism and digital technologies conspire to reconstruct free time as a field of capital accumulation. Algorithms and capital jointly inject a constant stream of consumption symbols and instant stimuli into leisure time through short videos, social media feeds, targeted advertising and other forms of the attention economy. Free time is unconsciously dissipated, and the soil that ought to nourish self-realisation degenerates into a passive space for the reproduction of desire. Second, the logic of efficiency that underpins modernity enables the disciplinary inertia of work time to spill over into the entire sphere of life. Invisible working hours silently invade the time beyond the formal workday as skills training, professional networking and online tasks fill what should be periods of rest and creativity. Free time is transformed into a self-management project within a performance-oriented society. Third, the de-territorialising power of internet technologies fundamentally reconfigures experiences and boundaries of space and time. Mobile work dissolves the physical separation between workplace and home; online education smudges the line between classroom and private space; cloud laboratories enable research

to run around the clock; and e-commerce makes transactions real-time and de-contextualised. While such compression of space–time brings convenience, it also entangles the whole of life in a permanent online state of acceleration, weaving free time invisibly into a 24-hour production–consumption cycle and stripping it of its buffering and liberating significance.

As Rosa emphasises, under the sway of capitalist logic technological acceleration not only fails to deliver on its promise of liberation but further “workifies” and objectifies free time, turning it into hidden labour time. The efficiency culture driven by capital forces individuals into a condition of haste in which lifetime is devoured by acceleration and human existence is subjected to an all-encompassing temporal colonisation in the name of efficiency. The consequences are twofold. On the one hand, modes of production operate strictly according to the imperatives of capital, systematically constraining the space for individuals’ creativity and personal development. On the other hand, capital, through technological applications, continuously manufactures premature consumption and false needs, drawing subjects into a pursuit of external recognition that causes them to lose sight of their authentic interests and value commitments and even to throw themselves willingly into practices of self-alienation. As incisively observed by Erich Fromm, in modern capitalist society “the idea of efficiency becomes one of the highest virtues. At the same time, the pursuit of wealth and material success becomes the all-absorbing passion” [Fromm 2018: 39]. Once human beings and their lifetime are thoroughly objectified and capitalised, freedom is left without both an inner foundation and an external space of realisation.

Engels already pointed out in his 1880 work *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* that “only through social production can society secure for all its members an ample and steadily increasing provision of the necessities of life and at the same time guarantee them the fullest freedom for the development and exercise of their physical and intellectual capacities” [Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, 1880/2009d, 563–564]. This statement not only affirms the fundamental role of the development of productive forces, but also underscores the fact that the realisation of human freedom is deeply conditioned by social relations, institutional arrangements and the superstructure.

In the contemporary context, a re-examination of Marx’s theory of free time reveals at least three implications of direct relevance. Firstly, free time is the basic condition for escaping compelled labour and for developing individuality and creativity; it is a necessary precondition for the free development of human beings. Secondly, the social distribution of free time vividly reflects a society’s class structure and power relations, serving as a key yardstick by which to gauge its level of civilisation. Thirdly, the meaning of free time does not lie in pure idleness but

in whether subjects can autonomously plan, endow and practise it, turning time into a living field of self-realisation and social participation. To challenge the cult of efficiency and temporal colonisation, we must return to this essence of free time and, through individual awareness, cultural reflection and the transformation of social structures, reclaim the right to define and govern time so that it once again becomes a space in which life meaning can grow rather than a mere abstract metric of capital accumulation.

3. Information overload, AI algorithms and the dissolution of *ziruo*

If the previous section showed how capitalist logic colonizes human lifetime through efficiency culture and consumerism, then in the phase of digital capitalism this temporal colonization increasingly takes the form of occupying cognitive time and mental space, with information overload and AI algorithms as its key media. To understand this new mechanism of erosion, it is illuminating to revisit the ancient ideal of *ziruo* – composed self-possession – as a norm of subjectivity.

In the Discourses of the States (*Guoyu*), we read: “If one can dwell in self-possession (*ziruo*), one can thereby measure all under heaven, correct what comes, and decide according to what the time requires” [Chen 2013: 718]. This ancient wisdom highlights the importance of an inner steadiness that allows the subject, amid incessant change, to maintain composure, survey the situation as a whole, assess right and wrong and make timely decisions. In today’s accelerated society driven by high-technology, with torrents of information, rapidly shifting historical narratives and ever-emerging novel phenomena, the core question of human freedom increasingly concerns the survival and rebuilding of this capacity for *ziruo*. If subjects cannot keep a mental anchor in the rolling waves of information – cannot take in the larger picture, distinguish truth from falsehood and act according to what the times require, their freedom will inevitably be lost in the current.

The tradition of critical theory offers a powerful lens for grasping this predicament. Fromm’s classic *Escape from Freedom* already analysed temporal alienation as a key thread linking individual psychological distress to structural social domination and exposed the modern paradox of freedom in ways that foreshadow the contemporary erosion of *ziruo*. For Fromm, the modern process of individuation is intrinsically double-edged: it is “a process of increasing strength and integration, of growing mastery over nature, and of growing capacity for reason and love”, yet at the same time it means “growing isolation and insecurity, increased doubt concerning one’s role in the universe, and an intensification of the feeling of one’s own insignificance and powerlessness” [Fromm 2018: 18]. Individuals gain formal freedom of choice by freeing themselves from the bonds of traditional communities, but are simultaneously cast into a state of rootlessness. Information overload does not occur in a vacuum;

it exacerbates and radicalizes this condition. Once individuals are separated from the knowledge-filtering and meaning-providing systems of traditional communities, they are confronted with an infinite universe of information that is hard to verify and replete with conflicting opinions.

As observers of digital society have noted, the internet, AI technologies and information explosions “immerse users in the opinions of thousands, even millions, of others and deprive them of the solitude necessary for sustained thought” [Kissinger et al. 2023: 61]. The deprivation of solitude is far more than a simple distraction of attention. It amounts to the collapse of the psychological time and mental space needed for introspection, for integrating experience and for forming independent judgements. Individuals are thrown into a never-ending cacophony of information and sink into the sense of isolation, anxiety and powerlessness that Fromm described. The coherence of self-consciousness, the firmness of free will and the capacity to understand the world actively are all subjected to ongoing erosion.

The problem lies not only in the volume of information but also in the way its quality and structure reshape patterns of cognition. AI-based technologies, as mediators of information processing, create a new kind of cognitive dependence. While they can, in certain respects, enhance the efficiency of information retrieval and pattern recognition, they tend to place human beings in a reactive cognitive position. The subject relies on algorithms to classify, distil and evaluate knowledge, and his or her thinking process is easily guided by pre-set question-and-answer frameworks. More crucially, recommendation systems based on users’ past behaviours and preferences tend to feedback and reinforce existing views, building up dense “information cocoons”. These cocoons appear to provide a comfortable cognitive environment but in fact systematically block encounters with heterogeneous viewpoints and deprive critical, plural and creative thinking of the friction it requires. This mechanism parallels the psychology of escaping freedom analysed by Fromm: when independently confronting complex information and making judgements entails huge cognitive burdens and existential anxiety, individuals may voluntarily or semi-voluntarily relinquish their autonomy and entrust decision-making to the simplified narratives and ready-made consensuses that algorithms offer, in exchange for certainty and a sense of security.

The cost of such reliance is high. Fromm warned that “pseudo-activity takes the place of original thinking, feeling and willing, and in the end the pseudo-self takes the place of the original self” [Fromm 2018: 135]. At the level of cognition, this means that “pseudo-knowing” – seemingly constant exposure to information that is in fact spoon-fed according to pre-existing preferences – replaces genuine thinking grounded in first-hand materials and critical reflection. Over time, the capacity for innovation and the spiritual freedom of subjects are bound to wither.

The deep involvement of AI further undermines the foundations of subjectivity. AI systems do not merely change how we acquire information; they also reshape the basic relations through which we interact with the world and, by extension, subtly alter how we understand our place and role in it. When algorithms can predict our preferences, make choices on our behalf and even simulate human emotions and creativity, a fundamental confusion arises: to what extent are my thoughts and desires really my own, and to what extent are they products of data traces and optimising algorithms? This uncertainty about the authenticity of the self constitutes one of the deepest forms of alienation in the information age. If industrial capitalism once objectified time as a calculable unit of efficiency, digital capitalism extends this logic into the innermost realms of cognition and consciousness. The time and process of thinking are disciplined by the logic of efficiency; slow contemplation is perceived as waste, whereas instant reaction is celebrated as a virtue. In such an environment subjectivity becomes blurred, and people fall into an existential wavering over whether their thoughts and actions arise from genuine free will or from the invisible calibration of a digital system.

In this context, *ziru* is no longer merely a classical ideal of self-cultivation but an urgent practice related to the very survival of freedom. It requires subjects not only to manage chronological time but also to defend the integrity and sovereignty of their cognitive and spiritual space. This does not mean withdrawing into a pre-digital isolation. Rather, it calls for the forging of inner steadiness and filtering mechanisms while being fully connected to global information networks – an advanced capacity to remain “at ease in oneself” and to decide in accordance with what the time requires. Without such foundations of *ziru*, so-called free choice degenerates into passively selecting among pre-set options, and emancipation is lost in the informational labyrinth that we ourselves have created yet by which we are in turn dominated.

4. Practically reconstructing the temporality of freedom

The most visible manifestation of the temporal alienation generated by social acceleration is the widespread anxiety that pervades contemporary society. Its root lies in the dislocation of subjectivity caused by being chased by time: individuals become slaves of time and find it difficult to establish stable connections with the world in fragmented spatio-temporal fields. In response to this predicament, Rosa proposes his theory of resonance as a core strategy for countering social acceleration. The reconstruction of the temporality of freedom is, in effect, a central pathway for building such resonant relations. The first task of this reconstruction is to transform fundamental temporal concepts and behavioural models.

More specifically, we need to break through the “arboreal” temporal structure of modernity, which is rooted in linear causality and singular narratives, and move

towards a “rhizomatic” or network-like conception of time. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s metaphor of the rhizome, this means advancing towards a multi-centred, multidirectional and non-linear understanding of temporality [Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 3]. Such a transformation is not a mere formal adjustment. By means of temporal strategies that spread in multiple directions and create systemic connections, it dissolves the rigid disciplinary mechanism of a prison-like timetable, activates the boundaries of time and the constraints of space, and enables subjects to break free from stereotyped constraints through creative and autonomous practices.

Within the fragmented time of modernity, subjects can, by forging multiple connections, capture what might be called “Benjaminian moments of aura” – epiphanies of creativity and openings of innovation that are often neglected by mainstream narratives – and reconstruct the meaning of freedom within these non-continuous “temporal fissures”. The key to escaping temporal colonisation is to build a plural system of life meanings and value goals: to break the single narrative of “acceleration equals progress”, to excavate the intrinsic worth of non-accelerated practices such as contemplation, wandering and artistic creation, and to promote a “slow living” wisdom centred on *daofa ziran*, the Dao following the rhythms of nature [Tang & Wang 2014: 95]. Through such efforts, time can be transformed from an external, objective framework into an existential dimension that carries subjective value, and subjects can autonomously legislate its meaning. In practical terms, reconstructing the temporality of freedom requires a threefold process of transformation in ideas, everyday practices and institutions to rebuild the autonomy of subjects.

At the level of ideas, a dialectical awakening of temporal consciousness is needed. We must revise our cognitive paradigm of time, move beyond the constraints of the arboreal temporal structure and establish a rhizomatic framework of multiple times. This implies constructing a plural system of life meanings and value goals, breaking the single narrative in which acceleration equals progress and efficiency equals truth, and highlighting the value of non-accelerated activities such as contemplation, travel and interpersonal communion. In this way, we can oppose the logic of time is money that has dominated since the rise of industrial civilisation and realise a subjective self-legislation of temporal meaning. Time then reverts from an external metric of efficiency to a dimension of existence that carries subjective significance.

At the level of everyday practice, the focus falls on cultivating the capacity for *ziru* and reshaping modes of interaction between subjects and the world. First of all, “slow experiences” can be employed to rebuild authentic connections: by strengthening bodily perception and action – through reading, handicrafts, fieldwork, face-to-face conversation and other forms of first-hand experience – we

can counteract the alienating fast logic of technology and avoid having subjectivity masked by virtual worlds. Second, dependence on digital technologies must be reduced in order to reclaim temporal sovereignty. Within the tight temporal order of contemporary society, this means cutting the “digital umbilical cord” by switching off unnecessary notifications, reducing routine screen time and creating ritualised breaks from online life, thereby restoring the rhythms of real life. Third, “inner anchors” must be cultivated to stabilise subjectivity. By preserving carriers of memory, practising seasonal alternations between fast and slow living, engaging in personalised creativity and reflection, and recovering sensitivity to the fine texture of daily life, subjects can maintain inner balance in an accelerated world and consolidate self-knowledge – the questions of who I am, what I live for and where I am going.

From an ontological perspective, the for-itself existence of human beings consists in consciously becoming aware of one’s lifetime, autonomously choosing life goals, shaping one’s lifestyle and organising one’s practical activities. Although individual lifetime unfolds within the conventional rhythms of society, the decisive moments of breakthrough always depend on the subject’s capacity for reflection, deliberation and resolute action. Only by transcending a pre-programmed life timetable can subjects set their own goals and achieve self-realisation. The authentic meaning of freedom lies in a mode of existence characterised by choosing rather than obeying, creating rather than conforming and striving rather than fleeing.

At the level of institutions, a framework of systemic guarantees must be constructed to support the reconstruction of temporality. This includes implementing flexible working systems and linking working hours more precisely to the value of time in order to prevent unpaid overtime and the normalisation of invisible labour time; tying income more rigorously to time input; formulating cultural norms for technological research and development and introducing a digital human rights charter to regulate the boundaries of technological applications and protect individuals’ temporal sovereignty and personal dignity in digital space. Such institutional innovations can provide stable and effective guarantees for the process of temporal reconstruction.

In essence, the reconstruction of the temporality of freedom calls us back to the original meaning of life freedom: a stance of existence that privileges choosing over obedience, creativity over conformity and engagement over escape. Through the joint efforts of conceptual renewal, practical transformation and institutional support, we can break the fetters of objectified and instrumentalised time and reverse the social property of time that has, since the rise of industrial civilisation, been standardised as a calculable unit of efficiency under the logic that time is money. In a dynamically balanced state where fast and slow, inner and outer, self and others are integrated, we can achieve a dialectical unity between the social disciplining of time

and the free will of subjects. From the perspectives of ontology, consciousness, plural value and autonomous construction, we may then reshape the relationship between time and humanity, overcome both physical and social constraints and realise genuine autonomy over lifetime so that freedom is transformed from an abstract theoretical concept into a concrete mode of existence.

Conclusion

The analysis above shows that the temporal structure of an accelerated society is no longer a neutral technological environment but a core mechanism that deeply shapes and constrains subjectivity and freedom. The acceleration logic driven by technological iteration, the efficiency cult under capital, the penetration of the attention economy and the proliferation of algorithmic governance together constitute the temporal order of contemporary society. Although the overall quantity of free time seems to have increased formally, its qualitative dimension is increasingly characterised by deprivation, colonisation and alienation. The cognitive burdens generated by information explosions and the existential confusion of meaning experienced by subjects intensify temporal oppression from both psychological and ontological perspectives, leading modern individuals into states of anxiety, isolation and powerlessness – in short, into the predicament of escaping freedom.

For this reason, the central task of a “civilizational breakthrough” lies in reconstructing the temporality of freedom. We must both establish temporal sovereignty for subjects – rectifying alienated time values and co-constructing a harmonious spatio-temporal order – and enhance the humanistic dimension of technological development, thereby achieving a dynamic balance between instrumental and value rationality and unifying the quantitative expansion and qualitative improvement of free time. At the level of values and ideas, it is necessary to transcend the single narrative in which acceleration equals progress and to excavate the core significance of non-accelerated practices such as contemplation, creativity and emotional connection. At the level of institutional safeguards, flexible working systems, strict regulation of working time and digital rights protections should be designed in order to reserve temporal spaces for autonomous self-development and to curb the unlimited encroachment of capital and technology into the sphere of life. At the level of everyday practice, concrete strategies such as slow experiences, offline rituals and the cultivation of inner anchors are needed to rebuild genuine connections between self, others and world.

Only when free time is transformed from merely formal possession into substantively autonomous use, and only when human beings can control their own temporal structures rather than being swept along by the waves of social acceleration, can modern civilization complete a deep self-reflection and creatively transcend

itself. From this perspective, the reconstruction of the temporality of freedom is not only a core issue that contemporary social theory must urgently address; it is also the necessary path by which modern civilisation may move towards a more human-centred and creative new form.

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