

## “HAVING NOTHING TO DO” New epistemologies to understand contemporary social times

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**Abstract:** This communication discusses the meaning of the expressions "do nothing" and "having nothing to do", in the context of contemporary society. We leave of the idea that the social experience is increasingly mediated by the paradox between the experiences of "lack of time" and "time in abundance", which is currently classified as "empty". Both expressions characterize social actors' narratives and actions of in their daily lives. They are both significant sociologically, by signalling a gap between the forms of social and cultural organization of the world – the world as it is and presents itself, with its manifold and alternatives – and people's subjectivities – the ways in which the subject understands himself/herself and his/her everyday experience in that world and gives meaning to it.

**Keywords:** social time; doing nothing; lack of time.

### **Introduction**

Sociological studies were so far largely focused on the phenomenon of social construction of the time, powering it up and setting it, continuously and persistently, with the organization of the productive activity (Adam, 1990). This theoretical structure maintained a relevant set of investigations guided by two principles based on the idea that time is measurable, storable and can be distributed (Thompson, 1963; Zeruvabel, 1983; Grossin, 1974). These principles are the following: i) working time (dominant) can be separated from the free time and leisure time (dominated); and ii) time has a direct equivalence in money and, therefore, the more scarce it is, the more value it has. It is observed that the modes of debating time were based on the idea that it was a quantifiable thing. Therefore, the experiences of "doing nothing" and "have nothing to do" started to configure one of the following situations: i) the experience of leisure-time and free time, or ii) the experience of having "empty" time, without content, i.e., time

which is involuntarily not occupied with paid tasks, that is, a time of "unemployment", a time less valuable, which potentially brings about social isolation.

In this communication we will focus on the exploration of the variety of meanings ascribed to that time of "doing nothing" and "time to have nothing to do". We envisage demonstrating that the first is still very connected to leisure time, while the latter continues to classify the state of "absence of rhythm", of being in the "margin" of the dominant temporal system. For this demonstration, we start by questioning two of the classifications, which are still relevant within the discursive repertoires of the fordist production model: do not have time and have time in abundance.

The main purpose of this argumentation is to highlight the need to examine and build up other meanings about the experience of "have nothing to do" or "time in abundance". We intend to do so in the context of the rising level of unemployment, as well as in the context of the change as regards the values concerning the uses of time, which tend to reveal the increasing importance given to the "proper time", to the hedonism, as well as to other dimensions related with the revelation of the self in contemporary societies.

With a view to consolidate the theoretical arguments that follow, we take into account the studies developed by the authors of this communication (Franch, 2000; 2002a; 2002b; 2004; Schouten et al, 2012; Araújo and Duque, 2012), in particular those which debate the experience of time by the unemployed and by young people. We give relevance to the ways those two categories of people undertake the separation between leisure time and occupied time, as well as to the meanings and representations underlie that separation.

In relation to the uses of time by unemployed, we use data came from the research project "time and technology" which was developed in partnership between the University of Minho and University of Beira Interior, coordinated by Professor Johanna Schouten. This project aimed to understand what were the main profiles of time using in families inhabiting in the regions of Braga and Covilhã, by using a survey, in-depth interviews and focus groups (Schouten et al., 2012; Schouten and Araújo, 2012). In relation to the way young people utilizes time, we use mainly the research developed by Monica Franch (2000; 2002a; 2002b; 2004) in Brazil, in which the author discusses young people representations concerning the meaning of "having nothing to do".

### **1. The lack of time as a reflex of social time**

The permanent lack of time is one of the most important categories of social construction of the time after industrialization (Harvey, 1989; Rosa and Scheurman,

2009). As Zerubavel (1981; 1982), Weber (1992), Simmel (1978), Grossin (1974) and Thompson (1967) show, the mechanical time is subject to monetary evaluation. This equivalence between time and money reveals itself as a central element in the institutions structures, as well as in organizational models. As an internalized structure, it is also a component of the *habitus*. It is inscribed in the socialization process and shapes the way the individual and groups live in society. Do not have time, or have little time, are trademarks of social recognition and value, not only of the activity being performed, but also of its performer (Jahoda *et al* 2000). It is known that, over the past centuries, a lot of changes occurred as regards the way people deal with the contents of the time. We have also witnessed a gradual process of imposing different definitions to durations associated with the existence of time "in abundance".

At the beginning of industrialization, a period marked by the growing valuation of the occupation of time, the abundance of this was only socially permitted to certain population groups and individuals, according to their social status. The positive correlation between the lack of time and the social status is still evident, although less and less, due to changes in modes of organization of work, as well as to other cultural transformations, most of them related to the effects that techno science may have "filling" the time, as it brings a indefinable set of little tasks to be accomplished. In societies in which agricultural temporality was dominant and in which human beings lived according to natural world times and rhythms, the social time had an unique structure (Elias, 1998) as natural and social rhythms were entangled into each other.

But, in industrialized societies, the social time is determined by the principle of separation between occupied working time, administered, governed by external entities (remunerated and connected to a physical space set) and the time free of that discipline. That is, any time of the daily experience is conditioned by the abstract system of time: free time is a consequence of the working time. Is a time whose legitimacy derives from the existence of the working time. That is why working time is so central at the level of the practices and representations of individuals and institutions (places where individual productivity standards come together with increasing retirement age, reduction of time off due to sickness, among others). We know that the free time and leisure time receive their classification from the working time and its gravitational nature. "Having nothing to do" means not having "time occupied with paid activities".

## 2. The time for doing nothing: unemployed, pensioners and young people

Concerning this theme we will make a parenthesis to emphasize that, in a contrary position to these trends, we may identify a whole set of studies developed during the 20th century that claim, precisely, the "right" of the human and social being to "have nothing to do." As evidenced by Naville (1969; 1972), 19th century social thinkers such as Marx (1971) staged the first discussions about the modern leisure, on the basis of political and socio-economic interests. Lafargue, Marx's son-in-law would be the first to launch a pamphlet extolling the virtues of idleness, in the book *'The right to laziness* (1883). His work, committed to debunking the work, was the fuse of a series of complaints addressed to the capitalist ideology.

Contemporary thinkers, such as De Masi (2000) and Russell (Russell, 1977 [1918]), were noteworthy representatives of that critical vein. Contrary to the exaltation of work, these authors have seen, on the increasing of free time, more the corollary of the automation processes, than a "path to happiness and prosperity" (Russell, 1977 [1918], p. 11). Marcuse (1955) argued that the quality of life was threatened by the taste of the capitalist system in creating false needs supported by a strong sense of inexorability and standardization. These, in the perspective of that author, have imposed, under the cloak of *culture*, several behavioral standards which are subject to symbolic and sometimes, transcendent sanctions, expressed in the need to follow a rigorous time discipline avoiding have to lose time, or have time no previously marked with an activity.

In a same vein of orientation, Riesman (1971), relates in his book, *The lonely crowd*, the advent of leisure with the loss of human autonomy. This would be moved by norms and values conveyed by the mass media. Baudrillard (2008) would state later and in this line that the great "drama" for having leisure is caused by the contradictory need of have not any time lost, even during non-working time.

The truth is that for those who have a busy time mostly with paid time, "do nothing " corresponds exactly to the "free" time and, above all , to leisure time. In the excerpt below we present (Schouten et al, 2012) , a woman participant in a focus group who describes that "do nothing " is just like having the chance to " stop" in the performance of household chores , breaking some social expectations that were formed from gender divisions . The woman says that having free time is:

- "Leisure time is "doing nothing. Having the pleasure to sit down without having nothing to do. Because I often simply ...I sit on the couch with remorse because I have clothes to iron, or things that could be organized. But I changed: now I think I

have more... But deep down, the day should have more hours, because it seems to me that we spend the day running and at the end we have the impression we did nothing... And half, most of those hours, are passed working, whether at work, at home "(woman).

It is a narrative marked by the same problems and the same system of representations we had already mentioned concerning the expression "lack of time". In the following excerpt, is remarkable the way the times of "doing nothing" are subtracted to the working time (remunerated or not).

- "Over the weekend I try to take everything I've got, go out, walked a little bit, which is also when the husband is at home, since during the week we hardly see, mal finds himself. Over the weekend tried to seize same. Try to arrange everything in the morning. From Saturday afternoon, Saturday and Sunday are my days off. I try not to do anything at all, nothing at all "(woman).

Several other authors have discussed over the past few years the subordination of free time and leisure time to working time. In turn, time without having "nothing" to do (even during free time or leisure) would be equivalent to having time devalued, "dead", "empty".

The post-capitalist society is marked by the paradoxical valorization of the "occupied" and paid time, in one side and the free time and leisure, in the other side. As before, the capitalist logic distills in time its required occupation (including something to do). But if, on the one hand, employment has become, in contemporary societies, the source of sociability and identity construction, on the other hand, free time can be used for stylization of life and social status distinction.

Besides, southern European societies are traversed by a deep absence of paid time, of paid work. And, following the language and the perspective of the capitalism discursive repertoires, marked by the already mentioned abstract meaning of time, these societies also reveal an increasing number of people who stay with the time "not occupied", "nothing to do", because they are "unemployed". They pass through the experience of having plenty of time (not busy) and, in parallel, through the experience being away from the participation in the dominant rhythm, which is largely structured on the basis of the working times.

The excerpt that we present below (extracted from the report that "Time and Technology") demonstrates this experience of "marginality", towards the daily rhythm and routine:

- "For one who has always been used to work, well, during x years and.. Now, being without working, well... psychologically one can stand the initial days.. but, then, everything is evil, one begins to feel we are not useful ... one do no stops feel we are not useful at home (...) one begins to have less patience for things (...) one goes to seek employment one two, three, ten times and we get always the same answer, so one starts to fall into repetition (man , unemployed ) .

One of the most paradoxical points of these political and social contexts relates to the strength of the representation of time as something to be occupied and, simultaneously, the increasing decline of employment and work, as well as to the growing value ascribed to proper time, and to the autonomy administering it. In an effort to "occupy" time of those who have plenty of time (unemployed and young), and guided by the principles of industrial time, much of the social policies in these areas is directed by the need to design activities that meet the needs of individuals, institutions and groups.

As regards pensioners, substantial programs are directed to active ageing; demand the need of having a complete fulfillment of their time. The same happens with the planning of the activities at school, that is, as children tend to have their time increasingly occupied with classes and sessions regarded as means of preparation to enter labor market. In the case of the unemployed, there is a structural dislike in regard "do nothing" or "having nothing to do". Although institutions assume that people are unemployed as a result of structural factors, they constantly convey the need to occupy time and eliminate the time of have nothing to do.

The programs and measures adopted tend to introduce activities and chores in time of unemployment, as a way to prevent the empty time as well as dead time, particularly on the part of the unemployed, and those who have experienced the paid work, as well as experience of timetables and framing routines of everyday life. Among other ways to fill the time, institutional actors in Portugal have adopted some measures which include several strategies, as the compulsory participation in training programmers that, far from ensuring the access to specific knowledge and expectations of the unemployed, serve to "fill" their time and ensure formal accounting of that time as "active time" and, sometimes as "paid" time. "Not doing anything" and "having nothing to do" are thus more than simple expressions that translate states of free time or leisure, by which "nothing" would mean precisely something that is "paid".

In modern societies, and respective repertoires of signification and communication, these expressions are marked by institutional and ideological value conferred upon the paid time, weather as a currency which attracts to itself more the evaluation of all the tangible and concrete sump of activities than the less intellectual activities, no tangible

and immaterial. So, having nothing to do or do nothing, serve today to classify states of "leisure" (as opposed to time paid) and, simultaneously, to classify "marginal states", which are seen as important pieces of time to eliminate and control. That is why many pensioners, children, young people and the unemployed go through a deep process of identity reconfiguration, since "doing nothing" (nothing, as opposed to time paid) is not regarded as a legitimate condition.

Indeed, as mentioned in the introduction, in parallel, other studies about the expectations and the creations around the free time of young Brazilians demonstrates well the overlap of these various meanings. These studies indicate that "have nothing to do or "do nothing" are also trademarks of identity as they inscribe their own narratives within a particular culture. At the same time, they correspond to forms of direct interference of organizations upon individual biographies.

In the next point we analyze in more detail the time experience of young people and their narratives of "having nothing to do".

In Brazil, young people have become object of social concern from the late 1990. That would result in the creation of a series of programs and public policies geared to this population in the years 2000. The way young people use their time is one of the main vectors of social concern about this age group. In a paradigmatic manner, the message chosen to announce the federal program For Urban youth in 2008, brings the time uses in its motto: "for anyone who has to win and has no time to lose". And, not incidentally, the soundtrack of the television commercial used in the announce of that program was the theme *to make up for lost time*, by Renato Russo<sup>[1]</sup>. The concern with the use of time reaches the families of middle layers, that seek to fill the largest possible number of hours of their children with activities that may contribute for their future performance, but is more present even in the case of the young popular groups, whose spare time isn't just cause for parents concern, but also regarded as a matter of family and social policy intervention (Araújo, 2011). The view that young people have very poor idle time and that's not good neither for them nor for society, imbues the common sense.

Media and reports often shine through interventions geared to this group. Analyzing policies and programmes addressed to youth, in Brazil, by the year 2003, Sposito and Carrano (2003) have concluded that there is a "simultaneity of times in the debate on youth" (p. 4), including "guidelines such as those aimed at the social control of the juvenile time, training of manpower and also those that aspire to lead young people to be actual agents of rights" (p. 4). To occupy the time, combat idleness, channel the

youthful energy for activities such as sports or as "popular culture" is part of the explicit or implicit agenda of a large number of interventions addressed to youth, at the expense law logic. As seen, the social concern about youthful time features variations in terms of class, but it also conveys sexually differentiated representations in societal terms, young are perceived as being susceptible of involvement in crime, especially drug trafficking, but young people tend to be more concerned with other issues, such as sexuality, specifically as regards early maternity. When we talked to the young, the spare time is not necessarily understood as something negative. Conversely, it can be perceived as an opportunity for recreation, sociability, the creation or, why not, to laziness.

As noted by Abramo, "youth is seen as a time of life in which one can enjoy life and try for a better future" (1994, p. 62). In popular media, especially being young often means having a license for the distraction, since adulthood entails deprivations and difficulties. However, the "disengagement" can also be a sign of failure, social exclusion and lack of opportunities for young people and their families – since it is not the same thing when someone has nothing to do when he/she is 15 years old or when he/she is 25 years old, or when he/she is single or he/she has kids, etc. For these and other reasons, the juvenile time, especially in low classes, appears as a crossroads of practices and meanings which reveal social conditions, norms, values and contradictions concerning the experience of youth, often revealing conflicts and power relations.

In the first survey (Franch, 2000; 2002a, 2002b), one of the elements that drew the most attention was the variety of free time practices developed by young people in the places where they inhabit or in its outskirts because of economical reasons, since many of them are students, other are unemployed, and some are even workers who collaborate in the family expenses. In short, they are young people who have not economic capitals to consume goods offered by the leisure industry. However, staying at home, or on the streets of the neighborhood, is not necessarily synonymous of boredom or "dead time". Attention must be given to the fact that most of the activities they mention involve the coexistence with other young people and several relations of sociability. The wheels of conversation outside their home, the music groups, the spontaneous games of football in the street, the visits to relatives and friends, are some of the alternatives used by young people in order to make their daily lives more enjoyable.

Such practices introduce in the domestic and familiar space a place of social gathering, where what counts is the ability for be together. The realization of this kind of activity relies on the existence of networks of sociability territorially based, what indicates the



existence of dense neighborhood networks in the more popular social groups. That is, for young people who have integrated this study, the neighborhood is still a place used by them to recruit friends and boyfriends. The practices, such as the wheel of conversation and the visits to friends contribute to maintain and expand friendship networks and, indirectly, to foster the bond of young with their places of residence.

In terms of representations, the more trivial activities carried out within the neighborhood are often not considered by young people as "Recreation" or "free time". In contrast, they are described to the investigator as being "nothing" – "there's nothing to do in this slum".

Firstly, the repetitive and daily leisure (trivial) is "nothing" because it does not introduce anything new from a relational point of view. As it was said by a girl of 15 years, "it's always the same faces". This comment, very common, reveals the expectation that the free time allows young people to make new friends, far behind those belonging to their home networks. Visits and games on the street are also "nothing" when compared to the extraordinary events, like the parties (understood as festive events carried out by young people themselves, as birthdays) and other visits (show houses, *shopping malls*, and beach). In this second case, it can be noticed that the activities only lose their classifications as nothing if they refer to activities performed within the logic of the market and leisure industry.

In the second survey, developed in 2008, juvenile temporal practices were contextualized according to the family situation of the young - married, single or in the process of formation of their families. Among the single ones, we noticed the existence of very expressive variations in daily time, due to very different relations this group has with the institutions, mainly with the school. We found out two main temporal experiences concerning leisure and free time usages. First, the young people who were studying during some periods of the day and who worked as internships in the other period. These reported experiences of having a very busy time and, sometimes, of fatigue and lack of opportunity to sleep. Their free time, was reduced to the weekends, marked by an intense sociability, and guided by the idea of "take advantage from time". The second group involves young people out of school, out of familiar control, and who tend to use free time exactly against the school and family. They were young people who used to sleep during the day and who used to stay out till the morning, synchronizing their time with other young people in the same rhythmic situation.

## Conclusion

We wanted to highlight not only the need to deepen our understanding about the way time may be understood as something to occupy, but also advance, in face of the growing ineffectiveness of the opposition between working time and free time, the need to better comprehend the expression “have nothing to do”. This is not only a way that individuals use to classify themselves before the dominant representation model of time paid, but also as a form of designation of the resistance against the dominant model (do nothing, given the strict time occupation model). We wanted to show that, given the scheme of values presented in modern societies, namely the importance given to consumption, "nothing to do", far from expressing the "absence" of activities, reflects the "sameness" of everyday life and its repetition.

Social temporalities arise, not only as increasingly complex, but also more and more changed, reconfigured by the organizations, by the media, by individuals own representations about what must be their life and which elements they must value. Today, there are shortages of analytical, conceptual and methodological resources that facilitate the understanding of the phenomenon of multiplicity, conflict and time overlap and of meanings within that complexity. But, for the purposes of the answer to questions that we mentioned at the beginning of the text, it is important to emphasize that, globally, the "do nothing" and "having nothing to do," can be debated under two main axes. Firstly, they can arise from cultural changes that occur in societies of hypermodernity, and can be parsed as "interpretative repertoires", understood as "discursive resources that can be used to build versions of events, actions, internal processes, justifications of certain practices, etc. That is, as:

"Sets of terms related to each other and used with a certain grammatical and stylistic coherence, and that usually are organized around one or more central metaphors (Potter & Wheterell, 1987). Taking into account that there is no internal psychological content in individuals who command their behaviors, the interpretative repertoires are tools, which are not located in individuals, but that individuals use as social cultural resources available, for their own ends" (Nogueira, 2001: p. 25).

But, have nothing to do, and "do nothing" can be designed as components of critical discourse about the modes by which scientific management conceive time as the central unit of production (of things, processes) and therefore can set modes of subordination or resistance to these structures of appreciation of the current time. It is relevant to stress the theoretical framework developed by Foucault (2010), referring to the power of discourse and to the role of discipline (undeniably linked to the use of

time) of modern societies (industrial) as a result of the process of internalization of power. In fact, both "have nothing to do," as the "do nothing", represent forms of reproduction of power that are embedded in institutions and that materialized, not only in the set of regulations and interventions concerning times of work, as well as the alignment of priorities and social policy programs.

The ideas presented have been exposed so exploratory, requiring a subsequent work of comparison and analysis. However, they demonstrate the urgent need to continue working on the construction of new conceptual framework more adapted to the complexity and to non-causal observation of social times and its representations , counting enormously with the role of discourses and media.

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