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A Larger Universe

Future research is equally compelling because it allows us to get so much more

is not just to reveal more and more about them, but also to allow us to ask ourselves questions that we might not pose otherwise. While reading about the busyness of others may in this way provide a guilty pleasure, it can be a profound experience as well, for those other lives can help us think about our own circumstances and perhaps act to change them for the better. What is important is not whether their busyness is the same as ours, or whether they coped and buffered in the best ways, but rather what it allows us to learn that is useful in our lives as individuals and members of families.

There is, however, a danger in the attraction of the richly detailed perspective available through ethnography. Such rich descriptions also provide windows onto processes that may be changing entire ways of life, but that seem removed from everyday experience. Complementing the ubiquitous ethnographic microscope is the need for a “macroscope” that connects everyday life, and its immediate exigencies, with a larger meaning or significance. Doing so might sound like an academic thought experiment, but in fact it is profoundly practical. We can imagine, for example, reconfiguring our daily lives and our families to gain better control over busyness, but the effects of busyness would still reverberate through society, changing its very texture.

Busy lives might be firmly grounded in daily obligations, but how we handle those obligations, and even how we think about our lives, affects and is affected by moral visions of how we should live. As we have seen, one way to think about our busy lives assumes the importance and simplicity of time and pays scant attention to the content of our activities. Ideas about a time bind, or life speeding up, or of “fitting it all in” assume the centrality of time. They treat activities and how we categorize them as natural, necessary, and taken for granted. They are not problematical and they remain unexamined. Only the challenges of efficient organization or the productive use of time seem noteworthy. There is a matter-of-factness to this approach, one in which techniques of time management are paramount. Moral issues may

The perspective from busyness frames different questions regarding morality. The focus from busyness is less about mastery or exploring alternative solutions than it is about the new content of cultures and how they are

to ask a person for an intelligible account of it, and those accounts connect specific actions to larger intentions.

Through this dual process of constructing narratives of both self and settings, we connect our individual lives to cultural traditions; we are not just

The sociologist Alan Wolfe points out that capitalist economics and liberal democratic policies have freed many citizens from both concern with “the nitty-gritty of survival” and “the struggles for power taking place around them.” In this sense, they have “freedom from economics and liberation from politics.”¹⁷ The result is a key paradox, in that we are largely free to make choices about how to live our lives irrespective of the actions of other people. But because of the social and economic complexity of our societies, we are interdependent with others in making those societies work. We may aspire to be free, yet freedom means being unencumbered by obligations to others, while economic growth, democratic governance, and freedom are produced through dependencies on other people: “To be modern is to face the consequences of decisions made by complete strangers while making decisions that will affect the lives of people one will never know,” Wolfe writes. One resulting dilemma is that the more we depend on others (and they on us) owing to the web of obligations, the fewer are the agreed-upon moral rules that can account for those obligations.¹⁸

and the state by promulgating universal solutions. Each operates independently of the people who might be directly involved in the actions of others. Because of this simplification and the apparent complexity of alternative

so cannot be contained within the procrustean beds of work and family. But the drivers of busyness, our reliance on coping practices, and how we create buffers that enhance our resilience thrust us into social interactions with obligations, standards of conduct, and rules that have not yet been fully written. How busyness affects us individually and as family members is likely to be where we are most immediately aware of its effects, but it is the longer, often indirect effects on society that will arguably be more important to our futures.

We should not be uncritically confident about the possibilities of a civil society with renewed functions. Alan Wolfe and Charles Taylor remind us that any moral obligations and codes that emerge will be generated by the content of our interactions and our capacity to place them in larger narratives about ourselves and the settings that give them meaning.²¹ Busyness neither eliminates the possibilities for such narratives and the unities they create nor is particularly conducive to constructing them.²² For example, we have seen the quest for opportunities for reflection that is necessary for good stories to think with, but we have also seen the difficulty in finding them. Far more common are occasions for mastering techniques, the goals of which are not always evident.

An ethnography of busyness allows us to understand the poverty of simply looking at time as the *sine qua non* of busy lives, and to instead refocus our gaze on the activities that make us busy and those that we embrace to manage our everyday lives. Ironically, time reemerges in importance, albeit in different ways. We have seen its importance through the experiments individuals and families conduct over days and years to best live their lives. Time also reasserts itself in the possibility of constructing narrative histories that unify our pasts, presents, and futures into a good life. And we are also reminded that those lives are being led at a historical moment when market, state, and civil society are shifting their functions in society. There are few reliable guideposts in such a world, and reasons for concern and even despair loom large. Yet also possible are new forms of family, workplace, and community that can help us cope and meet the obligations we have to