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Article

The coronavirus and the temporal order of capitalism: Sociological observations and the wisdom of a children's book

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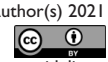

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Abstract

The coronavirus is not only a medical threat but also collides with the temporal logic inherent to capitalism. While capitalism demands constant growth, acceleration and efficiency, the outbreak urges societies to reduce, slow down and be patient. This article provides a sociological comment on the pandemic that focuses on the role of time and temporality. It explores the multiple ways in which the required responses to Covid-19 are at odds with the temporal order of capitalism. In the midst of crisis, the specific features, contradictions and weaknesses of the time regime governing modern societies become even more apparent – and make sociological scrutiny more necessary than ever. While this comment relates to the insights provided by the sociology of time, it uses a children's book to illustrate its argument. Drawing on Michael Ende's story of the orphan girl Momo and the grey gentlemen who steal people's time, I recapture the main features of capitalism as a time regime: measurement and commodification of time, temporal expansion, acceleration, appropriation of the future, and unequal temporal autonomy. The current pandemic challenges both individual and collective temporalities that are governed by these temporal imperatives of capitalism. I conclude with reflections on the feasibility of a more sustainable temporal order that Michael Ende's novel hints at and suggest how sociological research could support such an endeavour in the current crisis.

Keywords

acceleration, capitalism, pandemic, sociology of time, temporality

To win time appears to have become an omnipresent mantra these days. Political leaders, journalists and scientists insist that we will only be able to overcome the pandemic if we succeed in flattening growth curves, decelerating dynamics, reducing, closing down, hitting the brakes and being patient. By the end of April 2020, 156 of 179 countries globally had adopted some kind of stay-at-home policy (Hale et al., 2021). While in many parts

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of the world lockdowns were relaxed during the subsequent summer, new waves and new mutations of the virus are reaching ever more countries. Time and again, citizens worldwide are warned against prematurely rushing things and urged to slow down economic and social life.

Coping with Covid-19 thus requires a manner of dealing with time that is in many respects opposed to what we are used to (cf. Rosa, 2020). Growth, acceleration, efficiency: these are the virtues our capitalist system normally extols. Where time is money, things can never increase fast enough. Consequently, the coronavirus is not only a medical threat but also collides with the temporal logic inherent to capitalism.

This article comments on the pandemic situation by exploring the multiple ways in which the responses demanded by Covid-19 are at odds with the temporal order of capitalism. In the midst of crisis, the specific features, contradictions and weaknesses of the time regime governing modern societies become even more apparent – and make sociological scrutiny more necessary than ever. While this comment relates to insights from the sociology of time and emphasizes the relevance of this research field for understanding the current situation, it uses a particular work to illustrate these insights. Reflecting these special times and my own particular working conditions, my primary reference is a 1973 children's book: Michael Ende's *Momo*.[1]

Drawing on the striking story of the orphan girl Momo and the grey gentlemen who steal people's time, I recapture the main features that characterize capitalism as a temporal regime. From there I describe how the current coronavirus outbreak challenges both individual and collective temporalities under capitalism. Finally, I reflect on the possibility of establishing a more sustainable temporal order that Michael Ende's novel hints at and point to how sociological research could support such an endeavour.

From sociology of time to a children's book and back

> Life holds one great but quite commonplace mystery. Though shared by each of us and known to all, it seldom rates a second thought. That mystery, which most of us take for granted and never think twice about, is time. (Ende, 1984, p. 55)

At the beginning of the sixth chapter, Michael Ende beautifully summarizes the overall theme of his novel *Momo*. The book, written in the early 1970s, encourages readers – irrespective of their age – to reflect on time, its use and perception, as a crucial dimension of social life. In *Momo*, the famous German author of children's books (e.g. *The Neverending Story*) tells the story of how an army of mysterious grey gentlemen urges all adults to save time by meticulously measuring their time, avoiding everything that has no obvious use, working more and faster, and struggling in a rat race to 'get somewhere in life' (Ende, 1984, p. 79). But as the orphan girl Momo and her horrified playmates discover, the time 'saved' by the increasingly unhappy, tired grown-ups is really being stolen from them. In their attempt to save time, the adults irretrievably lose it. Alienated from its original bearer, time becomes lifeless and merely serves the purpose of nourishing the ever faster-growing troops of grey time thieves. By equipping these gentlemen with grey suits, briefcases and a taste for fast cars, competition, interest rates and growth curves, Michael Ende makes rather obvious what ideology they are committed to. Capitalism, the message is, deprives people of their lifetime.

Momo and her friends, however, do not passively accept this knowledge. The remainder of the book deals with their attempts to fight back and bring the adults to their senses. Over and over, they challenge the reign of the time thieves – and thus incur the attention and wrath of those powerful grey gentlemen.

In his novel, Michael Ende adopts a plethora of colourful metaphors, symbols and side-stories to make the complexity and wonder of time more accessible to his audience. By showing that capitalism is not merely a mode of production but implies a specific time regime, *Momo* echoes substantial findings of the sociology of time (Bergmann, 1992; Hassard, 1990; Zerubavel, 1985). Referring back to Émile Durkheim's (2001, p. 10ff.) claim that time is a social fact, this field of research starts from the premise that social relations are inherently organized and governed by time, but the perception of time – also referred to as temporality – is the result of social construction (Abbott, 2001; Adam, 2013; Sorokin & Merton, 1937). Sociologists of time have particularly been interested in the transition from more traditional temporal orders to modern, capitalist temporalities (e.g. Nowotny, 2018; Sewell, 2008). This research, which I build on in this article, has provided both theoretical and empirical insights into the capitalist time regime.

But if a substantial research field concerned with the temporal order of capitalism already exists, why would an academic article need to complement these insights by referring to an invented fiction, let alone a children's book? How is *Momo* helpful in understanding the pandemic as a challenge to the temporal order of capitalism?

References to fictitious literature are not only prominent in the sociology of literature (Beer, 2015; Longo, 2015) but also have a long history in classical sociology. To name just a few examples, Alfred Schütz (1976) drew on Cervantes' *Don Quixote* to depict the contingency of reality; Pierre Bourdieu (1993) used Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* to develop his theory on the ambivalence of fields; and Erving Goffman (1978) exemplified his framework on direct social interaction with references to Sansom's novel *A Contest of Ladies*. In all these studies, literature is not used as an empirical data source (like it legitimately is in another strand of research) but as a 'spark for theoretical rumination' (Beer, 2015, p. 410). Sociologists have used literature to illustrate and inspire sociological theory, to visualize and explore the limits and merits of abstract theoretical frameworks.

Fiction, sociologists of literature argue, is apt to serve as an analytical instrument for sociology, because it shares its major purpose (Longo, 2015, p. 2). Like sociology, literature sets out to describe and understand society, its problems and paradoxes. It constitutes, as Howard S. Becker (2007) puts it, an alternative mode of 'telling about society'. Sociologists can therefore learn from literature. Of course, fiction does not 'truthfully' represent reality; it is an imagined narrative only 'pretending' to be real (Searle, 1975). However, it is precisely the fabricated, fictional character of such imaginaries that makes them so interesting for sociologists. Literary works not only capture elements of the social world but also caricature them. They simplify, alienate and exaggerate, thus providing a 'thicker representation' (Longo, 2015, p. 105) of reality. Sociologists can therefore use literature as an alternative stock of knowledge to provoke new perspectives on the social world.

Children's books, like the one I consider here, may have even more of this 'exploratory function' (Longo, 2015, p. 8). What makes children's books different is first their implied dual audience of children and adults, and second their didactic character (O'Sullivan, 2005, p. 12ff.). Children's books are supposed to socialize their young readers and teach them

something about the social world. Claims about the nature of the social are therefore even more pronounced than in mainstream literature. Like in the story of Momo, who needs to find out about and deal with the grey gentlemen, a dominant theme in children's literature is of a young protagonist who needs to make sense of the world and find her place in it (McCallum & Stephens, 2011). Modern children's books, like Michael Ende's, often provide a critical, alienated assessment of the strange adult world and its peculiar institutions (Lurie, 1990; Singer, 2011). From there they depict a subversive trajectory in which the heroine discovers her own agency and challenges established orders (McCallum & Stephens, 2011): for example, we accompany Momo and her friends in their increasingly active efforts to overcome the grey gentlemen. In providing a fictional but extremely pointed perspective on the peculiarities of the social world, children's books can illustrate and inspire sociological thinking. Particularly, they may provide stimuli for researchers interested in how established social orders are disrupted or challenged.

While the reference to *Momo* in this article may thus be a reminiscence of the particular circumstances of the pandemic and my obligation to compensate for professional childcare, it serves to illustrate and inspire the adopted sociological perspective. First, the novel is used to visualize and recapture the main features of the capitalist time regime. Second, Michael Ende's description of how the grey gentlemen's intentions clash with the children's temporality guides my assessment of the pandemic as a collision of opposing time regimes. And third, the end of the novel allows reflection on whether the turmoil of the pandemic can serve as an opportunity to win back time.

The reign of the grey gentlemen: The temporal order of capitalism

Reiterating basic claims of the sociology of time, *Momo* shows that the economic system of capitalism implies a specific time regime which governs modern societies well beyond the 'economic' sphere (Jessop, 2007, p. 178ff.). Throughout his young protagonist's adventure, Michael Ende reflects on some of the main features social scientists consider characteristic of the temporal logic of capitalism:[2] measurement and commodification of time, temporal expansionism, acceleration, and the appropriation of the future.[3] In order to better understand the temporal order that is currently being disrupted by the pandemic, I recapture these four features but also indicate where the fictional oversimplification appears to miss a fifth crucial feature of the capitalist time regime: the unequal temporal autonomy of actors.

Measurement and commodification of time

When persuading men and women to become depositors of the 'Timesaving Bank', Michael Ende's men in grey begin by adjusting their victim's conception of time (Ende, 1984, p. 58):

> 'How long do you reckon you'll live, Mr Figaro?'
>
> 'Well,' stammered Mr Figaro, thoroughly disconcerted by now, 'I hope to live to seventy or eighty, God willing.'

> 'Very well,' pursued the man in grey. 'Let's call it seventy, to be on the safe side. Multiply three hundred and fifteen million three hundred and sixty thousand by seven and you get a grand total of two billion two hundred and seven million five hundred and twenty thousand seconds.'
>
> He chalked this figure up on the mirror in outsize numerals – 2,207,520,000 – and underlined it several times. 'That, Mr Figaro, is the extent of the capital at your disposal.'

Thus, the grey gentlemen urge people like the barber Mr Figaro to consider their lifetime as a quantifiable, abstract variable. Time to eat, sleep, contemplate nature, read a book or converse with friends is turned into a number of uniform seconds.

Abstraction, standardization and measurement of time have been a concern for many classical sociologists, from Émile Durkheim (2001, p. 11ff.) to Max Weber (1958, p. 47ff.) and from Robert K. Merton (Sorokin & Merton, 1937) to Norbert Elias (2007). In those perspectives, universal time, measured by clocks and calendars, is a prerequisite for modern life, as it allows the versatile rhythms of differentiated societies and rationalized organizations to synchronize. Scholars like Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 8ff.), Barbara Adam (2005, p. 23ff., 2016) or Edward P. Thompson (1967) have criticized this decontextualization and anonymization of time, as clock-time suppresses other, often more traditional, temporal logics and timescapes. From a capitalist perspective, the abstracted measurement of time is crucial, as it allows time to be equated with the most abstract medium of all: money (Esposito, 2011; Simmel, 1978, p. 506). The standardized assessment of time is an essential condition for time to become a commodity. Only when it is conceptually separated from its bearer and context can time be considered an entity to be priced, exchanged, sold and bought. Major building blocks of capitalism, such as wage labour or interest rates, rely on the fundamental idea that time can be treated as an abstract commodity. Capitalism, like the grey gentlemen, requires actors to consider time not as something inherent to them but as a scarce resource that can be externalized and therefore needs to be rationally economized. As Max Weber famously described in his treatise on the Protestant ethic (1958, p. 156), for capitalism, 'Waste of time is thus the first and in principle the deadliest of sins.'

Temporal expansion

Once transformed into a commodity, time is subjected to the encompassing capitalist logic of growth, accumulation and expansion (Sewell, 2008). 'It is a wearisome business, too, bleeding people of their time by the hour, minute and second', a man in grey explains to Momo (p. 89). 'We drain it off, we hoard it, we thirst for it. Human beings have no conception of the value of their time, but we do. We suck them dry, and we need more and more time every day, because there are more and more of us. More and more and more.' Michael Ende employs the metaphor of the grey gentlemen, their mysterious multiplication as they appear first in the city centre and then conquer the periphery, to illustrate how capitalism constantly expands its reach to additional reservoirs of human time. Karl Marx's (1981, p. 341) depiction of capital as a force that 'vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks' may have served as an influential template for those grey gentlemen. In his reflections on the working day, Marx emphasizes how capitalist employers over centuries and against the

interests of the working class have managed to extract ever more working time for the offered wage. Though the settings of this struggle have surely changed since Marx, it is just as relevant today: in our digital, global and flexible working environments, the limits of the working day are constantly blurred (Snyder, 2016); alterations to retirement age or the number of school years further extend the available biographical working time (Han & Moen, 1999; Lynch, 2012).

Moreover, capitalism has gained access to additional reservoirs of time by extending its logic to ever wider aspects of life. Previously unpaid private time is turned into paid public time (Nowotny, 2018, p. 113): free leisure time has been transformed into time for consumption and commercial forms of relaxation; and unremunerated efforts, like care work and household chores, into (low-)paid jobs (Bakker, 2007). The latter has enabled women particularly to 'liberate' themselves from unpaid tasks, become integrated in the workforce, and thus sell their time on the market. As a result of these complementary developments, ever greater shares of human lifetime are subjected to the capitalist regime and its temporal order. The grey gentlemen appear omnipresent.

Acceleration

The temporal logic inherent to capitalism is characterized by not only an expansion but also an intensification of time. As Momo realizes in astonishment, with the rise of the grey gentlemen 'it had ceased to matter that people should enjoy their work and take pride in it; on the contrary, enjoyment merely slowed them down. All that mattered was to get through as much work as possible in the shortest possible time' (p. 67). Acceleration, the idea of ever more in less time, has long been regarded as a phenomenon of modernity (Koselleck, 2004; Rosa, 2013).[4] Social scientists have often attributed it to the capitalist logics of profit maximization and competition. Capitalism pushes actors to outpace their peers, destroy the old, and search for new opportunities; to 'move fast and break things', as Mark Zuckerberg famously claimed. From the spinning jenny to new waves of digitalized algorithmization, technological advances have thus been used to increase the pace of production, commercialization and consumption (Wajcman, 2015; Wajcman & Dodd, 2016) and expedite monetary accumulation. Though of course even in capitalist societies not everything can be fast, speed becomes an ultimate objective, both a requirement for many and a privilege for some (Sharma, 2014).

For those who cannot live up to this objective, get out of sync or simply waste too much of their precious time, a whole industry of 'temporal work' has emerged. Like Michael Ende's grey masters, it advises, incentivizes and urges actors to 'save time', move faster, and eliminate anything superfluous.

Appropriation of the future

One may argue that it is precisely this constant flow of optimization, of striving to achieve more in the future, that enables progress and adaption and thus renders capitalism superior to other economic systems. It is indeed hard to imagine an economic regime that is more oriented towards the future than capitalism (Beckert, 2013, 2016; Urry, 2016; Wenzel et al., 2020).[5] Capitalism is driven by actors' unwavering faith in the open future. Any kind of entrepreneurship or investment depends on the propensity

to imagine better days ahead. Even Momo's friends are motivated to save their time by the vague hope to 'get somewhere in life' (p. 79) or one day be 'free to live the "right" kind of life' (p. 66). However, the ideal of entrepreneurial individuals attempting to achieve a better world, which Adam Smith or Joseph Schumpeter might have had in mind, does not always reflect today's capitalist reality. In line with its characteristic inconsistencies (Hartmann & Honneth, 2006), capitalism's obsession with the future is highly contradictory. While capitalism relies on change towards an open future and is motivated by aspirations for what lies ahead, it also appears to erode actors' capacity to imagine that future as an undetermined sphere of possibilities.[6] On the one side, sociologists of time have described how acceleration and the implied orientation to the short term constantly reduce future horizons until they collapse into what Helga Nowotny has described as 'extended present' (Nowotny, 2018, p. 45ff.), or what John Urry has conceptualized as 'instantaneous time' (Urry, 2009, p. 191). With excessive speed, the future becomes inconceivable as a sphere distinct from the present and, as Zygmunt Bauman puts it, 'speaking of directions, projects and fulfilments makes no sense' (Bauman, 1992, p. 168). On the other side, partly contradicting, partly complementing this argument of the dissolution of the future, scholars have propounded that capitalist practices are (not least as a reaction to the increasing pace) constantly attempting to impose regularity and predictability on the future (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 50). The future is 'colonized' (Adam, 2004, p. 136ff.; 2006, p. 125), appropriated, by being scheduled, forecasted, calculated and simulated. It becomes a regular pattern of 'stillness in motion' (Sewell, 2008, p. 526), of paralysis despite acceleration (Rosa, 2003). Michael Ende compares people's futures, once the grey gentlemen have got hold of them, to the tediousness of new housing developments: 'They ran dead straight for as far as the eye could see. Everything in them was carefully planned and programmed, down to the last move and the last moment of time' (Ende, 1984, p. 68). Instead of serving as an open horizon for dreams, visions, enthusiasm, or creativity (Mische, 2014), the future under capitalism all too often resembles a to-do list that needs to be ticked off.

Unequal temporal autonomy

While *Momo* vividly depicts these four major features of the capitalist time regime –measurement and commodification of time, temporal expansionism, acceleration, and the appropriation of the future – it ignores a fifth characteristic that qualifies the other four and is therefore just as crucial for understanding the temporal order of capitalism: the *unequal temporal autonomy of actors*.

In fact, Michael Ende's novel does not ignore inequality as such. Instead, it carefully illustrates the relative deprivation of Momo and her friends – from the patches on their clothes to their cramped living conditions – and contrasts it with descriptions of rich people who inhabit luxury estates and boss around their personnel. Ende depicts a society shaped by unequal wealth distribution and quite clearly puts the sympathies of the omniscient narrator with the poor. He glorifies their modest lives and praises the passion and solidarity they demonstrate. However, faced with the grey gentlemen, all adults appear equally afflicted. Commodification of time, expansionism, acceleration, and the appropriation of the future are presented as universal imperatives that affect rich and poor alike.

While these features arguably present general tendencies of the capitalist time regime, the oversimplified perspective of the children's book echoes accounts of early speed theory and denies a crucial insight of more recent research in the sociology of time (Sharma, 2014, p. 7): that capitalist temporalities are not universal but highly differentiated. The time regime is not equally rigid for all actors but provides some with more temporal autonomy than others, i.e. granting them more or less control over their time (Bertoncelo, 2015; Goodin et al., 2008, p. 30; Rose, 2015).

Michael Ende explains that the grey gentlemen do not wrest time from the people by force but 'because people give them the opportunity to do so' (Ende, 1984, p. 137). In fact, the capitalist time regime (at least in the global North) is not enforced by physical force but rather by what Elias (2007) describes as 'self-restraint', i.e. voluntarily internalizing the logic of saving and rationalizing time. Still, the extent to which people have to obey these imperatives or can live up to them when desired depends heavily on their social position and power resources – which in a capitalist society are profoundly shaped by the monetary capital they possess. Money makes it possible to speed up processes, buy back 'free' time or keep the future open. With the help of money, one may force others to wait or adapt their rhythms. Drawing on the concept of 'power-chronography', Sarah Sharma (2014) has for example shown how the capacity of the privileged to speed up or slow down at will is enabled by less privileged actor groups who are granted less temporal autonomy. Making others hurry or forcing them to wait represent two opposing but similarly effective modes of domination (Serafin, 2019). Similarly, Lisa Adkins (2018) illustrates how, rather than rendering their futures predictable, the overall capitalist logic of speculation exposes those who are indebted (and even more so those who are under- or unemployed [p. 131ff.]) to precarious, contingent futures in which they must constantly adapt and reorder time. In consequence, inequality, both a result of and prerequisite for capitalism, also becomes apparent as unequal temporal autonomy. The grey gentlemen may indeed torment all adults – but some more vigorously than others.

The coronavirus pandemic and the collision of opposing temporal logics

Arguably, there are still spheres and situations that elude the temporal logic inherent to capitalism. In deep conversation with friends, we tend to forget about time. Faced with sorrow and grief, time seems to stand still. And, as anyone who has ever tried to hurry them when they are engrossed in play will know, *children* persistently resist the capitalist time regime. With uncomprehending looks, children ignore external timetables or pleas for urgency. Growth, acceleration and efficiency are (still) unknown to them.

The collision of two antagonistic temporal logics – of childhood and capitalism – is indeed a major theme of Michael Ende's novel *Momo*. It carefully depicts how the children's ways are at odds with the grey gentlemen's time regime. We learn about Momo's powerful capacity to wait calmly and 'listen properly' (p. 17ff.). Time and again, the author admiringly describes how the young protagonists take their time for games and reverie or forget about time altogether. Throughout the novel, he celebrates the children's unpredictable creativity and their refusal to rationally use or schedule time. 'Children',

Ende has one of his grey gentlemen complain, 'present a greater threat to our work than anyone or anything else' (Ende, 1984, p. 106ff.).

The collision of childhood and capitalism as two opposing temporal logics becomes even more apparent when Momo and her friends become aware of the grey gentlemen and agree to fight the 'infectious epidemic' (p. 88) of time-saving. They try to persuade the grown-ups to slow down, reduce their working time and break out of their pre-scheduled existences. However, the children's attempts to take on the grey gentlemen only bear fruit once Professor Hora, who personifies Death, joins forces with them.

The pandemic we are currently experiencing certainly joined forces with death from the outset. But in a similar vein to Momo and her friends, it also appears resilient to the capitalist time regime. Emanating from the kinds of conflicts and frictions Michael Ende describes in his novel, the economic and social turmoil of the pandemic can be understood as a collision of opposing temporal logics. Unknowing like a child but with supreme vigour, Covid-19 collides with the commodification of time inherent to capitalism, its relentless temporal expansionism, inclination for acceleration and propensity to appropriate the future – while dramatically exposing the unequal temporal autonomy characteristic of capitalism. This collision shakes the current socioeconomic order to its core and reveals some of the major weaknesses, frictions and contradictions inherent to our personal and collective temporalities.

In some respects, the outbreak challenges the dubious illusion of a predictable future and forcefully *re-establishes the radical uncertainty* about what is to come. Wage earners, entrepreneurs and economic policy makers have become unable to plan for the next months, weeks or sometimes even days. The global scale of the crisis, affecting almost every national economy, industry, business or private household on the planet (though to different extents, of course) renders the attempt to rationally predict the future illusionary. The instruments our capitalist society usually employs to cope with – or even take advantage of – the indeterminacy of the future, such as forecasts, insurance, risk analyses or risk scenarios (Evans, 2002; Folkers, 2017; Lobo-Guerrero, 2014), are overwhelmed by levels of uncertainty unprecedented since the Second World War. Calculating the future, like the men in grey postulate, is rendered impossible. The appropriated future, the regular, predictable pattern that we are used to, has become foreign territory again, a sphere that is hardly navigable.

In Ende's story, Momo copes with unexpected circumstances and uncertainty by relying on her exceptional capacity to wait things out. Time and again, she calmly sits down and waits for the turmoil to end and problems to unravel. Momo stoically but confidently waits until she or the people around her can see clearly again. Indeed, while in normal, accelerated times, *having to wait* is often used as a mode of domination (Auyero, 2010), *being able to wait* appears a most useful skill in times of radically uncertain futures.

In a capitalist society, however, patience is not merely a personal trait. It first and foremost requires monetary resources. An uncertain future may always be inconvenient, but it is harder to bear without appropriate capital. And it is worst for those who are still tied to the 'planified' futures capitalism exacts: those who have to pay rent, depend on fragile career planning, or comply with mortgage schedules, report cycles, or business plans. Many individuals, families and companies simply cannot afford to patiently wait out the pandemic. The radical uncertainty of the future collides with the demands of capitalism – but it particularly affects those with the least temporal autonomy.

In other respects, the pandemic has, at least partly, impaired the temporal commodification, expansionism and acceleration inherent to the capitalist time regime. Crucially, the political efforts to constrain the virus have enforced a massive *redistribution of time budgets* that drains time off the capitalist purposes of production and consumption. The repeated lockdowns made apparent to what extent modern lifetimes are focused on paid work and consumption. If both are dramatically reduced or even disappear, an enormous temporal vacuum remains. In hiking, baking, sewing, gardening, brewing or DIY, many have rediscovered decommodified ways of spending their time during the pandemic and thus reduced the reach of the grey gentlemen.

In the course of her adventure, Momo befriends the tortoise Cassiopeia, who compels anyone accompanying her to slow down and just take one step at a time (p. 110ff.). Similarly, the pandemic has widely been perceived as a forced deceleration (Rosa, 2020). The dramatic reduction of air traffic (International Air Transport Association [IATA], 2021) or the ongoing workplace closures, cancellation of public events, and stay-at-home restrictions (Hale et al., 2021) illustrate this as much as the omnipresent imperative for patience. However, reducing the pace of social action collides with the capitalist virtue of acceleration. Indeed, many people have found it hard to cope with, rearrange and refill the sudden abundance of 'spare' time, experiencing the imposed abundance of time and the reduction of speed as a depletion and devaluation of their lives. Others, meanwhile, have perceived this deceleration as enriching. In Michael Ende's novel, Cassiopeia's slowness seems to mysteriously enable her to always outpace the grey gentlemen: 'Although the tortoise was plodding along more slowly than ever, Momo again found herself marvelling at their rate of progress' (p. 118). Similarly, some have experienced the lockdowns and the implied deceleration and decommodification of their time as unexpected freedom. Relieved from the daily commute, lunch appointments and non-essential shopping, they finally discovered the delight of having enough time and being truly productive.

From a sociology of time perspective, it is important to understand that the deceleration trend is not a universal experience but instead relies on a redistribution of time budgets. It is compensated by simultaneous acceleration for other actors and in other domains. Storekeepers and delivery services, farmhands, cleaners, police officers and food retailers have suffered dramatically increased workloads since the outbreak. These domains now euphemistically labelled 'essential work' have, however, long been a bonanza for the grey gentlemen of capitalism. They are characterized not only by low wages but also by extensive efforts to meticulously calculate, measure, monitor and optimize workers' time. The extra time expenditure of Covid-19 is thus met by domains that have long been deprived of any temporal buffer.

This holds, with even more devastating effects, for the health care sector. By subjecting hospitals, doctors' surgeries, and nursing homes to the accelerating capitalist logics of competition and growth, skilled personnel and human time have become scarce (Altomonte, 2016; Bode, 2015). These are precisely the resources that are now desperately lacking. It takes time to adapt ventilators to patients, monitor the course of disease, listen or take away fears, trace infection trajectories or comfort the bereaved. On whom the medical staff can still spend their precious time has literally become a matter of life and death.

Along the same lines, the time regimes of families have been afflicted by the pandemic and required responses. Working parents (and even more so mothers [cf. Dermott, 2005]) depend on schools, kindergartens, domestic help, nursery staff and day-care centres to provide them with the time necessary to meet their work commitments. Usually, a substantial part of necessary care work is outsourced to enable parents to devote themselves to earning a living and advancing their careers (Fraser, 2016). With the outbreak of the coronavirus, this infrastructure for 'buying back time' has mostly broken down. According to UNICEF (2021), 188 countries worldwide have imposed school and kindergarten closures in response to the pandemic. Families are left to somehow juggle with work appointments and childcare – and often they fail. The current crisis therefore not only reveals how unequally time-intensive care work is still distributed between the genders in most families, it also shows to what extent capitalist expansionism has marginalized other areas of life and deprived them of the time available. Most families were already aware of how tightly calculated their time budgets are. Now, in the midst of the crisis, those budgets have been torn to pieces.

In Michael Ende's story, Momo appears immune to the grey gentlemen and their regime. However, when she sets out to challenge them, the time thieves vow to 'neutralize her by every available means' (p. 110). They at least temporarily succeed, by tightening the grip on Momo's grown-up friends, exploiting them even more relentlessly and enforcing their regime more rigidly than ever. Capitalism responds in a similar vein to its collision with Covid. While the pandemic indeed challenges the temporal order of capitalism and relieves some actors of its most rigid imperatives, the capitalist time regime comes down even more relentlessly on those actors who do not have the resources to disentangle themselves and thus cannot escape the grey gentlemen. The collision of the opposing temporal logics reveals once more the inequality that shapes the capitalist time regime.

Winning back time: Towards a more sustainable temporal order

Is it possible for societies to escape the capitalist time regime of the grey gentlemen and win back time? In the subtitle of the German original, Ende explicitly classifies his story as a 'fairy-tale novel'. Since all fairy tales (and most children's books) end well, Momo in the end manages to defeat the grey gentlemen. Together with Professor Hora, who represents Death, Momo forces the world to stand completely still for an hour and thus causes the time regime of the grey gentlemen to collapse. Without access to the people's lifetime, their reign comes to an end. When time finally starts running again, Momo's friends are freed from the time thieves and can henceforth joyfully dispose of their time as they see fit.

Like Momo and Professor Hora, the coronavirus and the peril of further deaths have forced our societies – at large – to slow down or even stand still. And like the regime of the grey gentlemen, our economic order is severely tested by this abrupt halt. The OECD (2020) estimates that global GDP plummeted by 13% in the first half of 2020 and is only recovering slowly (OECD, 2021).[7] As new waves and new variants of the virus require further lockdowns in many countries, capitalism is running out of supplies, out of labour, and out of income. In reality, however, an economic system beginning to falter is less

desirable than Ende's fairy tale depicts. In reality, we are facing bankruptcies, falling productivity, rising sovereign debt and tough distribution conflicts. Unemployment is increasing massively – the equivalent of 225 million full-time jobs were lost in 2020, the International Labour Organization (2021) states – disproportionately impacting on women and young people. UNICEF (2021) fears that an additional 142 million children will face poverty due to economic turmoil caused by Covid-19. Moreover, it is by no means self-evident that these economic upheavals will lead to a softening or taming of capitalism, let alone its end. In the attempt to 'catch up', the opposite seems more likely: even more austerity, more cuts in social spending and thus a further increase in inequality. This crisis may ultimately result in an even more merciless orientation towards growth, acceleration and efficiency.

Therefore, if societies want to win back time in the long run, it is naive to hope for the abrupt self-destruction of capitalism. Rather, the crisis can serve as an impetus to reflect on the capitalist time regime with all its contradictions and weaknesses. Societies need to be aware of its premises in order to identify those situations, relationships and practices that deserve better protection from it.

Inspired by Michael Ende's novel *Momo*, I have argued in this essay that the pandemic can be considered as a collision of opposing temporal logics. Covid and the political attempts to contain it collide with the commodification of time inherent to capitalism, its relentless temporal expansionism, inclination for acceleration and propensity to appropriate the future; at the same time, these measures dramatically expose the unequal temporal autonomy that is characteristic of capitalism. Indeed, like a magnifying glass, the collision of the pandemic offers sociologists an extraordinary opportunity to further explore the role of time and temporality for modern lives under capitalism. Drawing on insights from the sociology of time, such research could inform and facilitate the transition to a more sustainable temporal order. I see (at least) two important sets of questions that should be addressed.

First, it is important, as one of Momo's friends puts it, to 'recognize' the grey gentlemen and their activities, because 'knowing their secret makes a person invulnerable' (p. 96). Therefore, social scientists need to keep assessing the social, political and economic consequences of the capitalist time regime and its complex and often ambivalent rhythms and speeds. Particularly, we need to investigate those spheres where it proves most harmful. The pandemic highlights several domains, such as health, education or care work, that appear particularly vulnerable and deserve further scholarly attention. How is time poverty administered and institutionalized there? By tracing the disruptions due to Covid-19, researchers can shed light on how these domains usually manage to make ends meet despite scarce time budgets. Equally, it is important to assess what hidden costs result from obeying capitalist temporalities. For instance, scholars could explore where the capacity to adapt to the unforeseen is impaired (Ergen, 2018); or how democratic processes are affected by both the temporal imperatives of capitalism and the time economy of the pandemic (Rosa, 2003).

When taking up the fight against the grey gentlemen, Momo and her friends are, however, forced to realize that recognizing the time thieves is not enough; one also needs to know how to fight them. Second, therefore, research should look out for remedies that can contain and mitigate the capitalist time regime. We need to better understand what

situations, practices and relationships remain resilient; and what institutions enable domains and actors to obey divergent temporal logics and shield them from the capitalist time regime. Again, the Covid crisis offers an interesting occasion to study such phenomena. The enforced experience of lockdown and decommodification of time may have incentivized new ways of sharing care duties or balancing paid work and leisure time. Similarly, the increased digitalization of work, further flexibilization of working hours and home office arrangements still lack established temporal norms and practices – and therefore give actors some creative leeway. Scholars should investigate whether and how actors have explored new ways of governing their time during the pandemic and to what extent the disruptions have enabled them to partially evade the capitalist time regime (Sorensen & Wiksell, 2019). Another potentially crucial element for establishing a more sustainable temporal order is the role of governments. Emblematic of left-wing state scepticism in the 1970s, Ende's novel does not even mention the government. However, the temporal autonomy of actors, the way they can use and perceive their time, is surely dependent on legal frameworks and the setup of welfare states (Rice et al., 2006). With the pandemic, governments across the world have readapted institutions that affect the temporal order of societies. With interim loans, stopgap allowances and other interventions, states have tried to 'bridge' the time up to a more secure future, to enable actors to wait and re-establish a minimum of predictability. New legal frameworks for working from home were introduced, parental leave extended or flexibilized, welfare and wage systems reformed. These versatile responses to the pandemic and scrutiny of their successes and failures can serve as instructive cases to understand how governments can shape collective temporalities. Comparative research can cautiously indicate promising pathways for mitigating and reducing the demands of the capitalist time regime to more manageable levels and empowering a culture of temporal diversity (Geißler, 2002).

At some point in Momo's story, she asks Professor Hora to explain to her what a crisis is. He characterizes crises as unique moments that 'bring about something that could not have happened before and will never happen again. Few people know how to take advantage of these critical moments, unfortunately, and they often pass unnoticed. When someone does recognize them, however, great things happen in the world' (Ende, 1984, p. 132). The current crisis will most probably neither revolutionize the socioeconomic order of modern societies nor miraculously resolve all of its frictions. But in line with Professor Hora's cautiously optimistic assessment, if this crisis is met with both sociological exploration and societal reflection, it might at least provide an opportunity to slightly loosen the grip the men in grey have on our individual and collective lifetimes.

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Notes

1. My engagement with this children's book is due to the increased amount of time I was allowed to, but also had to, spend with my children during the pandemic. I am grateful to my daughter for her eagerness to read and discuss Momo's story with me.
2. Indeed, capitalism exists in multiple varieties and shades (Hall & Soskice, 2001). Respective time regimes and their precise institutionalization therefore differ. Yet the temporalities in any economic or social order that is driven by wage labour, competition and the maximization of profit is shaped by these five features at least to some extent.
3. This distinction is not identical but closely related to Barbara Adam's four Cs of industrial time (2004, p. 123ff.): Commodification, Compression, Colonization and Control.
4. For a more nuanced, multidimensional assessment of acceleration see Southerton and Tomlinson (2005).
5. For an overview of how sociology has approached the future as social fact over the last decades see also Beckert and Suckert (2021).
6. Much of the sociology of time literature discusses how modern, capitalist modes of dealing with time increasingly take hold of the future by anticipation and therefore have detrimental consequences for perceiving it as an open realm of possibilities. Lisa Adkins' work on speculative futures in the age of securitized debt interestingly opposes such accounts (Adkins, 2017, particularly 2018, p. 23ff.). She argues that speculation should be considered a form of social organization that, rather than 'closing down' the present or future, enforces an orientation towards the possible rather than the probable.
7. Tellingly, the OECD outlook for 2021 bears the subtitle 'The need for speed'.

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