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## **DRAFTING THE 'TIME SPACE'.**

### **Attitudes towards time among prep school students.**

*Abstract:* This article wishes to investigate the 'time space', defined with Bourdieu as a set of distinct and coexisting attitudes toward time related to individuals' social positions. Based on an ethnographic study of French prep schools (*classes préparatoires aux Grandes écoles*), it sheds light on the specific temporal culture of these schools (the routinization of urgency and 'temporal panic') but shows the existence of different attitudes toward time among students. These variations can then be explained by the volume of capital possessed by students, thus differentiating those who can 'master time' and those who 'suffer' it. But the article wishes also to unveil 'timestyles' which, like lifestyles, would be connected to the compositions of students' capital (economic versus cultural) and not only to its volume.

**KEYWORDS :** habitus ; time ; elite education ; social space.

## **DRAFTING THE 'TIME SPACE'.**

### **Attitudes towards time among prep school students.**

#### **1. Introduction : Temporal cultures and the time space**

Time, which is a well-established topic for natural and hard sciences, may seem to have been only recently conquered as an object by social sciences despite early durkheimian studies on time as a social category and representation (Durkheim, 1994 [1912]) (Hubert, Mauss, 1905). Elias's groundbreaking work (1984) stated that time is not a natural given but a social symbol and the product of a learning process. Historians also showed the connections between the transformation of uses, measures and perception of time and the birth of industrial capitalism (Thompson, 2004). Even more recently, studies have seen in the acceleration of time an original feature of late-modern societies (Rosa, 2013). Written in 1991, Adam's assessment remains relevant: 'Time has occupied sociologists ever since sociology became developed as a separate discipline (...) Despite this diversity of opinions, however, there is agreement (...) on three interrelated points: that time has neither been adequately understood nor satisfactorily dealt with in social theory; that time is a key element of social life and must therefore be equally central to social theory; and that all time is social time' (p. 13-14).

All these studies indeed oppose a given, natural and universal time to a historical or cultural measure or perception, which amounts therefore to a specific social construction of time. In doing so they can however be said to recreate, at another level, a new form of 'universalism'. Temporal culture – singular – is seen as a trait of a given society and period, a feature shared by all its members who are supposed to experience time in the same way.

But should we be content with such a homogeneous view of society? It could be argued that sociology's traditional task of 'denaturalization' and de-universalisation should indeed not stop halfway at enlightening 'the' temporal

culture of a given society. To break with naturalized views of time as a given, sociologists must show the variation of temporal cultures – plural – within a given society, and explain their distribution and their effects.

Bourdieu offered such a conception of a ‘social space of attitudes toward time’ [*espace social des rapports au temps*] as early as the 1960s in his work on Kabylie. He enlightened the ‘system of dispositions towards time’ displayed by Algerians peasants, and analysed their temporal ethos as built in material conditions of existence dominated by insecurity and hazard. One of the specificities of this ethos lies in the relation to the future, which is not ‘a field of potentialities that calculation can explore and master’ (Bourdieu, 2000 [1972]: 377-385) (Bourdieu, 1963) (Bourdieu, 1977). Later on, in *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984 [1979]: 176), the presentism of the working classes (also called ‘the hedonism (...) of the immediate present’ or ‘the being-in-the-present’) is defined as ‘the only philosophy conceivable to those who ‘have no future’ and, in any case, little to expect from the future’. Finally, in the last chapter of *Pascalian meditations* (Bourdieu, 2000 [1997]: 221-223), the attitude toward time of members of the Algerian subproletarians or of the working-class youth is again similarly described as one of ‘men without future’, suffering from a broken ‘link between the present and the future’, since ‘the aptitude to adjust behavior in relation to the future is closely dependent on the effective chances of controlling the future that are inscribed in the present conditions’.

This particular line of enquiry has scarcely been pursued. When it has been, studies have largely concentrated on the relation to the future – or more rarely the past – as the main feature of attitudes toward time on the one hand, and on working classes on the other hand, both in the wake of Bourdieu<sup>1</sup>. Atkinson’s

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<sup>1</sup> Studies conducted in the United States during the 50’s and 60’s on the influence of social class on time orientation (such as Coser et Coser, 1963 ; LeShan, 1952 ; Schneider, Kysgaard, 1953...) also concentrated on class-based ways to envision the future (Lallement, 2008 : 11, 19).

study (2013) on perceptions of the future across class structure brings to light three sets of temporal dispositions which correspond with resources possessed: the 'future-proofed' orientation of those in possession of ample stocks of capital, the 'precarious future' of those possessing little in the way of valued capital, and thirdly the future as reasonably controllable of an in-between category. Miles, Savage and Bühlmann (2011) compare the accounts of their life history told by upwardly mobile and immobile (or downwardly mobile) men, revealing different attitudes toward time and more specifically distinct perceptions and presentations of the past that can be referred to their resources and trajectories.

Studies in France have focused more specifically on the potential contradiction between working-class attitudes towards time and school requirements (Verret, 1975). Beaud (1997) described the 'elastic time' of working-class youth, which at times stretches out ('hanging out in the hood') and at times suddenly accelerates. There's a huge discrepancy between this 'way of inhabiting time' and ascetic school-administrated time, particularly for the few working-class pupils who make it to University. These 'new' university students are left with a feeling of being 'overbooked, overwhelmed, always late' and cannot manage to keep up with university work and readings requirements: the 'elastic time' acts also as a retracting force back to the neighborhood and its temporal culture. Millet and Thin (2005a, 2005b) also studied a specific relation to the future among working-class families: primary class socialization engenders an arrhythmic sense of temporality, with no strategic view of the future, which clashes with 'the temporal demands of school activity'.

Middle- and upper-class attitudes towards time have generally been the object of even less attention. In *Pascalian meditations* again, Bourdieu (2000 [1997]: 228) alludes briefly to the relation between time and power from the point of view of the 'all-powerful' ('he who does not wait but who makes others wait') and mention 'the exercise of power over other people's time on the side of the powerful (adjourning, deferring, delaying, raising false hopes or, conversely,

rushing, taking by surprise) – but without detailing what constitutes the attitude toward time of the dominants the way he does for the Algerian peasants. One of the few empirically-based studies is that of Lareau (2002), which gives access to the way children of ‘middle-class families’ are taught to practice and enjoy a full schedule of various activities, and to ‘get bored’ at the slightest decrease of the occupation rhythm.

All these studies concur to show that the way time is experienced and conceived can be located within a ‘time space’, which I would define, drawing on Bourdieu (1979), as a set of distinct and coexisting attitudes toward time (and of practical uses of time) related to individuals’ endowments in different kinds of capital. As the ‘food space’ (*espace des consommations alimentaires*) in Bourdieu’s *Distinction* (1979: 182), the time space (*espace des rapports au temps*) would be homologous to the social space of social classes and structured around two main dimensions. First, the overall volume of capital: those who are best provided with both economic and cultural capital would have different attitudes towards time (practices, uses, and representations of it) than those who are most deprived in both respects. Second, the composition of capital (mainly cultural or mainly economic, for example) would also organize such a time space and account for secondary variations within dominant or dominated classes. My approach of time and attitudes towards time, inspired by Bourdieu’s conception of the social space, revolves therefore around the following principles: (1) Time can (or even should) be analysed empirically by looking at individual attitudes towards time and the social logic of their variations; (2) Positions in the social space of social classes, both in terms of volume and of composition of capital, are relevant to analyse attitudes towards time; (3) Attitudes towards time are therefore part and parcel of a class habitus the socio-genesis of which encompasses a specific temporal socialization that explains the different attitudes towards time learned by individual through class socialization.

This article aims at drafting, if not charting, the time space within which these different attitudes are situated. First, I will analyse and detail what is an 'attitude toward time', often solely equated, in the works quoted above, to a way to envision the future. I will add to such a definition elements like perceptions of the passing of time, sensations of panic or boredom, principles of time management and feelings regarding their potential efficiency, or practical feelings of slowness or rapidity in action.

Second, I wish to raise the question of the effect of not only the volume of capital but of its composition. So far, sociological studies of attitudes toward time within social space have been limited to the study of the effect of the volume of capital, or lack thereof. I will try and show that the kind of capital possessed – economic versus cultural capital – may explain some of the variations in attitudes toward time.

To refer to the variations of these mix of practices and representations of time, I have in this article kept the expression used to translate Bourdieu's 'rapports au temps', i.e. 'attitudes towards time'. To convey in a more explicit manner the practical dimensions of such diverse attitudes toward time, they could also, paraphrasing Boltanski (1971), be coined 'social uses of time', embedded in different class-based 'temporal cultures' which produce 'temporal habituses' or 'temporal dispositions' – the latter being an original bourdieusian phrasing. More than the traditional 'attitudes toward time', such an expression ('social uses of time') would convey the deep incorporation and the practical manifestations of temporal dispositions. It would also signal more clearly their variations and their social genesis, which is the very question I want to raise in this article, since social uses of time remain a largely overlooked dimension of the habitus or of class dispositions. But it would risk being confused with the sociology of timetables and the statistical approach of 'time use', which is a rather different object of sociological investigation. For this reason, I decided to stick with the original expression of 'attitudes towards time'.

## 2. Methods and setting: a spatial ethnography of time

This article is based on a two-year ethnographic study of the French elite education system of scientific and business prep schools ('classes préparatoires'). Prep schools and Grandes ecoles in France are institutions of elite higher education that are institutionally distinct from Universities<sup>2</sup>. Prep schools prepare post-baccalaureate students (roughly between 18 and 20 years old, and around 5% of their age group) to take the nationwide competitive exams allowing access to Grandes ecoles. They are located in the Lycées (secondary education institutions for students between 15 and 18). Grandes ecoles mainly fall into two categories, Engineering schools and Business schools, and there are consequently two main kinds of prep schools to prepare for each type of Grandes ecoles: 'scientific' prep schools (with a large focus on sciences) prepare students for the examinations of engineering schools, 'business' prep schools (with a focus on mathematics, history, economics, philosophy, literature and general knowledge) prepare for business schools. Prep schools are scholarly selective and students from Lycée who are allowed to attend them are chosen after a minute screening process of their academic level and their attitudes towards school (Darmon, 2012). But prep schools are also very socially selective, with more than half of the student body originating from the upper-classes (one-sixth of the active population), and only 2 to 5 % of working-class children.

Studying 'time' in prep schools is therefore relevant for at least two reasons. First, it enables us to focus on students from upper and middle classes and on differences within the upper-classes, which is all the more useful that we have

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<sup>2</sup> I have chosen to keep the French term of 'Grandes ecoles', as is often done in English, but to switch from the usual 'preparatory classes' to 'prep schools' to translate 'classes préparatoires'.



seen that previous studies on attitudes towards time were focused on working classes. Second, prep school are well-known for their heavy workload and it is a place where time is indeed of the essence, the problems it poses to the study participants being highly visible for the ethnographer and of real importance to them.

For two years, I sat in classes, I observed oral or written exams, I attended meetings aimed at discussing the evaluations of each and every student, and I hanged out whenever I could with students during formal or informal activities within the institution. Simultaneously, I conducted repeated in-depth interviews with 40 students, at various stages of their two years in the institution, along with interviews with teachers and officials (94 interviews), half of which I transcribed (the other half was transcribed by sociology students), and all of which I analysed myself (I've also translated the excerpts used in this article). The students I followed came mostly from upper class and upper-middle class families, in line with the general recruitment of prep schools (20 from upper-classes, 16 from middle-classes, 4 from working-classes).

A book based on this research has been published in 2013, but I want to focus in this paper on one specific set of results, pertaining to attitudes towards time and the way they can be located within social space. Such a goal calls for preliminary remarks on the possibility to approach social space through ethnographic and qualitative methods. Although quantitative methods have been used as ideal and self-evident methods to chart social space, there are many things to be said in favor of qualitative methods in this regard. Qualitative methods bring specific assets to the study of time space.

First and foremost, qualitative methods enable sociologists to analyse both extensively and precisely the subjects' social position and not only their occupations, social origins, diplomas or income, as in a quantitative survey. It gives access not only to variables but also to a complete social trajectory, the spaces through which it developed, the attitudes of the subjects towards their own trajectory, all of which give a more nuanced sense of their position. For

example, Mathieu, a 19 year-old student of scientific prep school, is not only, like many others in his class, the son of an engineer himself with a diploma from a *grande école* and a high income. He is the son of an engineer and a nurse, both from working-class backgrounds, with a kid brother who is slacking off at school (and who will probably not capitalize his parents' cultural capital). Second, qualitative materials give access to a whole set of practices and attitudes, not only those specifically under study, but also loosely or inconspicuously connected practices and attitudes that might have been overlooked. It provides therefore better understanding of their unity (and of their potential habitual source) than discontinuous answers to a questionnaire. If we take once again the example of Mathieu: he feels he 'doesn't fit' in prep classes, he misses his friends from 'the neighborhood' when he was in Lycée and tries to keep as much contact with them as he can, he regularly says during interviews that he is 'impressed' by such and such student, that things are more difficult for him, that he feels clumsy, out of place, all the while working hard and being quite successful scholarly (such attitude is therefore not the effect of school difficulties).

This kind of knowledge about Mathieu's trajectory and habitus is very useful to establish his social position with a certainty and consistency than one could not draw from a single and even very large set of variables. Objective criteria like Mathieu's mother's occupation and the working-class background of both his parents led me to code his class position as (upper) middle class and not upper-class (which I might have selected if I had only taken into account the fact that his father belongs to the 16% of the French active population that are 'cadres supérieurs et professions intellectuelles supérieures'). The myriad of other elements, both objective and subjective, that I gathered on his position, trajectory and attitudes towards it confirmed this coding. It also made it possible to situate Mathieu's attitudes towards time in the much broader context of his class habitus and his 'attitude towards the world' (Bourdieu, 1979). More generally, I used all the information given by interviews and

observations (and first of all parents' and grand-parents' occupations and diploma) to code each student as working-class, middle class or upper class.

Finally, the crucial insight given by qualitative materials has to do with deciphering and coding attitudes towards time. As next section will show in details, I have extracted criteria (from interviews and observation) in order to synthesize and code each student's attitude toward time. The more significant of these criteria were the following: position vis-à-vis teacher's pace and class rhythm, capacity of sticking to principles of time management, of deciding and allocating time, rapidity or slowness in study, feelings of urgency and temporal panic, perception of the passing (slow or fast) of time. I identified three main attitudes toward time based on these markers: mastering time, suffering time and intermediate attitudes, that I confronted with the students' position first in terms of volume of capital (upper-class, middle class and working-class students) and then in terms of composition of capital (mainly economic versus cultural capital). Such coding and counting, drawing from nearly a hundred interviews but only 40 students, do not claim statistical validity. They nonetheless constitute 'thick' coding and counting, thanks to the flow of materials provided by qualitative fieldwork, interviews and observations and the 'thick description' they provide.

### **3. Time in prep schools: the routinization of urgency and temporal panic**

For the sociologist, but also for the students who inhabit the world of prep schools, the existence of a specific temporal culture is self-evident, and prep schools seem a case in point for the 'acceleration' of time.

In these selective, demanding ('all work and no play') and ascetic institutions, urgency is a way to prepare students for dominant positions in the field of power: 'By turning a student's entire life into a competition placed under the sign of urgency – a « race against the clock » – preparatory classes, like sports

in other traditions, create a simulated equivalent of the real struggles of ordinary life within the universe of school' (Bourdieu, 1989: 117). Without having to explicitly state underlying principles, the institution thus inculcate deep-seated dispositions, namely 'the propensity and the capacity to make an intensive use of time' that will later give an advantage to those who display it in 'the struggles of professional life' (Bourdieu, 1989: 117). The process of students' selection facilitates such an institutional socialization: prep schools students are selected not on their attitudes towards time per se, but on their good marks (which tells they were able to keep up with the Lycée rhythm) and a certain kind of docility that is supposed to make them malleable to prep school inculcation (Darmon, 2012).

Urgency is indeed a crucial aspect of life in prep schools, woven in the fabric of the everyday and in the very walls of such an 'enveloping institution' (Author, 2013). First, the workload is very heavy and notoriously impossible to achieve, even by spending days, nights and weekends working. Students are therefore confronted with the necessity to do as much as possible and to always rush through the school year. The joke symptomatic of the 'overload' situation for medical students in the 1950's ('It's only Monday, and I'm behind already') (Becker et al., 1961) could as easily be used by prep school students.

Second, the feeling of urgency does not only derive from the disproportion between the task at hand and the available time to do it. It is also a result of a specific institutional work aimed at creating and maintaining the students' involvement in scholarly work. As I sat in classes, I observed the numerous ways in which professors manage to constantly accelerate time and initiate this feeling of urgency. When I asked one teacher if I could present my research to his students before sitting in class with them for one year, he said: « do that on a day when I have them during four hours, because I can't lose these 5 minutes on a two-hours session ». Classes are peppered with temporal notations or expressions. During classes, teachers are used to repeatedly give the time ('come on, it's 9:10, we should already be...', 'it is now 9:40 and we are about

to', 'there are 10 minutes remaining', etc.). Furthermore, they constantly refer to what will be done 'next', 'next week', 'next class' and 'next year', stepping across small or huge periods of time and fast-forwarding their course. The future is both anticipated and already there, as shown in these few excerpts from my fieldnotes:

*[Math teacher, demonstrating a theorem on the blackboard:] And now I guess you all see what I will be writing down next (...) Okay, you've got to understand that now because it will be in tomorrow's evaluation.*

*[Math teacher, at the blackboard:] It's quite difficult to demonstrate this properly, you will learn that next year, and I will show you a bit of how it's done at the end of this year [He actually takes 5 minutes to show it]. You're not supposed to know that by now, but I have rather you know it now, because you will end up wondering about it and it gives you answers by anticipation.*

Such constant remarks constitutes a specific work of acceleration, and end up manipulating time structure itself and give the students a sense of urgency and of a 'fast-forwarded' time.

This work results in a true temporal socialization, and students learn over the years an intensive use of time, getting rid of moments that could be 'lost'. The rare moments that are not spent working or sleeping should be enjoyed at their fullest ('Now each moment I don't have to work, I've got to *do* something, you know, like the piano or a movie or something, I don't 'do nothing' these days!' says Marie). The use of time is all in all thoroughly rationalized: Anne takes her shower in the evenings as a break from homework and not in the mornings (a useful moment to review her notes), Quentin or Laureline stopped 'doing their hair', Julien takes an earlier train to school that takes longer to arrive and is quite empty of classmates, enabling him to work longer during his morning commute, etc.

But whatever their efforts, students describe how they are 'running out of time' or feel 'overwhelmed' and constantly 'left behind'. The specific laws of time in prep school induce what could be coined a 'temporal panic', i.e. a particular kind of time-related anxiety and a feeling of deficiency, of not being able to manage and to cope with the pace of time:

*If during three weeks you don't read each night what you've written each day, it's Panic stations! Because you can't make up and at the same time follow what's going on, follow today's thread and make up for Yesterday's! This is what is currently happening to me and I'm having panic attacks... [Christophe].*

But what is simultaneously incorporated is the normality of such a state, its routinization in fact, as shown for example in this interview with Nathan:

*Since the beginning of the year I've had this feeling of being completely overwhelmed. All the time, all the time. But I'm taking things philosophically... I'm beginning to accept to have papers that are overdue (...) It is a kind of quiet panic, a panic that has normalized over time.*

All this seems to point to the existence of a specific 'temporal culture' in prep schools, made of fast-forwarding, feelings of inadequacy and temporal panic, but also their routinization. The common burden of having to deal with urgency and temporal panic does not however mean that all students are alike in the way they perceive, experience and deal with it.

## 4. Coding the attitudes towards time

A close analysis of the interviews with the students actually puts into light important variations from one student to the next in the ways they display (but also perceive and judge) attitudes towards time.

### 4.1 Masters of time

A first clue of the existence of variations is given by a recurring figure in the students' interviews: that of 'masters' of times. The teachers are the primary embodiment of this figure. They are presented as the origin of the pace and of the schedule, but also as combining knowledge and rapidity:

*'Our math teacher, he's indeed something! He is a real dynamo and he gives it all! At first I had real difficulties with him because he goes so fast, even in writing, he's so quick! He writes fast, he speaks fast, he thinks fast!'*

But such perception of the mastery of time is not limited to these obvious school 'masters'. Students, also, can be awarded this kind of title and be granted almost mythical powers:

*Sometimes, the teacher has barely completed the explanation and he [a fellow student] sees already the next question! He is 3 kilometers ahead from everybody! In his head, it must be... He has an understanding of things that is ten times that of anybody else; he's so fast, so quick! [Marie]*

*So there's this guy, he comes into the classroom, the teacher or another students I don't remember was at the blackboard, a bit puzzled, looking for something, and the guy just puts down his bag and says 'this is what should be done' and that was it! This is the kind of guys we have this year with us... [Laura].*

The scientific excellence of the two students referred to by Marie and Laura is inseparably a cognitive and a temporal excellence. Scholarly success is here demonstrated by anticipation and rapidity, and is mainly described with temporal categories. Time is therefore both the content and the language of scholarly excellence. More generally, judgments on students by professors and on fellow students by other students are very often expressed through a temporal language. Being fast (understanding and writing rapidly) is presented as the ultimate form of excellence. Students are used to compete as to 'how long' (i.e. how much) of the exercises they managed to do within the time limit assigned by the professor. Such judgments, sometimes verging on the mythical, as we have seen, hint to variations that can be found in practice in the students' attitudes towards time. A close examination of the data collected gives indeed access to criteria that vary strongly within the student body, which are systematically connected and which reveal an underlying spectrum of attitudes towards time. Are there, indeed, masters and servants of time?

## 4.2 Taking one's time

At one end of the spectrum are the students who display mastery of time. They define themselves as being globally 'well in sync' with the general rhythm of the school year and with the specific pace of teachers, and they develop techniques in order to stay that way:

*If there is stuff you don't revise immediately after class, you shouldn't try and work on it the next day, the day after or even the weekend after, because then you will have other things to do. You don't want to drop behind, because it would be exponential. Better to miss something studied long before than to miss something currently studied in class*  
[Marie]



They manage to have ‘principles’ of time management, and to stick to them. They free some time each week from the school schedule for extra-curricular activities like sport or music, and they won’t skip it even when the workload is bringing temporal panic. They set their temporal schedule, for example their leisure or their sleep hours, and once again they stick to it:

*I have been doing horse riding since I’m a little girl and there’s no way I would give it up like so many in the class who stopped doing anything else than work. I used to go twice a week, now it’s once a week and on Sundays (...). Some students say they go to bed at midnight or 1:00 am, well I wouldn’t do that! I’m no good after 10:30 anyway. So it’s 10:30 [Pauline].*

Pauline’s attitude in this excerpt shouldn’t be mistaken for a ‘bad’ or ‘lazy’ student’s one. It can in fact be opposed to two others, much less dominant: those of students who go to bed at 10:00 one night because they just ‘can’t go on anymore’, but also those who can’t stop from working because of the state of temporal panic they’re in and who end up working unwillingly until very late. Working late like that does not so much indicate seriousness as it displays incapacity to decide and allocate time. Students who combine such a capacity to allocate time and rapidity are granted the symbolic capital of the mastery of time and praised accordingly (‘I’m so impressed, he’s so efficient, it’s magic!’). Masters of time are therefore students who manage to distance themselves from the common burden of urgency and temporal panic. They are the only one to say in interviews that they don’t feel anxiety (‘I may be exhausted, I may be discouraged, but no, I feel no panic I would say’), or even that they like the sense of urgency attached to prep school life (‘When I’ve got time, I tend to linger, but when I’m in rush, I like that, I know I will make it’).

To them, time goes fast:

*'It's Monday, you blink and it's Friday!'* [Margot]

*'When did I saw you before [for the first interview]? September? Wow, it seems like one week ago and it's several months!'* [Arthur]

*'Time goes so quickly you can't even feel it pass!'* [Nathan]

Nonetheless, they still can make temporal decisions and not only react to temporal constraints. They are indeed able to 'take their time' – a recurrent and significant locution in their interviews:

*I like to take my time to eat, you know, at lunch, even if the others are going like 'let's go, we've got such and such to do before 2' (...) On Monday, I took time to enjoy a movie, it was a good one (...) I always go out in the open between classes, to take five, I'm much more efficient afterwards* [Julien].

### 4.3 Suffering time

At the other end of the spectrum under study are the students for whom time is something that is suffered and not mastered, that is chronically lost and not taken. Let's review the case of one of them, Quentin, an 18 year-old first year in scientific prep school when I first meet him. During the first interview in September, he speaks already of a 'problem with time': 'the work is not that hard you see, but I seem never to have enough time to dot it'. His parents pay for private tutoring to help him catch up, and it's again in temporal terms that Quentin defines the help it brings him:

*He [his tutor] helps me do my homework, and it saves time, because I was used to spend one weekend over one assignment and now with him I save time because he tells me what to do and how to do it.*

It is also finally in temporal terms that Quentin evaluates his success and mostly his failures:

*I wanted to study during the holidays, so I programmed a precise schedule but I couldn't stick to it, I wanted to see my friends from the neighborhood that I hardly see now, so I had scheduled 50 hours of study per week, and the first week it amounted to 15 hours max, I couldn't help it, I was really behind. Second week, I tried to up the hours, I was close to 50 but I couldn't make it.*

In these examples, time is therefore not mastered but indeed suffered. It is a problem and not a solution, and it is perceived as a curse, something that cannot be tamed. Quentin, like other students displaying the same kind of attitudes, far from 'taking' his time is always running after time and always running late. Description of states of temporal panics are numerous and vivid in these interviews, along with words like 'overwhelmed', 'lost', and the continuous feeling of 'losing time'. Studying 'one day at a time', without being able to see the big picture, seems the only solution to deal with temporal panic:

*If you look at what you should do during the whole week, you might just as well top yourself! So I'm only thinking about today, you know, about what I have to do today.*

Contrary to masters of time who feel in sync with the class rhythm and the 'fast forward' laws of time in prep school, the students feel always 'behind' and may daydream of 'repeating' their school year in order to be able to keep up with it:

*If I could do it all over again, you know, with a time machine, I would do it, to do it better: I would be ready, I could anticipate everything, I would not be taken by surprise by anything, I would not be so stressed out... [Dylan].*

We saw above that deciding not to study or to go to bed early testifies to a certain kind of mastery of time. Symmetrically, suffering attitudes towards time may indeed entail incapacity to stop working:

*The teachers told us, this assignment should be done in 4 hours, if you're not done with it in four hours, let it go and do something else. But I couldn't do that. So I went to bed at 3 or 4 in the morning, I know it's not wise but I couldn't help it. [Marc]*

One last very telling criteria of attitude towards time has to do with the perception of its rhythm. If masters of time feel that it is passing very quickly, students at this end of the spectrum feel on the contrary time goes by very slowly:

*I shouldn't say it goes slowly, I won't say it goes slowly, but let's say time doesn't pass very quickly (...) [at another moment of the interview] Time goes so slowly in prep school it seems like forever! [Quentin]*

*Two hours of mathematics, you feel every second of it; it's not like two hours on the Internet! [Christophe].*

Urgency appears as a structural feature of prep school, so much so that one could think it would impose on every student with the same weight. On the contrary, diametrically different attitudes towards time can be spotted among the students. Such attitudes appear to be systematically organized around the criteria presented above: position vis-à-vis teacher's pace and class rhythm, capacity of sticking to principles of time management, of deciding and allocating time, rapidity or slowness in study, feelings of urgency and temporal panic, perception of the passing of time. These criteria make it possible to synthesize and code a student's 'attitude towards time', which I did on a three-

level scale (masters of time, sufferers, and intermediates<sup>3</sup>). The two following sections will then be aimed at showing that these variations take place within the social space of social classes and to explain them.

## 5. Time domination

First, such attitudes towards time can be traced back to the students' social origins and the volume of capital in their family. In 29 cases out of 40, there is a correspondence between social origins and attitudes towards time. Students exhibiting criteria of time mastering comes from upper-class families, those suffering time from working-class, and intermediate attitudes (with elements of mastery and of suffering) from middle classes families.

Julien and Alexandre, who both come from old upper-class families, display all the criteria of temporal mastery. We have already seen above how Julien 'takes his time' throughout the day. What is even more significant is the way they manage to use — and not to suffer or to escape — the high rhythm and its potential temporal panic:

*On week-ends, at first, it's always difficult to get to working, but when the right moment and the deadline are approaching, I can feel it, I'm alert at once, I'm in a rush, I feel a rush and I manage to get to work at once, even after a whole day at school, I don't mind [Julien].*

Bastien's interviews also display such mastery, and may point to one of its sources:

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<sup>3</sup> Only a few students were coded as « intermediate » since their attitude towards time was distinctly heterogeneous (fitting some criteria of total mastery and lacking one or two). For an analysis of these cases, see (Darmon, 2012: 172 sq.)

*It's very rewarding to live in urgency like this, to study under stress, it's very educational because later when we're working [on the job market], we will have a lot of work to do in small amounts of time and we will be able to deal with it (...). [Smiling] I've always been a bit hyperactive, since I'm a kid I've always been doing a million things at a time, meetings, activities and so on, and I haven't stopped here, studying, finding time for this, for that, for leisure, for music, so I don't mind 'hectic', on the contrary, I just love it, some people wouldn't like it but I love it, this is exactly right for me! [Bastien]*

Bastien's father is the CEO of a big company, and this excerpt may be interpreted as the sign of a particular temporal education specific to upper-classes families. To give an idea of such a primary socialization, we can recall the case of Alexander, a 10 year-old child from a black middle class family studied by Lareau (2002)<sup>4</sup>. Alexander is 'busy with activities during the week and on weekends'. Alexander often complains that his mother 'signs him up for everything!' but he acknowledges that 'he likes his activities' and that without them 'his life would be boring'. His sense of time, adds Lareau, is thoroughly entwined with his activities: he feels disoriented when his schedule is not full, as shown by a scene he's making to his mother when he appears to have nothing planned for the next day. Alexander's life is therefore 'defined by a

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<sup>4</sup> Since my own research did not include a study of family socialization, I have to rely on previous sociological studies to give an idea of the temporal socialization processes that took place and can account for what I observed. But as noted in section 1, not only are those studies rare, but they focus on working-class families, with the exception of Lareau's ethnography (2002). This is why I take the liberty of using this American study, which I believe to be applicable to socialization in France since what Lareau writes on the attitudes towards institutions and towards time in American working classes is coherent with French studies on the same subjects.

series of deadlines and schedules', in a manner typical of the middle-class families under study (Lareau, 2002: 754-756). A similar primary socialization may well have produced Bastien's temporal disposition and his taste for 'hectic'.

At the other end of the spectrum, Quentin and Marc (who continuously display a suffering relation to time examples of which have been given above) are both from working-class background and the first in their family to go through higher education. As with upper-classes examples given above, the way they relate to time can be traced back to a specific family socialization in working-class family. Lareau's study can be used once again to exemplify such processes, focusing on Harold's case this time, a boy from a poor black family. The pace of life in his case 'is more free-flowing' than is Alexander's. It 'is not so much planned as emergent' and it 'ebbs and flows' with his interests and family obligation (Lareau, 2002: 758). Millet and Thin (2005) have also shown, drawing from extensive research on French working-classes, the specific kind of temporal experience that is learned within these families: deeply rooted both in economic insecurity and in working-class culture, it combines a feeling of precarious urgency, an attitude of resignation to the unexpected and the hazards of life (temporal resignation to the inevitable also enlightened by Atkinson (2013)), and a necessity to live in the present (what Atkinson (2013) again calls 'presentism') for lack of feeling able to master or change the future. They observe how children from these families encounter difficulties in conforming to school temporal requisites: they are seen as 'unable to concentrate' or to exert sufficient long-lasting 'attention' in class. They may manage to do very well when the tests are made of 'small' successive questions, but they have a hard time succeeding in organizing the stages and answers to longer exercises. They don't seem therefore to have interiorized 'planning dispositions' (Lahire, 2002) of the kind children learn in a domestic environment when parents have a daily use of organizers, schedule and

calendars (Lahire, 1995). Such family socialization may account therefore for Quentin and Marc's temporal dispositions.

One clarification remains to be made. The academic level of students could also well be all-explaining here: good students could afford to master time and bad students would structurally run after it, for cognitive and not organizational reasons. Academic achievement would therefore operate here as a hidden variable, students from upper-class families having much more probabilities to be good students than children from working-class ones. Indeed, Quentin and Marc quoted above are the least achieving students of their class, whereas Julien, Alexandre and Bastien are among the very best. It is therefore useful and even salutary to examine more closely the few cases of *discrepancy* between school and social level and their attitude toward time.

Those cases actually reinforce the hypothesis that attitudes toward time are governed by social position. There are cases where, in spite of a mediocre or bad level, students of upper-class families exhibit a firm and strong hold on time, as with Romain. Romain is the son of a medical practitioner himself son of a lawyer, married to an executive from a family of businessmen. He displays a mastery of time that seems totally independent of the apparent sanction constituted by his failing grades – he is ranked among the last ones in his class: he is very proud of his methods of time management and says he works efficiently, he allocates time for work and for leisure without ever feeling temporal panic or having problems in keeping up with the academic rhythm, and he presents himself as well in advance on a number of school assignments. This socially based self-confidence can be compared with the temporal humility displayed by Mathieu, a very good middle-class student. He describes at length in the interviews the various stages of temporal panic he goes through each week, together with his feeling of 'not belonging' in a class where everything goes so fast. He is 'always late', 'always running after time' and feels overwhelmed and powerless vis-à-vis school rhythm ('like a cow watching a



train going by...'). He is also very fatalist regarding this situation and does not hope to catch up or get out of it. Nonetheless, his teachers are very happy with his work, he is ranked in the top tier of the class, and he objectively manages to go through prep school even if it does not feel like it on a subjective level.

Both congruent and atypical cases seem therefore to point in the same direction. Variations in attitudes toward time can therefore be seen as a temporal manifestation of social domination, and the spectrum evidenced in attitudes toward time is also a social spectrum. In the quasi absence of studies on variations in attitude towards time and their incorporation, studies of family socialization can give clues about class-based temporal dispositions and the way they are internalized.

## 6. Timestyles

In a more speculative manner, I would like to suggest that the composition, and not only the volume of capital, plays a part in engendering specific attitudes towards time. With attitudes towards time as with other dispositions, the differences stemming from the total volume of capital may 'conceal, both from common awareness and also from "scientific" knowledge, the secondary differences which, within each of these classes defined by overall volume of capital, separate class fractions, defined by different asset structures, i.e., different distributions of their total capital among the different kinds of capital' (Bourdieu, 1979: 109).

### 6.1 Aristocratic and bourgeois uses of time

A first indication of such a result is given by secondary differentiations that seem to appear among 'dominant' attitudes towards time. They recall an opposition enlightened by Grignon (1993) between an 'aristocratic' and a 'bourgeois' use of time. The status-symbol oriented 'aristocratic' use requires

extravagancy in the dealing with time: one has to be lavish with one's time and that of others, even waste it and lose it in a conspicuous consumption aimed at looking the part. The 'bourgeois' use of time, reminiscent of the asceticism and the regularity of monastery life, is a much more technical one that requires, on the contrary, to save it, to organize it, to manage it efficiently in order to 'gain' it.

Of course, the prep school temporal context does not easily allow manifestations of 'aristocratic' use of time. But some of the students nonetheless display sometimes this kind of attitude, overtly losing time by hanging out, 'doing nothing' – if sometimes making up for it more discreetly –, claiming to have been shooting the breeze instead of having prepared for a test, showing off by going out at night while mocking students who wouldn't lose one minute of work, etc. These 'aristocratic' masters of time come from upper-class families with all kinds of capitals. 'Bourgeois' attitudes, which can still fall under the category of time mastery by fitting the criteria listed above, are displayed by students coming from families located slightly lower in the social space, and more specifically from families relatively more endowed with cultural than economic capital. The difference in 'aristocratic' versus 'bourgeois' attitudes could well be more related to the composition than to the general level of the family capital.

## 6.2 Managers versus engineers of time

A second indication of the influence of the structure of capital may be given by the somewhat different temporal 'cultures' in the two kinds of prep schools that have been till now analysed together, the scientific one and the economic one (preparing students, respectively, for engineering and business schools).

Statistically speaking, as far as the social origins of students is concerned, economic prep school have a recruitment that is biased towards economic

capital, at the top (in some of the economic prep schools) or in the upper-middle regions of the social spaces (in other economic prep schools), whereas scientific prep schools recruitment is more balanced between cultural and economic capital<sup>5</sup>. Such a difference may manifest itself in what appear as two different cultures of time. Students in economic prep schools tend to resist and even oppose the norm of urgency, playing games of being 'just in time', jokingly dragging their feet when teachers are trying to speed up the pace, or interrupting classes with 'rituals' and 'traditions' that actually slow things down:

*So, the second years explained our sacred rituals! If a teacher is saying something remotely funny, each and everyone of us is to applaud, for a long, long time! Several minutes is a must... [Julie, economic prep school]*

*We've got our codes, we do weird noises in class, whenever we want to ask for a 5 minutes break, or if the teachers is making a joke, or if one of us has answered right, anything! [Julien, economic prep school].*

This attitude (teasing and challenging the teachers' time) is absolutely out of the question in the scientific classes, where the teacher's rhythm is always obeyed and where resistance is made only of daydreaming or moments of evasion that do not challenge the temporal flow of the class. Attitudes towards time are therefore quite different, much more tense in scientific prep classes and defiant in economic prep classes.

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<sup>5</sup> As shown by a principal component analysis based on all the students enrolled in economic and scientific prep schools in 2004-2005 in France (Bouhia, 2005: 4), which have been confirmed by different studies (for a review see Darmon, 2012).

The students' reputation and the flow of social judgments reinforce this division. Students from scientific prep school mock students from economic prep schools for not being able to work 'long hours' and for asking for breaks 'every other minute'. Symmetrically, students from economic prep schools make fun of scientific students for not being able to stop working, for being pathologically incapable of losing time:

*I've got a friend in economic prep school, oh my god, it's not the same... They're asking for a break when they have a two hours class, they are not on time in the morning... We wouldn't even think of doing that! As for us, when we are granted a break during a four-hours class, we're so happy! It's so weird! [Marie, scientific prep school].*

*Frankly, those scientific students, they're so weird! There's one thing that had me totally flabbergasted: they were keeping on doing their math assignment in the bathroom. Sure, they can be efficient, those nut cases! [Manon, economic prep school].*

Finally, the two kinds of prep schools appear very different in the way they assess and manipulate the students' 'social age', their maturity, precocity or childishness. Economic prep classes are artificially maturing students, who are supposed, for example in personality interviews, to talk, to dress and to act like thirty-something professionals. Teachers always praise students' experience on the job market (for example their summer jobs), their maturity and their 'adult' qualities. Such an aging work has no equivalent in scientific prep schools, where students are perfectly allowed to act like childish nerds as long as their grades are keeping up. Youth is even highly valued in itself, through the praise of precocity and the admiration explicitly aimed at the students who are said to be 'in advance' and are younger than the rest.

Enrolled in economic prep schools, 'managers' of time, holding both types of capital but relatively more endowed in economic capital, learn how to lose and even to fight time and to mock petit bourgeois uses of it. Enrolled in

scientific prep schools, 'engineers' of time, on the opposite, learn a tense and earnest attitude towards it, to save every minute of it and not to take 'prodigal' students too seriously.

These two different temporal cultures sufficiently echo what has been described above on the difference between aristocratic (extravagant, lavish, show off) and bourgeois (ascetic, technique- and culture-oriented) uses of time to substantiate the hypothesis of the existence of two distinct and specific 'timestyles'. These timestyles, like lifestyles in the bourdieusian sense of the term (1979), would be connected to the compositions of students' capital and not only to its volume, and could be correlated with the relative dominance (already statistically proven) on the one hand of economic capital and on the other hand of a more equal mix of cultural and economic capital in the students' assets. Attitudes towards time would therefore vary not only depending on the total volume of capital, but also on its composition, and timestyles would be situated on a multi-dimensional timespace.

I have tried to show in this article that attitudes towards time were (1) diverse (versus common), (2) socially constructed through processes of primary (family) and secondary (institutional) socialization (versus given) and (3) class-based.

Since they are diverse, sociologists should therefore not jump to label whole cultures – and cultures as a whole – and to equate one 'society' with one kind of temporal culture. Bensa (1997) already criticized a certain 'ethnological' approach of time that artificially unifies 'primitive' attitudes towards time by extrapolating from ritual and collective calendars, to the detriment of everyday practices and especially of their variations.

A more systematic sociological approach of time would make it possible to challenge the idea of temporal perception as a given and as an a priori of the individual conscience, in order to replace it with a conception of time as the

result of a learning process, be that of primary or secondary socialization. All in all, it is the idea of a 'universal' time that is called into question, and I tried to show how an empirical study of the 'time space' might pave the way for a theory of the social relativity of time.

Such a time space (attitudes towards time being located in the social space of social classes) has been merely drafted here, and much remains to be done in order to chart it, from a more systematic approach to the inclusion of gender as one of its dimensions. Sociology would also strongly benefit from a deeper knowledge of the sociogenesis of temporal dispositions during class socialization, that would account for the various attitudes towards time presented here. Finally, analyzing class differences in attitudes towards time means taking into account the fact that they are not mere 'cultural' differences: they are temporal inequalities and are part and parcel of social inequality – towards school but also potentially many spheres of everyday life. Charting the 'time space' could therefore help describe and explain them.

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