Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the mechanized clock, and children’s time

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How much time should children spend taking and preparing to take standardized tests? How much time should children spend on homework each night? At what point do extracurricular enrichment activities take up too much of children’s out-of-school time? Behind these hotly debated questions stand the twin assumptions (1) that children’s time is too valuable for adults to let it be spent haphazardly, and (2) that therefore adults need to delineate exactly where children’s time will go. In one sense, there is nothing new about this; parents have probably always told their children to stop dilly-dallying and get to work, to grow up already, to learn how to be a civilized member of this social order before the devil takes their souls or the neighbors start to talk or they drive their parents crazy. Yet there is something distinctively modern about contemporary adult anxiety about how children are spending their time.

Listen for instance, to this rhetoric about whether children should take or opt out of standardized tests. One Chicago father argued on a Facebook site for parents that he was opting his daughter out of the Illinois State Achievement Test (ISAT) because “we’ve come to the conclusion that the 2014 ISAT is an unnecessary waste of the district’s limited resources and instructional minutes. . . . We certainly can’t stop CPS [Chicago Public Schools] from giving this examination, but we can take the small step of opting her out, if only to salvage for her benefit the hundreds of instructional minutes she would otherwise lose.” Other parents echoed the complaint that their children’s time was being wasted. CPS responded to the wave of opt-out requests by sending letters home warning parents of the consequences: students who did not take the ISAT might not be considered for selective enrollment schools, parents were undermining the accurate collection of data, and no additional instruction would be provided to students during this time. What makes this different from generalized demands that children stop goofing around is its measurement, organization, valuation and negotiation of children’s time down to the minute.

Treatment of children’s time as a resource to be measured and organized for maximum productivity is, like all precision in time-measurement, emblematic of modernity. Time has become money, and like money it can be quantified, saved, spent, invested, salvaged, or squandered, but this metaphor has not always governed how people experience time. Clock-time came to cities in the high middle ages, as clocks served the development of mercantile production and trade by enabling producers to synchronize workers’ labor. Before this, though, workers’ time was shaped by the sun and the seasons, with farmers waking to the birds, laboring until it was too dark to see, and organizing their work in terms of cues from nature and the order of tasks (e.g. sowing, watering, harvesting). Insofar as there is a time to sow and a time to reap, agricultural time is qualitatively various, indivisible into workdays and weekends, work and overtime, let alone instructional minutes. Furthermore, minutes and hours simply could not order people’s time until clock technology became both reliable enough and affordable enough to be used to measure time accurately to the minute, or at least the quarter hour. Even then, people had to have a good reason to want to live by clock-time, and workers mostly preferred not to, as clock-time put authority over the pace and amount of work in the hands of managers, who were eager to capitalize workers’ time. According to historian David Landes, agricultural time organized most rural people’s lives until the nineteenth century, when the infusion of landscapes with trains and their accompanying timetables forced a shift.

The intrinsic connection between time-measurement and the organization of a workforce was noticed and applied to schools with a new ferocity by the educational reformers that historian Herbert Kliebard calls “social efficiency” progressives. Inspired by Frederick Winslow
Taylor, whose 1911 *Principles of Scientific Management* broke down the performance of all tasks into 5 steps, social efficiency reformers argued that schools and their curricula should be organized along the same principles as industrial workplaces. If followed, Taylor argued, his five steps would transform workplaces and workforces, increasing productivity and with it human happiness. Step 3 is to “Study with a stop watch the time required to make each of these elementary movements [into which the task was broken in step 2] and then select the quickest way of doing each element of the work.” Step 4 is to “eliminate all false movements, slow movements, and useless movements.”

As Kliebard notes, the bureaucratization of schools was already underway before educational reformers applied “Speedy Fred” Taylor’s ideas to schools, but Taylor’s writing is noteworthy for the connections he made between the precise management of workers’ time and the social ramifications of this practice. According to Taylor, scientific management would replace conflict with cooperation, war with peace, and “suspicious watchfulness with mutual confidence.”

Does the management of time with stop-watch precision, and the coordination of human effort that it makes possible, indeed lead to human happiness? One who doubted this, even before clocktime had come to govern the lives of nearly all workers and schoolchildren, was Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Writing in 1762, before trains, before mass-produced pocket-watches, before “instructional minutes”, and with the industrial revolution just gearing up in France, Rousseau also claims time as the key to the progressive education that would support human happiness and a just social order, but he directly contradicts Speedy Fred’s stopwatch prescriptions. “Dare I expose the greatest, the most important, the most useful rule of all education?,” he writes; “It is not to gain time but to lose it.”

His claim should puzzle the reader, as it seems to undercut the basic premises of an educational manifesto like *Emile*. If education is about how children grow and learn through the days and years of their childhood, after all, how could you both lose that time and write a very long book about what to do during those years? This paper explores Rousseau’s rule, which Rousseau himself called a paradox. It argues that the conception of a child’s time that Rousseau develops is indeed the linchpin to the education he proposes for *Emile*. The following section of this paper examines Rousseau’s explanation of this rule and draws out its connections to other key aspects of his pedagogical, ethical and political theory, namely his connection of adult happiness to the avoidance of *amour propre* and the maintenance of one’s self-affirming *sentiment de l’existence*. The paper contends that Rousseau, who was the son of a Genevan watchmaker at a time when Geneva was an international leader in the production of mechanical clocks and watches, shows in *Emile* a profound sensitivity to the interconnections between accurate time-keeping and particular modes of coordinating human action in public spaces. Although clocks and watches did not create inequality, they contribute to it its particularly modern instantiations. When Rousseau proposes that the child’s time should be lost, the paper suggests, he means *clocktime*. The time that is to be gained back might best be understood as what Landes calls “natural” or “agricultural” time, a qualitatively variable experience of time that aligns one’s human life with nature, both the external nature of birds and stars and the internal nature of one’s own growth.

Rousseau provides a radical critique of the cultural framework that supports homework, standardized testing, and the competitive extracurricular activities that consume children’s time. He offers important insights to contemporary parents and educators wishing to reimagine an educational system that is currently fueled more by familial and international *amour propre* than by children’s interests and needs. Not the least of these is his recognition that to reimagine
children’s education would require a new configuration of the very terms of modern life. Problematically, however, Rousseau's alternative to mechanized clock-time depends on the labor of Sophie, whose time is also reconfigured. For the next generation of children to be educated according to natural time, Sophie’s labor needs to be off the clock too, which is a just as much a linchpin of her removal from the public sphere of citizenship and the paid workforce as it is of Emile’s education for public life, or so the final section of this paper shall argue. On the subject of time, as on so many other topics, Rousseau identifies the source of modern discontent with uncanny accuracy, but his preferred solution breaks down on the gears of gender.

Losing Time

Rousseau had one straightforward reason for commanding educators “not to gain time but to lose it.” Written in an era when half of all French children died before the age of five, Emile makes a strong case for letting children enjoy their fleeting time on earth. If odds were equal that they had no adult future whatsoever, why dedicate their childhoods to preparing for one? Having abandoned all five of his and Therese Levasseur’s children to near-certain death, Rousseau must have been acutely conscious of children’s mortality, and in part Emile seems an attempt to come to terms with his actions. Rousseau’s prefatory “dare I?,” however, recognizes that his rule was likely to seem absurd and needed further justification, even to readers nearly all of whose families would have been affected by child mortality.

His own references to child mortality raise questions about how Emile's present connects to his future and indicate that Rousseau’s message is more complex than a simple carpe diem. He mentions the likelihood of early mortality in Book I, where he discusses infancy, and again in Book II, where he discusses childhood up to about age 12. In Book I, the fact that “[h]alf the children born perish before the eighth year” is brought up in the context of Rousseau’s case for avoiding physical coddling of children, and he is curiously unsentimental about the possibility of infants’ death. Having just lambasted women who do not breast-feed their children, Rousseau brings up mortality rates as he turns to lambasting women who “instead of neglecting a mother’s care . . . [carry] it to excess.” He offers several reasons not to raise children “delicately”: children are likely to be strengthened by physical hardship; children do not fear death, so if death is impossible to ward off they will at least not suffer the “despair” they will suffer as sickly adults; and young children are worth less than older ones anyway. “A child becomes more precious as he advances in age,” Rousseau reasons. “To the value of his person is joined that of the effort he has cost; to the loss of his life is joined in him the sentiment of death. It is, then, of the future that one must think in looking after his preservation.” In Book II, he takes a different tack. After noting that “[o]f the children born, half, at most, reach adolescence,” he asks “What then must be thought of that barbarous education which sacrifices the present to an uncertain future, which burdens a child with chains of every sort and begins by making him miserable in order to prepare him from afar for I know not what pretended happiness which it is to be believed he will never enjoy?” As he does on other subjects as well, Rousseau spins the reader around with apparent contradictions. Are we to treat the child’s present with an eye to the future or not?

When Rousseau makes a claim and then quickly undercuts it, it is usually a sign that he has something important to say on the subject. On the first page of Emile, Rousseau addresses the text to “you . . tender and foresighted mother;” ten pages later he appears to contradict this
address with the statement that “Women have stopped being mothers,” and then in Book V he gives us Sophie. He eschews education for citizenship, even saying that the word “citizen” should be effaced from modern languages, only to present Emile as the “good son, the good husband, and the good father who make[s] the good citizen” by the end of the book. He gives himself an imaginary child “to avoid getting lost in visions,” and goes on to critique imagination and its perils. And so forth. The effect of these rhetorical spin-arounds is to unsettle the reader’s conventional suppositions and thereby open the reader’s mind to Rousseau’s reinterpretation. So it is with the child’s time. If two common-sense approaches were 1. That because many children died young in 18th century France, their desires should be satisfied as much as possible for their brief time on earth, and 2. That because half of all children did survive to adulthood, it was important to use childhood as a time of preparation for adult responsibilities, Rousseau has unsettled both.

Carpe diem or prepare for the future? Rousseau suggests that this is a false contrast. What it would take to prepare a child for a fulfilling adult life, he argues, is to preserve in him the happiness natural to childhood. For this to happen, educators need to avoid instilling in children the tendency to project themselves imaginatively into an uncertain future. “Foresight!” he exclaims, “Foresight, which takes us ceaselessly beyond ourselves and often places us where we shall never arrive. This is the true source of all our miseries.” Preparation for the future at the expense of attention to the present, Rousseau argues, creates a sense of being outside oneself, a self-alienation that is inimical to human happiness. Just before the passage on foresight, Rousseau has argued that happiness, man’s natural state, comes of matching one’s desires with one’s certain powers to achieve them, and his account of time reminds us that such certainty can only exist in the present. “What madness for a fleeting being like man always to look far into a future which comes so rarely and to reject the present of which he is sure.” Foresight is akin to fantasy in enabling desires to outrun faculties.

At two points in Book II, Rousseau raises the subject of time in conjunction with major themes, themes that cross the entirety of his writing. He dismisses foresight just before offering his most dramatic praise of what he elsewhere calls the sentiment de l’existence. This phrase, which he uses three times in Emile and discusses at greater length in The Reveries of the Solitary Walker, refers to a state of calm happiness, in which one is at peace with oneself and the world around, neither excited by passionate desires nor oblivious to the pleasure of being alive. In contemporary parlance, we might call it the feeling of being at home in one’s own skin. Right after his dismissal of foresight, he exclaims “Oh man, draw up your existence within yourself, and you will no longer be miserable. Remain in the place which nature assigns to you in the chain of being . . . .Your freedom and your power extend only as far as your natural strength, and not beyond. All the rest is only slavery, illusion and deception.” To maintain this commensurability with oneself, this unity of power and desire, the tutor is to prepare Emile for the future in a particular way. Rather than taking the child “out of himself” with an education based on inevitably uncertain predictions about what he might need to fulfill an adult role, he is to keep Emile in his “natural” happy state. There is thus no contradiction between his focus on the present and future happiness.

It is to accomplish this that Emile’s tutor is to follow the most important rule of all education, “not to gain time but to lose it.” His proclamation of the rule comes right after Rousseau has for the first time in Emile referred to amour propre. In its positive sense of amour de soi, this love of one’s own self is entirely compatible with the sentiment de l’existence. In its vicious sense of competitive pride, however, amour propre undoes all possibility of happiness.
When we measure ourselves against others, when we learn to think of ourselves as “better than” or “worse than” other people, we are alienated from ourselves, enslaved to social convention, under the sway of illusory and deceptive notions of happiness. Working hand in hand with fantasy and foresight, amour propre insidiously destroys our ability to align ourselves with ourselves. This notion runs throughout Rousseau’s literary and philosophical texts and is at the heart of his radical reappraisal of social and personal life. When we use reason, Rousseau holds, we can avoid falling prey to amour propre, but he believes children lack the ability to reason until they are about 12 years old. To forestall the development of amour propre, Émile is to be given a “purely negative” education until he reaches early adolescence. The tutor is to postpone Émile’s education in literacy, history, and theology until Émile is able to reason about the social life he will encounter in published texts, and he is to keep Émile in the countryside, away from social life. “If you could do nothing and let nothing be done, if you could bring your pupil healthy and robust to the age of twelve, without his knowing how to distinguish his right hand from his left, at your first lessons the eyes of his understanding would open up to reason,” says Rousseau. Because the child cannot leap directly from infancy to age 12, during the time of his childhood Emile is to be allowed to play and explore, to spend time outside, to make mistakes and only from their consequences learn how to avoid making them again. The child’s time is qualitatively different from adolescence and adulthood and is to be treated as such.

If children are subjected to educational practices that look to adult responsibilities at the expense of children’s “presence in the present,” and thereby establish the habit of measuring themselves against others, according to Rousseau, their long-term happiness will be sacrificed. With this insight, Rousseau provides solid grounds for a contemporary argument against standardized testing, against homework that crowds out play time, against scheduling children into extra-curricular activities that promote competitive play and adult-valued skills. Rather than fret about lost instructional minutes, parents and educators should “lose” the child’s whole decade that we now dedicate to primary schooling -- in Rousseau’s sense of losing time. If the school system refuses to provide instruction during the test-taking window and leaves children to draw, think, figure out a way to otherwise occupy themselves, so much the better. We need not accept Rousseau’s claim that children are incapable of reasoning to accept his premise that if children internalize the need to measure themselves against other people, always as better than or worse than, they are being set up for lifelong dissatisfaction. Nor do I think we need to go all the way with Rousseau and take our children to the countryside, there to smash windows and uproot bean plants rather than read books, to appreciate his major insight: the time of childhood should be spent learning to take one’s own measure.

There are also political ramifications to how children spend their time. Not only will children whose time is dedicated to preparation for bourgeois adult life be personally unhappy, according to Rousseau they will be unsuited for meaningful citizenship. The misappropriation of children’s time into activities that teach them to rank themselves against one another, by his account, builds a taste for inequality into the spirits of children. To rethink citizenship, in a way that promotes egalitarian relations among citizens, Rousseau argues, the child’s time needs to be valued in just the right way: as a time to let pass in play and exploration so that children who have learned to take their own measure can later respect the self-measure of others.
I have so far argued that Rousseau’s conceptualization of children’s time – why and how it should be “lost” for the sake of winning it back – is a critical aspect of his project to theorize equality, citizenship, and human happiness. Lars Lovlie, however, contends in his thought-provoking commentary about Rousseau’s rule “not to gain time but to lose it,” that “Rousseau’s point wasn’t really about time at all.” Above, I offered a textual analysis of Rousseau’s Emile to support my argument that Rousseau’s conception of time is as important as Rousseau says it is. In this section, I put Rousseau’s discussion of children’s time in its historical context, as this offers, I believe, further reason to think that Rousseau does have something important to say about the modern experience of time and the traps it lays for us.

Lovlie suggests that Rousseau be interpreted as considering the child’s space – his “lifeworld” – rather than his time.

It isn’t lost on the keen reader that Rousseau did not really ask us to lose time in our dealings with the child. He did quite the opposite. He wanted to win, to reclaim and put time back in its proper place – quite literally. His concern was aesthetic in the simple sense of letting the child’s experience follow its course without the interference of the teacher’s concepts or precepts: both the inner and outer world of the child should be allowed to make itself sensed and felt in its natural interaction with things and persons. Lovlie makes a compelling case for considering Emile’s education in terms of “spacing,” and much of what Rousseau says about managing Emile’s time does translate readily into metaphors of place. Questions about children’s time intersect with questions about children’s space – extracurricular programming has expanded, for instance, as children’s freedom to explore the spaces in their neighborhoods has shrunk. And, as Lovlie writes, Rousseau’s command to keep the child’s soul idle “means to give the child his or her space for making relevant experiences, for self-initiated musings, for wondering about the world, for philosophizing, for formulating questions and suggesting one’s own answers. To keep the soul open is to keep open a space for relevant experiences, relevant because they occur within the child’s own time span and are in sync with the child’s own experiential rhythm.”

Lovlie reminds his readers of the Greek notion of *kairos*, which “denotes the sense of doing the right thing at the right time.” This “right time” Lovlie also translates into spacing. “The feel for the right time is rather the feel for what is in place, for the right situation. It is place rather than time that determines the *kairos.*” The task of the teacher, in Rousseau’s pedagogy (and also in Dewey’s and Froebel’s), Lovlie argues, is to recognize the “non-method” of the right moment. Instead of applying technical procedures to the child over a chronological stretch of time, the teacher needs to stand back and let the child’s experiences occur, stepping in only to “grasp the instant as it occurs, when it has come into being on its own.” Lovlie uses this insight as the grounds for a critique of “today’s call for doing and making, for competition and excellence, which is ideological in the classic Marxian sense.” In grounding his critique of neoliberal approaches to education in Rousseau’s insight, I think, Lovlie is right on the mark. Neoliberal school reforms, which have taken Speedy Fred’s obsession with technique and productivity to new extremes, offer an education that ultimately damages children’s prospects of well-being and the prospect of egalitarian politics. Rousseau, too often dismissed, has insights worth returning to.

Illuminating though Rousseau’s Insight is, however, I think Lovlie goes too far in claiming that Rousseau’s point wasn’t really about time at all. Rousseau lived in a historical time and place that was pivotal in the reconfiguration of how human beings experience time. His own father was a watchmaker, and the son of Isaac Rousseau was born in Geneva, Switzerland.
when Geneva was an international center for the production and marketing of clocks and watches.\textsuperscript{20} This was no ordinary market specialization, either; mechanical time-keeping, in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, was the cutting edge of technological innovation. As David Landes documents in Revolution in Time: Clocks and the Making of the Modern World, the development of mechanical clocks was a driving force behind such features of modernity as capitalism, imperialism, and urbanization. Increasingly sophisticated clocks and watches made it possible to track longitude on sailing ships, supporting European nations’ ability to move commercial products and military forces around the globe. Accurate clocks made it possible to synchronize workers’ labor, as is necessary for factory production. They were a necessary component of the transportation networks that modernized rural communities by connecting them to cities. And, especially as clocks and watches became affordable even to ordinary workers, they changed the way people experienced time. The socio-political hierarchies that these features of modernity reify, in spite of Enlightenment hopes that the hierarchies will be toppled, are Rousseau’s major concern across his writings. Rousseau’s references to the child’s time in Émile suggest an awareness of the ways in which clock-time, as contrasted to “natural time,” affects human beings’ experiences of themselves and their relations to others.

Clocks, as noted above, were introduced in Europe to synchronize human actions in the public spaces of churches and workshops. During the first millennium CE, Landes documents, Chinese time-keeping technology was far superior to Europe’s, but European Christians had a distinct time-consciousness that drove them to outpace the Chinese by the middle ages. The Christian church, particularly the Roman branch, was committed to timely prayer – timely in the sense that it had to be done now because the end-time was nigh, and timely in the sense that the simultaneous prayers of the Christian community were the path to salvation. While Europe lost ground in almost all areas of science during the middle ages, “time and the calendar were just about the only aspect of medieval science that moved ahead in this period,” evidence of time-keeping’s importance.\textsuperscript{21} Timed bells in monasteries, which woke monks to pray on time, developed into the public bells that could call workers to their earthly labors. By the high middle ages, urban centers were equipped with public clocks, necessarily visible because otherwise workers did not trust that employers were correctly measuring their time. “These work bells,” however, “inevitably gave rise to conflict,” Landes records.\textsuperscript{22} While mercantile producers were eager to squeeze more worktime and hence greater production and profits out of workers, the workers by and large preferred to work only as much as necessary for subsistence and save the rest of their time for leisure. Both employers and workers had a vested interest in ensuring that time was measured accurately, but this made clocks a double-edged sword: they made it possible for workers to keep track of their employers and for employers to track labor. \textit{Pace} Speedy Fred, suspicious watchfulness was the norm, not mutual confidence.

As clock technology advanced, and with it mercantile production, urban populations became habituated to clock-time. This had, Landes argues, “profound consequences for the European mentality.”\textsuperscript{23} The medieval peasant was innumerate, as well as illiterate, but clock-time taught everyone at least the rudiments of arithmetic. Peasants learned to count by the church bells; in order to keep track of their calendars and their incomes, the learned had to catch up on the sophisticated arithmetic invented by the Arabs. For several hundred years, however, clocks were both governing features of urban life and fairly inaccurate, losing or gaining as much as a quarter hour per day, and this too had an effect on European mentality. Time had to be checked against someone else’s measurements – no longer against the sun and the roosters. Clock technology had by the 17\textsuperscript{th} century advanced such that clocks could keep time within a minute or
so per day, but there was always the possibility that one would forget to wind one’s clock or watch, and that the time on my watch was few minutes off from the time on yours. People learned to check their time not against the sun but against other people’s clocks and watches.

The political and economic changes that clock-time made possible – the growth of cities and commercial enterprises, the secular hierarchies of wage labor in central factories that parallel the older hierarchies of the aristocracy and the Catholic church, imperial domination – were of major concern to Rousseau. This can be seen across his work: in his skepticism of progress in the Discourse on the Arts and Letters and in his critiques of inequality in the Social Contract and the Discourse on Inequality. Insofar as clock time meant that human action could now be organized by the powerful to serve their own commercial and political interests, it was a key piece of the technological and intellectual progress that Rousseau continually questioned. In Emile, he considers the effects of aligning oneself and one’s actions with man-made measurements at the level of the person. Rousseau reminds his readers of the price even those well positioned pay for social relations governed by comparison and competition. The bourgeois rich enough to afford a watch still needs to check his status, just as he checks his time, against others. He cannot measure himself in his own terms, nor in terms provided by nature. To avoid such relations, based on amour propre, what needs to be “lost,” banished from the decade of Emile’s childhood, is time.

I do not mean that Rousseau wrote Emile, or any other works, as a deliberate critique of the mechanical clock. Rather, the fact that the world he criticizes in Emile is a world whose social and political relations are brought into effect by the mechanical clock gives additional significance to his rule “not to gain time but to lose it.” Rousseau challenges the experiential timescape of enforced coordinations of human action, of man’s internalization of artificial measurements of value, of loss of touch with the natural cues of season and weather, plant and animal life. The time that is to be lost for Emile is clock time: the regular tick-tick of an oscillating mechanism, time quantifiable in precise increments of hours and minutes, which because it is quantifiable can be measured, because measurable can be used to compare Emile to other children, because it can be used to compare can be used to alienate and control. The time to be gained is natural time: qualitatively different, sometimes stretching long like a summer day, sometimes passing as quickly as budding leaves, with each stretch of time suited to its own purpose and none other. Internalizing this kind of time, Emile will remain commensurable with nature and himself.

**Sophie’s Time**

What Rousseau’s “most important rule” offers the 21st century philosopher of education, I think, is both a powerful set of arguments against the continual measurement and comparison of children and, tragically, a reminder that we are even more entangled – enchained, if you will – by modern social and political arrangements than we might have thought. As mechanized time-keeping was to the 18th century, so the digital revolution is to our era. Palo Alto is our Geneva; computers our clocks; data our minutes. Rousseau’s case against the mentality of competitive measurement holds as strongly against the use of computer-generated data as it does against clock-time. On the one hand, this makes Rousseau a natural ally of progressive educators who would replace accountability regimes with a child-and-teacher-centered education. Ditch the PISA rankings and the standardized testing, he seems to imply, and instead foster the child’s
freedom to explore the natural world with a dedicated and thoughtful pedagogue. On the other hand, if the child’s education was threatened by modern time consciousness even before the development of state school systems and, much more recently, data-driven reforms, we are in even deeper than we thought. It would be relatively easy to call off standardized testing, much harder to rethink the ways we teach children to experience time – and the ways we experience it ourselves.

Relatively, there is the problem of Sophie. Emile’s governor, Jean-Jacques, is an isolated genius who opts out of paid employment and public life in order to educate Emile. Sophie, who will educate the next generation, and who represents everywoman as Emile represents everyman, is expected to do the same. Because the decade-long process of losing the child’s time requires an adult to commit herself full-time to creating the environment in which the child can grow aligned with himself, the happiness of the next generation of children can only be created through her withdrawal from public space. The freedom and happiness of children is thus made problematically dependent on women’s sacrifice of their financial independence and citizenship. Even if we grant that the person who withdraws into the timescape of childhood need not be exclusively the child’s mother – some contemporary version of Emile or Jean-Jacques the tutor will do as well as Sophie – so long as workplaces assume the homogeneity of minutes, days, and years, those whose days are determined by the rhythms of child-bearing and nursing, by illness and health, infancy and children’s gradual independence, will be working at a disadvantage.

That paid employment clashes with the demands of child-raising has been well established by social science literature, which traces this clash back to the industrial revolution and the employment norms it established, and the clash raises a host of issues about gender and class inequalities. As Joan Williams points out in Reshaping the Work-Family Debate: Why Men and Social Class Matter, the media most often frames the problem of “work family balance” in terms of elite women’s (and nowadays also elite men’s) lives and choices: whether one parent should stay home with a child or maintain a professional career. Most families, however, have little choice in the matter, as they cannot make ends meet on a single income or, in the case of single-parent families, on no income at all. Sophie’s choice is often unpalatable and most often impossible, at least within the current norms of paid employment. Yet if Rousseau’s immediate answer to the problems created by modern clocktime – i.e., to take Sophie off it -- will not suffice, his awareness that human happiness depends on a realignment of our lives with natural time remains acutely relevant. Paid employment need not be structured on the assumption that all workers are available 24/7 for four straight decades. I cannot go further into the economic, political and sociological questions raised here; suffice it to say that Rousseau’s ideas about time and the happiness of families support a radical reconsideration of contemporary mores.

As for citizenship, Rousseau’s Sophie was ineligible because her commitment to husband and children was considered incompatible with citizenship’s responsibilities. Whether a contemporary Sophie, a parent who thoroughly stepped out of clock-time into the natural time of childhood in order to raise children able to take their own measure, could continue to deliberate political issues with other citizens seems to me an open question. I shall not attempt to answer it here, only to raise the question of how a deliberate distance from public life supports or detracts from commitment to public concerns as worthy of further consideration. In connecting the child’s “lost” time to the parent/educator’s invaluable yet devalued time, I hope this last section has demonstrated that Rousseau’s insights into the connections between children’s experience of time, happiness across a human lifespan, are relevant not only to the questions I raised at the
outset about standardized testing, homework, and other uses of children’s time. They speak to
adult anxieties about children, but also to broader questions about inequalities that result from
the measurement, management, and capitalization of time.

1 Personal communication via closed Facebook website created by Raise Your Hand, a Chicago
non-profit organization that advocates for better funding for Chicago Public Schools. The author
granted me permission to quote him here. Emphasis added
(Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983). Because the word “horologia”
and its derivations (French horloge, Italian orologio, etc) was used to refer to sundials as well as
mechanical clocks, Landes notes, it is hard to date the invention of the mechanical clock with
precision. Furthermore, early mechanical clocks were made of valuable materials and broke
down often, so they would often have been taken apart for their iron and bronze, leaving few
datable artifacts. Landes estimates, however, that by the fourteenth century, urban workers were
called to work by timed mechanized bells (hence the etymological connection between English
clock and French cloche, or bell), which had been used in monasteries since the eleventh century.
3 Frederick Taylor, Principles of Scientific Management, cited in Herbert Kliebard, The Struggle
4 Kliebard, 82
Emphasis added
6 Rousseau, Emile 47
7 Rousseau, Emile 47
8 Rousseau, Emile 47
9 Rousseau, Emile 79
10 Rousseau, Emile 37 and 46.
11 Rousseau, Emile 40 and 363
12 Rousseau, Emile 82
13 Rousseau, Emile p 82.
14 In Reveries, he calls it “a precious sentiment of contentment and of peace which alone would
suffice to make this existence dear and sweet to anyone able to spurn all the sensual and earthly
impressions which incessantly come to distract us from it.” Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The Reveries
(1992) 69.
15 Rousseau, Emile, 83
To the best of my knowledge, this is the only published analysis of Rousseau’s “most
17 Lovlie, 337
18 Lovlie, 338
19 Lovlie, 339.
20 According to Landes, London was the dominant clock-making city in the 18th century, but
Geneva, with only a fraction of London’s population, came in second. Although London made
and sold more clocks and watches overall, Geneva was more thoroughly caught-up in clock-
making.
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