

# Time for Experience: Growing up under the experience economy

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## Introduction

This paper explores the condition of experience in its relation to time. Contemporary society is undergoing radical changes in its perception and experience of time. Modern society may be characterized as a society of urgency (Aubert 2004), where spatial and temporal boundaries are blurring (Lyng 2004; Boorstin 1961). Predictability has become a most prized value, and time itself a scarce commodity (Linder 1970).

Though emphasis on time (this particular time perception typical to the modern era) and more particularly on time control is hardly a new stance, its roots can be traced from the eve of work-discipline and all the way through the rationalization of factory production processes. It brought efficiency and predictability as the master words of *time in production*. It also involved a radical division of labour between thinking and doing and a transfer of the functions of planning production from labour to management. The worker's activity was limited to execution (the "doing") of tasks previously planned, standardized and optimized by the managers, assuming all the "thinking" on behalf of the worker (Andrew 1999). Rational control of time in production aimed at the shortening of (production) processes. We only need to extrapolate slightly to assume that its ultimate goal may have been the very suppression of the process itself to reach instant goal achievement. Such extrapolated vision is, as we shall see, not without relation with what our harried contemporary society strives after.

Besides, modern era's emphasis on time control did not only influence time in production. Previous research has shown a similar tendency toward control, regulation, pacification of play, leisure, fairs and holidays (Ariès 1973; Butsch 1990). The post-Fordism era opened the way to reduction of work time and rises in income. This should theoretically have resulted in an increase of time available for consumption. But Swedish economist Staffan Linder (1970) argues that the tendency is rather the reverse. Time is unlike other economic resources, says Linder, for it cannot be accumulated. Our affluence takes only the form of access to goods. Whatever our income, and therefore, the possibilities of access to a growing variety of goods, the availability of time we can use is limited. The supply of time is a constant while the demand for time under economic affluence (the time required for the consumption of a wider range of goods) is growing. Time itself thus becomes a scarce commodity, and the 'value' of one's time increases. In reaction, people will try to allocate their time in order to achieve a maximum yield, or increase the amount of goods to be consumed per time unit<sup>1</sup>. Such a phenomenon may be considered as the prelude of what Ritzer (2010) later called "the new means of consumption".

## The rise of experiential consumption

Over the past few decades, the very concept of experience has widened to new contexts, one of which is that of experiential consumption (Holbrook & Hirschman 1982), where commodities called 'experiences' or 'adventures' are provided through an extended service economy. Their research points out that conventional research on consumer behaviour has generally focused on consumption basically aiming at utilitarian functions<sup>2</sup>. They argue that there is another ignored but important consumption model "involving a steady flow of fantasies, feelings, and fun encompassed by what we call the "experiential view". [...] The growth of research on leisure, entertainment and the arts reflects a shift of attention towards the experiential side [of consumption]" (Ibid: 132,134). This commodification process is closely related to the leisure and entertainment market, but further developments (Hochschild 1983; Ritzer 2005, 2008; Bryman 2004) have shown that it was becoming the hidden paradigm underpinning many aspects of modern life.

This means that experiential consumption is no longer directed towards the concrete utilitarian functions that goods can provide, but towards the 'experience' of consumption itself. Focus on play, leisure and

entertainment implies that it is more the allocation of time rather than money that influences the consumption experience (Ibid: 133). The contemporary consumer cares less about the quantity of goods one can purchase with a certain amount of money than the quantity of experience-laden commodities one can consume in a certain amount of time. This is the process by which experiences are made commodities within a market of its own, the experience economy<sup>3</sup>.

In the following, we will assess the relation of time to experience through a concrete example of experiential consumption<sup>4</sup>, namely the ‘adventure experience’ provided through what is called adventure tourism. Since this form of tourism developed, extensive research has been conducted in a wide range of fields, particularly in countries disposing of abundant natural resources for such activities; for example Australia, New Zealand (Lynch & Moore 2004; Weber 2001) and North America (Fletcher 2005; Holyfield 1999). Referring to the results of field investigations on rafting or mountaineering activities as commercial trips, we will see how adventure experiences are consumed as time resources.

We will see how contemporary people’s striving for fun and adventure is an expression of the care for time yield and a symptom of our society of urgency. For to achieve the best experience yield in a given time span, secure enjoyment and predictable (yet extraordinary) experiences in friendly, safe, effortless environments, the experience process has to be ‘bypassed’. Process, it is known, is the very foe of efficiency, for it is the time that inevitably delays and sometimes hinders the fulfilment of our wishes. So another ‘radical division’ has to occur, between the experience providers (experts undertaking the planning or the ‘thinking’ on behalf of the clients) and the experience consumers (clients purchasing the services of the aforementioned providers).

In conclusion, critical insights about the educational implications of experiential consumption will be addressed. It can be resumed in a fundamental question—*Do we still have time for experience?* It happens that experience also takes time, and duration (as opposed to time control) is precisely what contemporary society does not allow.

### **The adventure experience**

As a beginning, let us think about what does the concept of adventure stands for in the common consciousness. First of all, as Venayre (2002) rightly claims, adventure is always related to travel. Travel means crossing boundaries. These boundaries are first spatial ones, the traveller advancing through space crosses lands inhabited by different people, having a territory more or less delimited by spatial boundaries<sup>5</sup>. Though, travel is not only moving through space, but also confronting a different kind of boundaries, that of the known and the unknown, certainty and uncertainty, self and otherness. The *idealtypus* of adventure is a journey into the unknown, the most fundamental expression of which is the mythical narrative of the journey of heroes to unknown and eerie lands (Campbell 1956). German sociologist Simmel also discussed about adventure and adventurers in his *On Individuality and Social Forms*. An important characteristic of adventure is that it “occurs outside the usual continuity of life” (Simmel 1971:188)<sup>6</sup>. Away from the secure and regulated realm of ordinary life, one must face what is outside its boundaries, uncertain outcomes, unpredictability and risk. This does not necessarily mean lethal danger, but can include conflict, hardships, deception, fear and a host of ordeals ranging from minor to major ones.

The contemporary adventure experience providers use such an *idealtypus* as a foreground for the advertisement of their commercial tours (or even other adventure-related commodities, for example see what Loynes (1998) calls “recreational capitalism”). But we need also to acknowledge the effect of time control on the adventure experience. Harvey notes a time-space compression phenomenon that followed the rapid innovation in transport through the modern era, which culminant point is the “annihilation of space through time” (Harvey 1990:241). It is forcefully illustrated in Boorstin’s example of long-haul passenger flights. While in flight, the passengers in the cabin space are literally isolated from the landscape they traverse; until landing, they will pass hours during which they will seem only to travel through time. The passenger gets to its destination without the experience of having gone there. The experience of going has been erased by time-space compression (Boorstin 1961).

Besides, the development of adventure tourism in the mid 70s led to the new concept of the adventure experience. Rather than air conditioned hotels, gourmet meals, sightseeing, beaches and folkloric attractions, adventure tours in “wild and scenic” (Holyfield 1999:13) environments provided activities such as white-water rafting and mountaineering; pursuits which were, on first thought, definitely *not* tourist activities. The reason is first, because these are active pursuits requiring specific training, while the typical stance of the tourist is basically passive, he “expects interesting things to happen to him” (Boorstin 1961:85). Second, because these practices were usually limited to professional rafters or alpinists: i.e. people that were formerly labelled as ‘explorers’ and were known for their daring feats of climbing the highest mountains or venturing to the most remote lands like the Polar Circle or the Amazonian rain forest. Though, what is not to be forgotten is the fact that such pursuits require time and money. For example, Beedie and Hudson (2003) say that experienced mountaineers had to “serve an apprenticeship” (Ibid: 635). That is proper physical training, acquisition of technical skills and mental resources, in order to be able to face the mountain’s odds independently. Such a learning process takes time for the obvious reason that getting experienced in climbing comes only through years of climbing. The reason why it requires money is also clear enough, as the cost of equipment and expendables necessary for the journey.

Still, the rise of adventure tourism has made possible for clients having neither the skill, nor the time to practice to engage such activities. As Beedie and Hudson (2003:634) observe, “[a]dventure tourists are typically rich, but have limited time: they want to squeeze as much experience into as short a time as possible”. So in order to bypass the skill and practice requirements, they perform a “capital transfer equation” (Ibid: 628) exchanging money for experience. The experience transaction here means mainly to buy the guide’s experienced practice to compensate the one they lack. As a result, adventure tourism outfitters provide the skills, control the risk, and “are often required to take responsibility for people who are not really qualified to undertake the activities they offer” (Fletcher 2004:12). Moreover, the capital transfer equation is correlated so that “the more exotic and adventurous the holiday purchased, the more this will cost” (Beedie & Hudson 2003:628).<sup>7</sup>

We observed that the commodity named adventure experience was marketed through images such as wilderness, risk, unpredictability, separation from ordinary life, journey into the unknown. But it happens that providers care to “tread a careful line between selling adventure as an idea and delivering the same as an experience. In this respect, adventure is *socially constructed* and has been subjected to a process of commodification “(Ibid: 629 my emphasis). There lies one of the fundamental paradoxes of adventure tourism, which is to detach the concept *adventure* from its former meaning, an uncertain, novel and uncomfortable *activity* and reattach it to a form of *experience*. The adventure no longer resides in the activity itself (as the capability to undertake it), but in the subjective experience of that activity (Fletcher 2005:26). Holyfield reports that “[t]oday, commercial companies compete to provide a desirable (and profitable) mixture of perceived risk and organisational constraint for novice consumers because not everyone demands truly fateful action. Instead, many of us want only the *appearance* of fatefulness, thus obtaining some of the glory with very little of the risk.[...] At each level of experience the emotional appetites of consumers are anticipated as companies attempt to harness as much of the experience as possible, still yielding to the unforeseeable elements of nature” (Holyfield 1999:5). Besides, companies are not the only ones to anticipate, such commodities’ advertising relies as much in customers anticipating extraordinary and unusual events that will be simultaneously pleasurable and intense, so when clients purchase it they are “paying for the expectation of gaining something” (Beedie & Hudson 2003:634).

Therefore, through the commodification of the adventure experience, we can observe some distinctive traits of experience consumption adding to those proposed by Holbrook and Hirschman. We observe that experience consumption relies on feelings of arousal and sensitive stimulation, but more important, experience is anticipated, the outcome of which is known (or at least expected) before the experience itself actually occurs. That makes it not only an adventure paradox, but also an experience paradox.

The second trait is the near-isolation from the need to confront boundaries inherent to adventure, to a final extent that the outfitters are taking the responsibility for all the odds that may occur during the trip to ensure

a secure yet extraordinary customer experience. In such conditions, adventure tourists have “the nature of their experience defined for them through a combination of a dependence upon guides, existing sources of information about mountains, and a protection afforded by constantly improving equipment and other technology resources” (Beedie & Hudson 2003:636)

Finally, the fundamental character that reassembles the adventure tourism paradox with the not less paradoxical traits of experience consumption together is that there is no such thing as an ‘adventure’ waiting out there to be lived. As Beedie and Hudson clearly stated, adventure is a ‘social construct’, in other words “the contemporary quest for adventure is an attempt to reproduce a model experience that exists only in the mind” (Fletcher 2005:30).

Among our ideal adventurers, from ancient heroes like Odysseus, to the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition led by Sir Ernest Shackleton (1914-1916), none were originally bound for an adventurous journey. Odysseus longed to return back to his homeland, and Shackleton’s exploration was made purely for scientific purposes. The ‘adventure’ was the result of unplanned events. What we remember about their experience is not what they planned to do but what they did once their plans were scrapped.<sup>8</sup> For them, it opened the way not to adventure, but to a dire and painstaking situation, which was no way desirable, but had to be confronted. The ‘adventure’ in Shackleton’s journey is not Shackleton’s actual experience but the narrative reconstruction of that experience, which stands as a model adventure experience<sup>9</sup>. Adventure ‘happens’ when a plan goes awry, it is accidental and unpredictable. That is precisely the reason why it can be neither planned nor anticipated, to the least nor commodified.

‘Adventures’ as experience commodities are said to become a type of resistance to the dehumanising constraints of modernization (Holyfield 1999:5), it is used to provide experiences supposedly ‘missing’ in contemporary societies (Lynch & Moore 2004). As Lyng (2005:21) observes “the disenchanting world of formally rational institutions offers little possibility for the vibrant experience of unexpected and unimagined sensual realities. In a highly rationalized system where almost nothing is left to change, day-to-day existence is distinguished most by its closely regulated, predictable character.” But at the same token, ‘adventures’ cannot become an escape route from modernity, because fundamentally, it does not allow to transcend the social reality of consumer society; the experience merely represents an extension of that reality (Ibid: 33).

Rationalization of production processes and commodification of adventure pursuit alike the aim to suppress uncertainty to make its process predictable, efficient and regulated. The shift on time resources and the aim at the best experience yield finds its expression in adventure tourism as well. The client is paying expert staff to be relieved from the tiresome task of *thinking* and *confronting boundaries*, as well as having unusual, extraordinary situations planned for him to experience, on a here-and-now basis. But experiential consumption is not only about the commodification of experience. It is about the commodification of emotions and human bonds themselves. Fantasies, feelings and fun provided on a commercial basis.

Aubert (2004) observed that our contemporary cultures are marked by the institution of the dictatorship of real time, leading to the development of “cultures of urgency” (*cultures d’urgence*, Ibid: 75). Contemporary societies have become societies in constant flow, without frontiers or limits. Such social conditions have direct influence on the personality types that develop, or are encouraged to develop within it, as well as on the nature of interpersonal relations. In a society that only values immediacy and where the flow of urgency rules, to establish stable and lasting social relations is nearly impossible. Being dispossessed of the time as duration necessary to feel sentiments, one can barely feel but *sensations* (Aubert 2004:78, my emphasis). Human bonds tend to lead through and be mediated by the markets for consumer goods (Bauman 2007), they come in ‘packs’, such as packaged experiences, packaged emotions, packaged fun and so on.

### **Packaged experiences: educational implications**

So we come to ask ourselves, what time is left outside of such packaging? Time packages that are to contain experience like bean cans are to contain beans. Do we still have time for experiences other than those on the shelves displaying the wide range of paid-for experience commodities? In such a context, the answer would not only be negative, but an ‘of course, not’. Not only do people have no time for it, but they are neither

willing to 'waste' such a scarce commodity. Whatever experience they consume, they want it now and they want it for sure. Instantaneity, predictability, safety, certainty are the rewards of their mastery over time.

In an educational context, the meaning and the value we give to experience is quite different. It is widely admitted that experience is of educational value as one of the major paths to reflective thinking and growth. Growth is understood here not only as socialization or development, but as human formation as a whole. It fosters autonomy and skill, but it is also the locus of confrontation with boundaries, that of the known and the unknown, certainty and uncertainty, self and otherness, and as such involves risk and possible conflict. Such educational values of experience are blurring under the contemporary changes in time perception and its relation to experience. Contemporary educational policy increasingly requires experiences to be safe, fun and predictable (see Ritzer (1998:151ff.) for a discussion on the commodification of educational institutions. In addition, some 40 years before, Kiell (1961:4) observed the spread of educational goods yet promising "clean, wholesome educational fun"). If it is not, to the reverse, lamenting the loss of experiential opportunities caused by urbanisation and technological civilization, and the dire necessity to provide such supposedly "missing experiences". Unfortunately, these two trends go the same slippery path, which leads to views of experience environments that are sanitized, civilized, trivialized, or in another variant, romanticized views of 'wild' and pristine nature (Bryman 2004; Lynch & Moore 2004) that are deemed to counter the devastating effects of urban modern life. Expurgation of risk and boundary conflict can be resumed in Coupland's expression (cited in Lyng 2005:173) "Adventure without risk is like Disneyland". So, to assess the educational possibilities of experience in our contemporary society, the key question is clearly not — how can we recover the educational value of experience?

The relevant question is — when our safe and fun enclosure happens to shatter, can we still cope with risk and uncertainty if we are to face it?

If experience as a locus of confrontation with boundaries is to be considered as a fundamental element for growth, this question is of educational importance. Growth itself cannot be shortcut, like the process of experience in experience consumption. The process of growth is like the apprenticeship of mountaineers, it takes *time*, or more exactly, it is structurally and essentially bound to take time. Because it is through time one learns autonomy. That is, like the ability to take independent action by mountaineers, a quality or skill that cannot be bypassed by some sort of transaction. The riskless experience is an experience where *nothing* happens; nothing except what was previously planned to unfold. And if there is no eventfulness, nothing to wonder about, then there is nothing to learn and the experience itself does not occur. What we mean by 'risk' here is not necessarily the possibility of physical injury or psychological stress. We are not suggesting some Spartan-like education in hostile environments. It is rather the possibility of one's experience expectations to go awry. The possibility for a planned experience not to unfold properly is when *something* unpredicted happens, when the safe and fun enclosure shatters and the elements that were expurgated outside come to flow through the breached wall of predictability. Confronting the unknown or the uncertain is not only a risk (of failure, or other low-yield experience for example) but also the necessary condition for growth. One has to learn to relate to environment or society by oneself, and through relation with it. This is why the formation of human bonds takes time. This is the time necessary to confront diverse situations or people with various opinions or worldviews, which may not fit in one's satisfaction patterns (or in a near future, we may have to face cases of individuals that show PTSD just because they were frustrated or deceived in their experience expectations). Though, contacts with boundaries have long been deemed to hinder socialization and its normative function or to create potential for rebellion. But can the deliberate isolation from the need to confront boundaries be beneficial for growth and development of youth? Programmes for youth designed to teach cooperation, social skills and strategies for working with others are seen as a foundation for children to become members of the community. However, these experiences are often defined by adults, occur in spaces created by adults and have adult-valued meanings. While superficially seen as beneficial and developmental for youth, the question must be asked — to what extent do the youth themselves see these experiences as developmental and beneficial? Are resilient youth created by experiences that are other-defined? (Guilmette et al. 2005).

The issue of resilience and other-definition expresses another concern for experience. Do the recipients of these experiences live them as they are ‘programmed’ to be lived? Does it have *meaning* for them? Barus-Michel says that enjoyment and efficiency are progressively replacing meaning, that is, the *effort of thinking*. In the place of thinking, we substitute calculating, but calculating is neither thinking, nor producing meaning. Human beings need to give meaning to their being in the world that allows them to find their path in life (Barus-Michel in Aubert 2004:244). Unfortunately, thinking also takes *time*, and same as growth and autonomy, the process of thinking is a task no service industry can undertake, at least in the educational context. Moreover, can we imagine learning severed from learning to think? The question “why?” is the beginning of all learning and precedes all other-defined forms of education. It is only possible when experience *happens*, when one comes in relation with a yet unknown, uncertain situation. It occurs while sharing space-time between the known (our social context, including other individuals) and the unknown (the source of our wonder, fear, puzzlement, enjoyment, sadness, hostility, etc).

The experience consumption is of course, free of this need from thinking, deemed too time-taking, inefficient and burdensome by its clients, who will gladly pay experience providers to think on behalf of themselves and even take responsibilities for them so they can get the better yield of their scarce time resources.

Loynes has a most appropriate expression to describe the relation between provision and education, in our context. “Provision is associated with the delivery of a good or product to a consumer, it implies trading of that good from one to another rather than sharing its production, the parallel in education is didactic teaching” (Loynes 1998:38).

But education has to do with processes that cannot be so easily bypassed, the growth process, the autonomy process and the thinking process. And as long as we recognize a distance between experience learning and didactic teaching, we shall acknowledge experience as sharing time and space with something we do not yet understand (and may never be able to, in some cases). Sharing is not only some fraternity move towards the other, like it is often considered as, it can also be found amidst any encounter or even conflict. It is, to the widest sense, to be in relation with something outside our boundaries. And experience has this particular trait which requires us not to receive it like the finished product of a third party, but to produce it, produce its very process to reach an outcome that shall be our outcome, the shared product of our journey outside our boundaries.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> As an example, Csikszentmihalyi, commenting Linder’s work, wrote that “[t]he opportunity costs of playing with one’s child, reading poetry, or attending a family reunion become too high, and so one stops doing such irrational things. Eventually, a person who only responds to material rewards becomes blind to any other kind and loses the ability to derive happiness from other sources.” (Csikszentmihalyi 1999:823)

<sup>2</sup> For example, focus on factors such as income constraints, the quantity of goods one could purchase, and the tangible benefits one could receive from its consumption.

<sup>3</sup> The experience economy is not a term used by Holbrook and Hirschman, it was later coined by Pine and Gilmore in the title of their book, *The Experience Economy: Work is Theater and Every Business a Stage* (Harvard Business Press, 1999). Its contents develop experiential consumption to concrete business models and subsequent customer behaviour analysis.

<sup>4</sup> Consumption oriented toward feelings and sensory stimulation, in Holbrook and Hirschman’s context.

<sup>5</sup> In the modern world, these spatial boundaries are represented by national frontiers.

<sup>6</sup> Simmel says adventure is also another form of experience, precisely in its relation to time. “Of our ordinary experiences, we declare that one of them is over when, or because, another starts; they reciprocally determine each other’s limits, and so become a means whereby the contextual unity of life is structured or expressed. The adventure, however, according to its intrinsic meaning, is independent of the “before” and “after”; its boundaries are defined regardless of them. We speak of adventure precisely when continuity with life is thus disregarded on principle—or rather when there is not even any need to disregard it, because we know from the beginning that we have to do with something alien, untouchable, out of the ordinary” (Ibid:188-189).

<sup>7</sup> To give a rather extreme example, Mount Everest’s commercialization began in 1985, when Dick Bass, a wealthy but relatively inexperienced climber, paid to be led up the mountain by a world-class mountaineer. Subsequent years saw a dramatic increase in commercial ascents (Fletcher 2004:29). The average cost of the Everest experience is estimated at \$250,000 (USD) for a group and

\$30,000 to \$75,000 for individuals. Off this total, \$70,000 is the cost of the permit required just to set foot on Mount Everest, a clear example of the commodification of mountains (Beedie & Hudson 2003:629).

<sup>8</sup> For details see Fletcher (2005).

<sup>9</sup> The reproduction of such a model experience can also be observed in a different context, that is the situation in which children play hero. While playing the child enacts his or her social construct of 'what it is to be a hero', but to the difference with experience consumption, the hero experience is shaped by the child's imagination, requiring no expert staff to help the child achieve it. Certainly this argument would require development in play theory and has limitations, like the extension of the "commercialized child" in contemporary society (Cf. Schor, Juliet B., *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture*, Scribner, 2004). Nonetheless, we think it is an alternative worthy to point out.

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