

## How the seven-day week came to rule the world

### A new book shows how modern cities **embraced** the weekly rhythm

In the autumn of 1853 Thomas Butler Gunn got lost—temporally rather than physically. On a visit to Mammoth Cave in Kentucky, and isolated from the outside world, his diary quickly slipped the **moorings** of chronological reality. Wednesdays are repeated and days go mislabelled. It took around a **fortnight**, and renewed contact with civilisation, for Gunn to restore his weekly bearings.



The episode, says David Henkin, suggests how fragile a sense of time can be—especially when it comes to weeks. Unlike months or years, these seven-day groupings have no real basis in astronomy. People from Nigeria to China have **thrived** without them. And yet the week has become the measure not only of routine, but even of **sanity**. “Weekly rhythms have become so thoroughly absorbed into ordinary human experience”, Mr Henkin writes, “that forgetting what day it is constitutes a singular symptom and feeling of disorientation.”

His new book shows how the week came to rule the world. Until the 19th century, he explains, the other days were a **preamble** to the Sabbath for many Protestants. Catholics followed a cycle of **feast** days and **fasts**. When newspapers, factory schedules and weekly paydays were all rarer, the weekly structure was less important. People got muddled, not just underground. As late as 1866, the *Louisville Courier* mentioned a man getting drunk on Friday because he thought it was Saturday.



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In outline, the story is one of urban development. As towns grew and society became more sophisticated, citizens “became differently and more intensely week-oriented, in ways we can now recognise as modern”. When his local **benevolent** society met on Wednesdays in 1859, and choral concerts were scheduled for Fridays, James Fiske of Massachusetts couldn’t afford to mix up his days. When *Every Saturday* magazine landed in New York each weekend in 1866, Bayard Taylor was expecting it.

Later anecdotes illustrate the “distinctive air” that individual days came to develop—the particular associations each subliminally carries. Philadelphians once used chains to block horse traffic on Sundays. The advent of washing machines disrupted the weekly cleaning schedule. In due course Westerners exported these feelings to the world. Japan formally adopted the seven-day system only in 1873; all the same, a character in a novel by Haruki Murakami is as sure of something “as I am that today is Wednesday”.

That sort of conviction is now **crumbling**. French and Russian revolutionaries ultimately failed in their attempts to abolish the seven-day week, but for many people the pandemic has squashed the weekly rhythm into an **interminable** present. Monday, runs the joke, has been replaced by Noneday. As Netflix offers entertainment on a **whim**, and morning newspapers become **obsolete**, Mr Henkin argues that “the hold of the week on our lives loosens, and our place in the cycle becomes in turn less memorable.” Everyone may soon start to feel a bit like Thomas Butler Gunn.

### Essential words for writing and speaking

1. **Embrace** - to accept an idea, a proposal, a set of beliefs, etc., especially when it is done with enthusiasm.

*It is unlikely that such countries will embrace capitalist ideas.*

2. **Mooring** - the ropes, chains, etc. by which a ship or boat is moored.

*The boat slipped its moorings and drifted out to sea.*

3. **Fortnight** - two weeks.

*We hope to leave in the next fortnight.*

4. **Thrive** - to become, and continue to be, successful, strong, healthy, etc.

*These animals rarely thrive in captivity.*

5. **Sanity** - the state of having a normal healthy mind.

*His behaviour was so strange that I began to question his sanity.*



6. **Preamble** - an introduction to a book or a written document; an introduction to something you say.

*She gave him the bad news without preamble.*

7. **Benevolent** - (especially of people in authority) kind, helpful and generous.

*He was a benevolent old man and would not hurt a fly.*

8. **Crumble (v)** - to begin to fail or get weaker or to come to an end.

*Support for the current government is crumbling.*

9. **Interminable** - lasting a very long time and therefore boring or annoying.

*One of friend's interminable stories sometimes make me feel frustrated.*

10. **Whim** - a sudden wish to do or have something, especially when it is something unusual or unnecessary.

*We bought the house on a whim.*

11. **Obsolete** - no longer used because something new has been invented.

*With technological changes many traditional skills have become obsolete.*

12. **Feast** - a special meal with very good food or a large meal for many people.

*The women were busy preparing the wedding feast.*

13. **Fast** – a period during which you do not eat food, especially for religious or health reasons.

*Most Muslims go on a fast during the holy month of Ramadan.*



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