



CHAPTER 16

When We Had the Time

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*Along with Juliet Schor and a handful of others, Benjamin Hunnicutt has been one of the intellectual pillars of the shorter work-time movement. His writings bring to life powerful moments in American history, stories that ought to be part of every student's education, but sadly have been forgotten. It was from Ben that I first learned the wonderful story of the Black-Canary Bill, recounted again in this chapter. We launched Take Back Your Time Day on April 6, 2003, the 70th anniversary of the passage of the Black-Canary Bill, which would have made 30 hours the official U.S. workweek (anything more would have been overtime) by the U.S. Senate. I met Ben Hunnicutt while producing the special, *Running Out of Time*, for PBS. I'll never forget the trip my coproducer, Viva Boe, and I made with Ben to Battle Creek, Michigan, where together we interviewed veterans of the Kellogg Company's 30-hour workweek (also recounted in this chapter). It was amazing to learn that such an experiment had actually occurred in the United States, and to hear how much it meant to the people who had lived it.*

—JdG

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teach in one of the last remaining leisure studies departments in America. What, after all, needs to know what to do with leisure when we don't have any? But one question comes up frequently when I talk about how overworked Americans are: *Maybe we have to struggle hard to live these days, but at least we have it a lot better than most other people in the world and throughout history, don't we? Technology has twice blessed us. We are much wealthier and we don't have to work nearly as hard. Right?*

Wrong!

Most of us assume that preindustrial folk had to work like slaves virtually all the time to keep from starving or being eaten by wolves, or whatever. The anthropologists' discovery that the "Original Affluent Society" was the "primitive" hunter-gatherer is, therefore, something of a shock to modern prejudice.

Original Affluence

For years, I have relished the surprise and occasional dismay among my audiences when I reveal that our industrial society is poverty-stricken in the time we have to live as compared to most of the rest of humanity throughout history. Even the majority of slaves in the ancient world and serfs during the Middle Ages did not work as hard, as regularly, or as long as we do.

From our point of view, hunter-gatherers "work" little or not at all. We might recognize what they are doing as "work" during only a few hours of activity a day. They are "affluent" because most of the time they have "enough" and can spend the majority of their lives as they wish: playing, sitting around, performing rituals, and doing things (gossiping, arguing, nurturing, flirting, telling stories . . .) with family and social groups. For these people, "enough is as good as a feast." They are rich in time to live.

Standard anthropology texts typically point out that, "Another common misconception concerning industrial and preindustrial modes of production is that industrial workers have more leisure than their preindustrial ancestors. The reverse seems to be true, however . . . this leads to the question of why the great labor-saving potential of technology has [not resulted in] an ever greater amount of leisure."¹

Why, indeed!

Our daily grind was virtually unknown until modern times. It may well be that our way of constantly working is unique. While we dash from place to place, meeting to meeting, frantically judding elevator buttons, desperately fighting traffic, the so-called "primitive" people of the world have a quiet breakfast with family, stroll around their gardens—perhaps taking a swim and planning for the delights of the coming afternoon hunt and evening feast.

1. Harris, Marvin. *Culture, Man, and Nature: An Introduction to General Anthropology*. Cor-

Not only is the pace of our lives accelerating, as James Gleick has shown us in his splendid book, *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything*, we have become virtually full-time workers. Our technology has allowed our jobs to follow us everywhere. We have become long-distance runners, plunging headlong at a sprinter's pace. No end seems in sight, except the grave or exhausted retirement. What happened?

Dreams of Leisure

After the "Neolithic Revolution" when we began domesticating food crops, farmers and city dwellers found it necessary to work a good deal longer than tribal societies and subject themselves to a more regular routine. Periodically, they have had to work very long and very hard indeed with harvesting, planting, etc. Even so, they were never as devoted to work, or so absorbed by it, as we.

Moreover, throughout history, humans dreamed of less, never more work. Through the ages, *leisure* was seen as the "basis of culture," the human condition yearned for, the hope expressed in legend and myth, the promise of heaven. At its very best, paid work was a subordinate value understood as a *means* to other, better things.

Aristotle is often quoted on this point, and rightly so. He wrote, "We work in order to have leisure," a sentiment the modern reader finds hard to understand.

This view continued well into the modern age. For over a century, prior to the 1930s, laborers throughout the industrial nations successfully reduced their working hours, cutting them virtually in half, and fully expecting their victories to continue.

Led by the United States, peoples of the industrial nations believed that industry and capitalism would continue to provide humans with more and more of the good things of life; more money *and* more time. This was how most people defined "progress" for centuries—higher wages *and* shorter hours. This is why they submitted to the rigors of work's new discipline and to the stress of living in a capitalist world driven by greed and envy. These two demands were the essence of the Labor Movement.

The American Federation of Labor's 1926 recommitment to the "progressive shortening of the hours of labor" celebrated labor's achievements to date—the eight-hour day and five-day week—and called for continuing action. The six-hour day was next on the agenda, then the four-day week and the four-hour day were soon to follow.

The original vision that persisted throughout the nineteenth century, that work would be reduced to a subordinate role in life, and the peoples of the industrial world would be able to work more to live, and live less to work, seemed about to come true, nearly eighty years ago.

The Old Economic Wisdom

Economists agreed. Describing the hundred-year-long work reduction process around the turn of the twentieth century, most confidently predicted that this decline would continue well into the future. There was no reason to expect it to stop. Indeed, this was arguably *the longest and most influential social and economic movement in modern times*.

What other movement had lasted so long and involved so many people throughout the industrial world? Stacked up against other "social movements" and "economic trends," this one was gigantic. Moreover, unlike other more abstract, hard-to-see "movements," this was close to home, involving the way in which ordinary people lived their lives and spent their time everyday.

Hundreds of books and articles were written predicting that work would soon become a subordinate part of life, and rightly so. Speaking before the Young Men's Hebrew Association in New York in the mid-1920s, Julian Huxley called the two day workweek "inevitable" because of the simple fact that "the human being can consume so much and no more. . . ."²

John Maynard Keynes, the best known economist of the century, wrote in the early '30s that, "when we reach the point when the world produces all the goods that it needs in two days, as it inevitably will . . . we must turn our attention to the great problem of what to do with our leisure." Indeed the time was rapidly approaching when "three hours [work] a day [will be] quite enough to satisfy the old Adam in most of us!"³ Keynes and Huxley agreed, as so many had maintained at the time, that leisure would overtake work well before the century ended.

Enlightened Owners

This view of progress spread even to conservative business people. Walter Gifford, president of AT&T, the largest corporation in the United States in the 1920s, was one of several business leaders who recognized that "industry . . . has gained a new and astonishing vision." The final, best achievement of business and the free market need not be perpetual economic growth and everlasting consumerism, he argued, but "a new type of civilization," in which "how to make a living becomes less important than how to live."⁴ As it had been doing for a century . . .

"[m]achinery will increasingly take the load off men's shoulders . . . Every one of us will have more chance to do what he wills, which means greater opportunity, both materially and spiritually. . . . [Steadily decreasing work hours] will give us

2. "Professor Huxley Predicts 2-Day Working-Week," *New York Times* (Nov. 17, 1930): 41:1.

3. Keynes, John Maynard. *Essays in Persuasion*. New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1932: 369.

time to cultivate the art of living, give us a better opportunity for . . . the arts, enlarge the comforts and satisfaction of the mind and spirit, as material well-being feeds the comforts of the body."

"Liberation Capitalists" such as Gifford, W.K. Kellogg (Kellogg's Corn Flakes®), and Lord Leverhulm (one of the Lever Brothers—the British soap kings) expected to perfect work by subordinating it. Good jobs were still possible, even in the midst of the tightly controlled, specialized, and frenzied environment of the modern office and factory, so long as the center of life was shifting; so long as people "worked more to live and lived less to work."

They believed that work would soon be put in its rightful place, becoming the servant of people's larger concerns with living, and modern jobs, despite their shortcomings, would be redeemed. The culmination of industrial capitalism was not to be perpetual economic expansion and eternally more consumption. Mass leisure would become progress' final, grand achievement.

The Best to You Each Morning

In the 1920s and 1930s, people in the United States began to live this new freedom, experimenting with new kinds of activities, hobbies, fads and fashions. Some recovered vital parts of life lost to industrial progress, such as starting creative projects around the house (the do-it-yourself phenomena), reinvigorating neglected communities, spending more time with family, friends, and nature, or reading.

For example, W.K. Kellogg put the rhetoric of his fellow "Liberation Capitalists" into practice in Battle Creek, Michigan. In December 1930, he and his CEO, Lewis Brown, began the six-hour day in his cereal factories. Even in the midst of the Great Depression, the experiment was a grand success, paying for itself in short order as productivity increased, and giving workers two additional free hours a day. As one woman put it, life in Battle Creek became something very much like "summer camp."

We have excellent records of what people at Kellogg thought about and did with the "extra time." The Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor did a thorough empirical study, and newspapers, magazines, radio, and scholarly journals reported in detail about what most people at the time simply assumed was "the coming thing"—business's next "great initiative."

Family and community were the two main beneficiaries. Kellogg workers spent most of their "extra time" at home and around the neighborhood, strengthening and improving those places. Workers continue to tell stories about the six-hour

day, how parents had time to lavish on children, how life seemed quieter and more peaceful then, how the neighborhood seemed more like a community.

One of the workers cautioned a young interviewer, "If you remember anything I tell you, take as much time as you can with your children when they come. Play with them. Read to them. It's as good for you as it is for them, maybe better. It don't get no better in this world, and if you miss these days, working all the time, you don't get a second chance."

Leisure infrastructures began to form. Private commercial recreation enjoyed the new business—skating rinks, movies, etc.—and survived in the town. New firms opened even in the dark days of the depression.

However, since money was tight all around, it was public facilities (parks, community centers), private voluntary nonprofit organizations (YMCA, fraternal orders), and traditional institutions (churches, synagogues) that flourished, supported not by increased revenues, but by the extra time people had to spend.

The Balanced Life

Schools became involved, opening their doors to a community rich in time to live. Teachers began to instruct students in the "the arts of living," preparing them not only for work, but also for the reality of leisure. Liberal arts and sciences were reinvigorated. "Extra curricular" activities burgeoned. Parent involvement expanded. "Room mothers" (parents—including some men—who volunteered to help teachers in the classroom) appeared. Librarians saw a new opportunity opening. Libraries would emerge at last as a vital community institution.

Workers spoke often about how the "balance" of their lives shifted. Instead of organizing their days around the job, they found that concerns about how to spend their lives away from work gained prominence. The economic equation seemed to shift as well. Economic concerns waned somewhat as extra-pecuniary interests waxed strong. "What shall I do" competed with "what shall I buy."

Those who became used to six-hour days, and to the expansion of their lives that the "extra time" provided, frequently looked back on the eight-hour day as a kind of barbaric slavery, saying things like "I wouldn't go back to eight hours for anything. I wouldn't have any time to do anything but work and eat."

1. Gwinn, Sherman. "Days of Drudgery Will Soon Be Over: An Interview with Walter S. Gifford." *American Magazine* (November 1928). See also "Address Before the General Election Board." *Addresses, Papers, and Interviews*, 4 (September 1931): 168.