



“Summary of article by Gary Cross: Traumas of Time and Money in Prosperity and Depression” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 2: The Consumer Society, Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. 43-45.

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## **“Summary of article by Gary Cross: Traumas of Time and Money in Prosperity and Depression”**

At the end of World War I workers in America, Britain, and France fought for shorter work days and work weeks. It appeared for a time that productivity gains might be shared with workers in the form of reductions in hours as well as increases in pay. Yet the movement for shorter hours soon lost its momentum, and the equation of productivity gains with wage increases became widely accepted, allowing the creation of a mass consumer culture. This paper analyzes the forces that blocked further reductions in hours of work in the 1920s and 1930s, while another paper by the same author, entitled "The Consumer's Comfort and Dream" [see chapter 4 in this volume], argues that working people actively participated in the formation of the consumer society during the interwar years.

### **Choice and Discipline in the Interwar Years**

Unions were relatively strong at the end of World War I, and many strikes demanded an eight-hour day or other reductions in hours. But organized labor had an ambiguous attitude toward the choice between time and money. It was more difficult to win reductions in work time than increases in wage rates because of the increased training and benefit costs, reduced flexibility in scheduling, and weakened labor discipline involved with shorter hours. When the labor movement grew weaker after 1919 as a result of recession and political opposition, the demand for shorter hours was dropped. During the 1920s, church and business reformers rather than unions continued the pressure for the eight-hour day in industry.

Lacking organized support for alternatives such as increased leisure, individual workers could only pursue advancement through wage gains and the accompanying increase in consumption. In the United States, by far the wealthiest country of the era, there was one car on the road for every 1.3 families by 1929, most of them paid for on the installment plan. Yet, by later standards, the consumer culture was barely underway; it was economic insecurity and the absence of an alternative, more than creeping consumerism, that drove the bias toward money.

That bias was intensified during the Depression as unemployment became a source of misery and social isolation. The trauma of job insecurity

tended to diminish the value of free time while it reinforced the attractions of money and the goods that it could purchase. Unemployment disrupted routines and made free time something more to dread than to long for. It intensified the linkage of status with work, wages, and the goods that money could buy. (136)

## **Traumas of Joblessness and the Declining Value of Free Time**

Unemployment undermined the value of free time because it destroyed the routines of work and play. This loss of a work routine was recognized as significant by government and philanthropic groups. Work relief programs in the United States and occupational clubs in Britain were developed with the objective of preserving the self-respect and manual skills of the jobless, while providing a structure for their time. These programs and clubs did achieve their objectives to a certain extent, but proved to be inadequate substitutes for work.

Unemployment left many with unstructured free time and the feeling that they had no right to participate in public leisure time. Existing social networks and institutions were inadequate to provide for people's needs, and so many withdrew into their homes and families. Men found themselves thrust into the traditionally female sphere of housework and domesticity, often resulting in conflict or discomfort for both husbands and wives. The lack of work routines heightened the awareness of status differences and reinforced the commitment to the values of work and the things that wages could buy.

## **Was There Love on the Dole?**

Economic hardship was very unevenly distributed during the Depression, and daily exposure to the co-existing affluent society only increased the humiliation of poverty. Prices dropped faster than hourly wages, so that those who remained steadily employed were actually better off. Luxury consumption did not fall as quickly as national income; in America sales of new appliances such as refrigerators continued to grow. Working-class leisure consumption had an escapist character, including spending on gambling, sensational films, and cheap magazines.

Spending money was psychologically liberating while its absence was devastating. Resentment of affluence was tempered by identification with those who could still afford to buy. For men, the lack of money often signified an inability to play the role of provider; joblessness undermined the traditional masculine role and sometimes even led to psychosomatic illness. Yet the sexual division of labor within the household was rarely reversed, even when married women held jobs while their husbands did not. Families struggled, often against immense odds, to maintain established images of respectability and propriety.

The fact that unemployment led to humiliation rather than political activism or creative self-realization

was inevitable in a society where, especially for men, free time was a compensation for work and leisure was inherently dependent upon income beyond subsistence. Not only was the value of free time diminished and money endowed with special social power, but commitment to work was reinforced.  
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