



“Summary of article by Juliet Schor: Exiting the Squirrel Cage” in *Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 2: The Consumer Society*. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. pp. 349-352

Social Science Library: Frontier Thinking in Sustainable Development and Human Well-being

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The textbook model of consumption assumes that workers can choose freely between labor and leisure. That assumption is increasingly unrealistic in the U.S. today. Instead, Americans are forced to work long and growing hours, as the author’s analysis has shown (see Schor summary in chapter 2). In her concluding chapter, she proposes a number of structural changes in labor markets and employment practices that would give workers a real choices about their hours of work, and speculates about the impact of such changes on consumerism, leisure activities, and the environment.

The modern consciousness of time as something to be measured and paid for emerged with the development of a capitalist economy, and was initially resisted by workers who maintained a traditional, "timeless" view of the world. Today, the sale of time for money is taken for granted, its legitimacy beyond question and its sphere of influence ever expanding. Market pressures continue to encroach on individuals' right to free time – a right which is established, to a limited extent, by legal holidays and regulated working hours. A redefinition and expansion of the right to free time is now needed.

Employers are biased toward demanding excessive hours from salaried workers, whose pay is typically independent of the actual number of hours worked. To end this bias, every salaried job should have a standard schedule formally attached to it, and compensatory time off should be required for hours worked beyond this schedule. Such a policy would not be a cure-all for excessive hours: employers could still set very high standards, and pressures to ignore the standards (as happens in Japan today) could continue to lead to unpaid overtime. However, clearly defined schedules would be an important step forward. A second proposal stipulates that employers pay for overtime with time off rather than money. Companies that ask workers to put in time beyond their scheduled hours should offer an equal amount of "comp" time at a later date, preferably scheduled at the employee's convenience.

Changes are also needed to make part-time work more attractive and feasible. In the absence of a socialized health insurance scheme, one step is to ensure that part-time workers receive a pro-rated share of health insurance, pension benefits, and other fringe benefits, and are given the option of upgrading to full coverage at their own expense. This would eliminate barriers that keeps many people from considering part-time employment. Another option is to institute job sharing, in which two people split one position's work, responsibility, pay, and benefits.

While people are generally unwilling or unable to reduce their current paychecks, polls indicate strong support for trading future income gains for additional time off. If an annual wage increase equal to 2 percent above inflation were entirely converted to reductions in hours, the average American work-year of 1,960 hours would decrease to 1,600 hours in about a decade, allowing either an additional two months of vacation per year or a 6.5 hour work-day. In this scenario, a shorter work-year would come at the expense of wage increases, with paychecks just keeping up with inflation. Although some would undoubtedly prefer to receive all future gains in the form of wage hikes, a large majority of both men and women tell pollsters that they would like to trade at least some income and career advancement for time off.

INEQUALITIES OF TIME

Many Americans earn so little that they cannot afford to give up future wage gains for free time. Nearly one-third of US workers earn wages that do not lift them out of poverty even on a full-time schedule. At present, a voluntary choice between leisure and wage gains would leave the poorest third of the nation working oppressively long hours. The solution to this inequality is a reduction in the underlying inequality of income and the guarantee of a living wage for all.

Increased flexibility of working hours could also reproduce inequalities of gender. Although the proposed changes in employment practices are gender-neutral, existing gender roles would lead more women than men to take advantage of them. This would reinforce women's current responsibility for housework and child care. However, if men take increased responsibility in these areas, they too will opt for reduced working hours in many cases. Proposals for flexible work arrangements will help undermine rigid gender roles by making shared parenting and two-career families more feasible.

Claims that competition compels long working hours are more than a century old: in 1830 New York employers complained that a 10-hour day would allow foreign firms to undersell them. Today it is often observed that Japanese and Korean workers put in more hours per year than Americans. However, Western European workers have much shorter hours per year, maintaining high living standards without sacrificing time off from work. It is not the number of hours worked or the absolute level of wages that determines international competitiveness, but rather the relationship between hourly wages and productivity.

In fact, long hours, with the Japanese model for example, may actually lower productivity. Several studies of businesses that have reduced working hours have found that productivity increases as a result; in some cases, a modest reduction in hours leads to no loss of output, or even a gain. With shorter hours, workers tend to be less exhausted, take fewer breaks, have better morale, and maintain a faster pace of work. Yet, management usually resists reductions in the number of hours worked, basing their decision on a much too narrow understanding of costs.

OVERCOMING CONSUMERISM

For many Americans, escaping from overwork will require not only economic and social changes, but also cultural and psychological transformation. A change in expectations is necessary in order to understand the function that material goods perform. When the struggle to

acquire commodities takes the place of an emotionally satisfying life (e.g., when men work long hours to provide for their families and thereby spend little time with them), everyone suffers. Those who succeed in "dropping out of the rat race" generally find themselves happier as a result.

What will people do with the increased leisure time that results from a more flexible work arrangement? Certainly some will seek out second jobs, either out of economic necessity or because of the cultural imperative that states that men with leisure are lazy. But, this cultural imperative may be losing its force with the rise of "post-materialist values" – the desire for personal fulfillment, self-expression, and meaning. People do work hard during their time off, but often at unpaid endeavors such as caring for young, old, or sick family members; volunteer or religious activities; continuing education; or participation in sports or community organizations.

Shorter hours at work will leave people less tired and perhaps less focused on low-energy leisure activities such as television viewing. The ability to use leisure well must be cultivated; too much work makes our "leisure skills" atrophy. Moreover, leisure activities have become increasingly market-oriented, expensive pastimes. Government and community support is needed for affordable, non-commodity-related leisure activities.

Although corporations remain the most significant obstacle to the expansion of leisure, there are enlightened, forward-looking companies whose policies could serve as models for others. The existence of progressive companies, as well as the "greening" of public consciousness, changes in gender roles and expectations, and the small but growing number of people who have voluntarily "downshifted" out of the fast lane, all point toward changes in attitudes toward work, consumption, and leisure. Effective organization will be needed to mobilize this changing public opinion; government must play a major role in facilitating this change.

Commitment to an expanding material standard of living for everyone – or what Galbraith has called the "vested interest in output" – entails our continuing confinement in the "squirrel cage" of work and holds the potential for ecological disaster. Or, we can redirect our concern with material goods toward redressing the inequalities of their distribution -- and realize the promise of free time which lies before us. (165)