

Work and Leisure

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INTRODUCTION

“Modern Man” lives in the “age of leisure” in which he supposedly has free time in which to do whatever he desires. And yet he finds himself caught up in a whirlwind of activity in which he works in order to have free time, and uses free time “to get away from it all”—or, in other words, to prepare and “repair” for a return to work. He finds his free time (a reward for work) taken by activities essential to his ability to return to work and non-work-related activities required by his materialistic and socio-economic status-related life style. He is caught in an endless spiral of material success and non-work responsibilities on the one hand and a demand for the consumption of goods and a complex of pleasure-related activity on the other.

What is the purpose of work? And what is the role of leisure in the the life of men today? These are good questions, but the chances are that few will have time to ask them. The struggle is *for* survival, but the struggle itself serves to strengthen the forces which act against it. Anyone who is concerned about the future of the world must seek answers to these questions, for those who run the treadmill seldom see far beyond their next step.

WORK

While the meaning of the “Protestant Ethic of Work” remains uncertain (and perhaps a better designation for the phenomena which it describes would be the “gospel of hard work”), there is no question that it is losing its grip in the United States. Hard work has no dignity, at least not for its own sake. A combination of easy work and superior position is the order of the day. Work has become a ritual by which social acceptance is

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gained. The "rite" is valued for its material and social rewards. And, as for so many, going to church is not particularly pleasant; neither is work valued in and of itself. The idea of dignity in hard work has been replaced by the idea of success in terms of greatest benefits and the highest prestige.

"Work" for most of America is still the element by which one's sense of worth is established. Work has become a ritual—and an empty one at that—through which men move only because it is the process by which they achieve a place in the realm of personal relationships. A "job" is viewed as a reward in terms of its convenience, ease, prestige, and other services rendered by the job. The attitude of the worker is "they are going to pay me and pamper me—not first of all for work, but for the inconvenience of working; for the honor I do to them for filling the position." Whether or not the need which created the position is fulfilled remains a secondary matter.

Work is still considered to be right and good in terms of its external utility and necessity; but at the same time there is a lack of interest in work itself and a failure to see value and beauty in work. Thus the typical relationship with work is degrading, and work is viewed with anxiety as a "necessary evil." While what America calls work does not occupy six-sevenths of the time available, there is by no means an indication that the God-given process is coming to an end. But "times have changed," for, not only does man no longer find dignity in work, he no longer works only for bread. He has moved from "work" for bare subsistence to "work" to achieve and to maintain a certain standard of living—a standard which, for modern man, makes work as necessary as ever. Except for man's ever growing desire for material success—and social success through status, prestige, and money—his need for work would decline. At present it may be that both man's desire and need for work are declining; but certainly from his present perspective his desire is declining faster than his need.

Hannah Arendt in her book, *The Human Condition*, makes a useful distinction between work and labor. The products of work are to be used, while the products of labor are to be consumed. Labor meets the physical requirements of survival; work meets the demands of the creative urge and its satisfaction. Linguistically, labor is contemptible because of bondage to physical necessity. The energies of the Western world have been turned to the production of that which is to be consumed. Thus even though Western man's work activity is not strictly essential to his physical survival, it is essential to the survival of his social and economic status—and seldom meets the needs of his creative urge—so, in Arendt's terms, his activity falls into the category of "labor" and is, hence, "contemptible." While he is not engaged in a struggle for his immediate physical existence, he is, none the less bound by forces beyond his control.

LEISURE

In the "Protestant Ethic" there was no intention to create leisure.

Leisure simply appeared. "Free time" has moved from a position of an unprepared-for-by-product to that of a highly prized primary goal. The present view of leisure reveals, in part, the view of work. Work is tolerated in order to obtain "leisure" as diversion and recreation in order that work may be renewed—an ambiguous state of affairs to say the least. Work and leisure represent opposite and contradictory phases of a dual event. The drive for pleasure in "free time" devaluates work and seeks that which, because of the nature of the context in which it occurs, it cannot achieve.

Each day men sell little pieces of their lives in order to buy them back each night and weekend with the coin of 'fun.' With amusement, with love, with movies, with vicarious intimacy, they pull themselves into a sort of whole again, and now they are different men. Thus the cycle of work and leisure gives rise to two quite different images of self; the everyday image based upon work, and the holiday image, based upon leisure.¹

A distinction must be made between "play-leisure," which is recreation moving toward the resumption of work—a means to an end, and "creative leisure" which is self-development, growth, fulfillment, "soul feeding"—an end in itself. Leisure in America has not been valued apart from work. It has been seen largely as non-work, as preparation for work, or as compensation for work. "Play-leisure" calls for a separate classification, for it is neither work nor leisure, but represents the activity complex of Western societies. When not working, it is necessary that man be engaged in some activity, since a dim view is taken of idleness, and inactivity is suspected of evil. Free time is filled with "off-the-job activities" and "non-work obligations." Our society has become so saturated with this state of affairs, however, that man no longer must search for such activities: they await him in over-abundance. Free time has become so thoroughly structured by the prevailing values established for the use of time and essential to "life style," and so determined and delimited in its content that it is thoroughly devitalizing rather than recreative. "Play leisure" is hardly play at all, for the expected "drive" prohibits inactivity, gives no rest and little recreation. It is hardly leisure either, for the free and timeless expression of personality is not possible. Man has become a spectator in sport, religion, and politics. Reflective thinking for its own sake (a most noble leisure activity) is no longer enjoyed. Time is totally taken up, and at that taken up by such activities as demand very little which is creative or thought-provoking, but which, nevertheless, demand the participation of the totality of human energies.

True leisure is a life process which is free from imposed responsibili-

1. C. Wright Mills, *White Collar, The American Middle Class*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1951, p. 237.

ty and structured activity. Yet it has no relationship with time, is not merely free time, and does not necessarily involve time in particular, free or not, except that it occurs in time (at least leisure as man knows it so occurs; God's leisure does not suffer this limitation). It is not surplus or residual, free or spare time, although these have potential as occasions of leisure, but leisure is not, by any means, limited to such "time." Likewise, true leisure has no relationship to work and cannot be thought of as being in tension with or as a result of work. Leisure is not a means to an end, but is an end in itself. Leisure may function, however, as relaxation, recreation, and diversion as well as a developer of personality. Leisure requires a free mind and sufficient separation from physical distraction to assure that freedom—and at the same time lend physical support to it. Leisure is the eternal experience, or as Robert Lee observes,

Leisure is a part of man's ultimate concern. It is a crucial part of the very search for meaning in life, inasmuch as the social malaise of our time has been diagnosed as anxiety and boredom, alienation and meaninglessness.²

A LIFE OF PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION

Production and consumption now represent the primary driving and edifying forces in Western societies. Where has fled the time left by labor saving devices and the shorter work week? The gain through savings in production has been lost in consumption—and the mood of our society is one of eagerness toward such a loss at an increasing rate! Western man is bound to his relationships as a part of his society, and is bound to his paycheck as well. He is forced to sell his time to production and is taught to desire an increasing, enormous consumption—which takes time. People tend to accept the institutions of their society, ignoring the frustrations which are thus brought upon them. They manage somehow to find sufficient satisfaction to make life tolerable, even when human needs are frustrated and freedom challenged. The American citizen of today supposedly has a large amount of free spending money, about four times the amount (above what he needs for necessities) that he had thirty years ago; thus he could, if he chose to do so, choose time instead—time in which to pursue leisure, but he does not. "So rolls the headlong circle of wanting things that cost money that costs work that costs time."³ There is no limit to

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2. Robert Lee, *Religion and Leisure in America*. New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1964, p. 25.
 3. Sebastian de Grazia, *Of Time, Work, and Leisure*. New York: The Twentieth Century Fund, 1962, pp. 167, 301.

the shift of balance between production and consumption in terms of human capacity: the proportion might shift to the extent that nearly all human energy is spent in consumption. Situations may arise in which the quality of consumption is very low, but there is no prospect of a point of balance which will produce time which will not be engulfed by either production or consumption.

CONCLUSION

The believer in Christ who halts long enough to take inventory will discover his massive commitment to production and consumption, and that his church is committed to the same process and methodology. He yearns for "time" and the church seeks it from him. But consumption controls time which is called "free," and the time which the church receives is largely a part of that consumption. If time—or better yet, leisure—is to be obtained for the pursuit of that which is of ultimate concern, then the desire for time requires a definite idea about that for which it is to be used, a preparation for its use, and practice in its use. Just as it is not always easy, especially at first, to be moral, and to have fun at the same time, it may be expected that if there is more to be found in "time" than our society expects, and more than the Christian ordinarily discovers, it may further be expected that obtaining it will require some sort of learning process. The current problem of "Sabbath breaking" is not only one of irreligion, but of an inability to cope with a "time" problem, which extends throughout the week. While Western society produces and consumes itself to death, those aspects of human life which do not contribute to economic growth, production, and the consumption of production tend to be further and further neglected (including time consuming arts and skills, fine arts, the family, interpersonal relationships, and religion), and are threatened with extinction in the vital sense of the word.

Man receives his true image only from his Creator, and finds his true happiness in his relationship with Him. The current emphasis upon "the pursuit of happiness" is an acceptable goal, but the notion itself is doubtful in both its source and direction. If "the good life" must be earned through work, then what is done is more important than what man is. If love is bought through a process of hard work, "good times" and "good things," then man is the measure of all things, and his god is graven in his image. If happiness is a world in which the ultimate concerns are bound up in enormous production for the purpose of maintaining massive consumption, then man has deemed what he does more important than who he is, and what he has made more important than who made him.

God created the earth, and its creatures, and man, not for His work, but for His leisure. Creation itself was (and is) the result of an act of "work," but also of God's creative, leisure activity. And man was created

to please God, and to “till the ground” (Gen. 2:5). Man has made work the measure of all things; but God made man; and work as man knows it followed in the wake of man’s disobedience. God created man to serve Him as part of His eternal creative activity: but man has made the product of his own disobedience the master and idol of his life. The timeless meaning of work and leisure, known to God as only He knows eternity, must be learned through His Grace in Jesus Christ our Lord. Through Him the true meaning may be restored to work, and true leisure restored to man.