

The Decay of Idleness

"Every man is, or hopes to be, an idler," Samuel Johnson observed two centuries ago. Alas, laments George Watson, few modern men (and now, women) would admit to such a languid ambition. Hereon, his complaint against the Achievement Society.

by George Watson

Why is nobody idle any more? I mean openly, totally, cheerfully idle, and by choice. The industrial world is no doubt full of people who could work harder, and know it, full of procrastinators and easy riders. But no one seems content to achieve nothing any more, whether at school and college, or in industry or the professions. When I first taught at a university—in the Midwest during the 1950s—a good fifth of the students, it was widely accepted, did no work, or next to none, and were content to drop out, fail, or pass at the bottom of the scale. That experience was duplicated a year or two later when I began to teach at British universities. The student militancy of the 1960s, which thought itself the beginning of something, now looks in retrospect like its end, the last gasp of a fun-loving mood of endless leisure, since it was accompanied by a marked disinclination to read books or write papers, at least in any systematic way. But since the collapse of the New Left in the early 1970s no one seems to want to be totally idle. For better or worse, work is definitely in.

This is a mood hard to parallel in hu-

man history. In former civilized ages there has always been at least an Idle Rich class, based on inherited wealth or riches newly made, and it included idle women and idle youth. In the last century, for example, and early in this, ladies did not work at all, as a defining characteristic of their class. They had never worked and were never expected to work, from birth to death, and their lofty status was guaranteed by that simple fact. Lady Violet Bonham-Carter, daughter of Prime Minister Herbert Asquith (1908–16), used to tell how as a little girl at the turn of the century she asked her nanny what her life would be. "Until you are 18 you will do lessons," came the reply, "and after 18 you will do nothing." Such a life was then entirely normal for one of her class and sex. It would be hard to convey to the modern mind, and especially to the modern woman, the sheer prestige in that age of Doing Nothing. Needless to say, Doing Nothing could include a lot of frantic activity. "How can you say such a thing?" a young lady exclaims in Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* (1899), when the young man of her choice is denounced by his father as idle. "Why, he rides in the Row at 10 o'clock in the morning, goes to the Opera three times a week, changes his clothes at least five



times a day, and dines out every night of the season. You don't call that leading an idle life, do you?"

Most people would. Americans have no great tradition of elegant indolence, but they know about it from plays such as Wilde's, novels such as those in John Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga* (1906–29), and stories such as P. G. Wodehouse's Jeeves series, where Bertie Wooster is the immortal high-class drone. One way to describe the change that has recently occurred, then, would be to say that Europe has now joined the American condition of esteeming work and nothing but work and of knowing about elegant indolence only from literature.

Perhaps there is now a case for arguing the charms of idleness, not to mention its uses. It can be elegant, which is a virtue in itself. It can be notably charitable, on a personal or on an international scale. It can be a civilized influence providing a sympathetic market of readers and collectors for literature and the other arts. And it can be amusing, and can sustain a valued tradition of conversational wit. The lazy, one often notices, talk well.

But for whatever reason, that world of total idleness, along with the values that once informed it, is dead. During the

1950s, early in her reign, Queen Elizabeth II abolished the ritual of presentation at court, for example, which once marked the "coming out" of a young lady of good family and her readiness to attend balls and entertain offers of marriage: after which, it was understood, in a domestic world based on servants, she would do nothing. As mothers noted with despair at the time, the young simply ceased to be interested in the traditional prospect of genteel and unending leisure. Nowadays work has an indispensable prestige, at least if it is non-manual and part of a professional hierarchy such as finance, higher education, medicine, or law. We live in what the Germans call an Achievement Society, and to be idle is to be uninteresting and to have failed.

Why is this? Since it is the first such society in the history of civilization, it presumably derives from a moral assumption that is itself new. The assumption cannot be Judeo-Christian, since that tradition, as Scripture tells, allowed full credit to Mary over Martha, to the values of pure contemplation and to Solomon's lilies of the field that neither toil nor spin. It is equally unlikely to be socialist, whether Marxist or some other variety, since socialism is yesterday's work ethic and one that inspires

only a small and dwindling band of the never-say-die. It is not, so far as I know, the creation of any single sage, though it smacks of a certain sort of guru-guide that used to figure in American bestseller lists, with titles like *How to Succeed in Business*—books which nobody nowadays wishes to be found reading. But then why should they? The mood of work is so omnipresent that there is no need, by now, to read about it. One hears no other view but to get on. Private schools ceased to train gentlemen a generation and more ago, and on both sides of the Atlantic they have become places where parents send children as a preparative for worldly success. The modern women's movement, unlike previous brands of feminism—the pre-1914 suffragettes in Britain, for example—knows no other assumption. Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970), for example, simply took hierarchical success for granted as the only goal of the new woman, enthusing over the heroines of the new cause—"the first woman judge," "her own brokerage firm"—lamenting over earlier generations of women who had missed their professional chances. Neo-Marxism, too, which despised the worship of the golden calf, has gone down utterly before the mood, and the remnants of the New Left have mostly yielded to the new ethos and taken fat jobs in business and the media, hoping to make them fatter still. When Donald Trump remarked that, as he saw the immediate future, money is king, he may have fancied he was summing up a personal philosophy. In fact he was speaking for an age.

If the new mood is without a prophet, it is also without analysts. The Germans, for example, live in the most successful Achievement Society in Europe—indeed, they invented the term *Leistungsgesellschaft* to describe it—yet theirs is a nation once notorious for its credulity of abstractions, mysticisms, and extreme dogmas in religion and politics. The Germans note the contemporary monopoly of modera-

tion and get-rich-quick thinking in the land that invented first Marxism and then Nazism. But they only smile if you ask them how it happened. Since there is no other view, they imply, the reigning view hardly calls for any explanation, interpretation, or defense. That notable incuriosity about the age now extends all the way from California to the newly liberated lands of Eastern Europe, and nobody is suggesting to President Gorbachev that he should try to revive the Russian tradition of the hermit-mystic or the religious contemplative. It pervades education, too. Students who lack advice about how to get good grades or find good posts can turn anxious, importunate, or bitter; and very few young women are heard to say they would be content to marry and raise children. To be outside this competitive game, apparently, is to be outside life itself. When I recently announced my retirement from an academic post, friends and colleagues stopped me in the street and asked with a sense of concern what I was going to do, as if the enjoyment of leisure was a possibility that had not entered into their minds. Even the British royal family works, and works hard, and is photographed by the press doing so, as an example to others. "I like to be busy," a retired colleague remarked to me the other day, and I did not dare ask him why, in that case, he had retired.

The causes of the decay of idleness as an ideal may be several, and it might be helpful to list them.

1. *Inflation*. Hippies flourished, for a brief age, on cheap food and cheap rents, much as the religious hermit once depended on alms. They largely vanished in the 1970s with hyperinflation, and failed to return in the 1980s, with inflation in the Western industrial world still registering an uncomfortable 5–10 percent. A year off may be a youthful aspiration for some, a time to cultivate friendships and see the world. But no college-leaver doubts that he is going to need to lock himself quickly into a pattern of rising income and eventual pension

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rights if he is to live a life of stable relationships away from the cardboard jungles of the city streets.

If inflation is the main determinant here, then private enterprise may be said to have secreted within itself an ingenious self-adjusting mechanism not yet fully noted by political philosophers. It runs, in outline, like this: Anti-commercial dissent breeds militancy, militancy breeds industrial unrest, unrest breeds high prices, and high prices make for a return to office and factory. It is observable that the contradictions of capitalism are seldom spoken of today, even by Marxists. The system is to that extent self-adjusting, more or less, and seen to be so, at least on a long view. It is the contradictions of socialism, which depended in its day on exhortation and terror to achieve better services and higher productivity, that will be the theme of historical analysis by philosophers with a taste for fallacies.

2. *Achievement.* It is not enough to live: one must live for something. "No pilot," as Montaigne remarks in one of his *Essais* ("Against Idleness"), "can perform his duty on dry land." Work is more than a chance to do your thing: It is a way of showing you have a thing to do. "I do not love a man who is zealous for nothing" was a sentence which, to Samuel Johnson's regret, Oliver Goldsmith deleted from *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766), and the sentiment has since become universal. The Achievement Society cannot love a man or woman who is without zeal. The quest for achievement is as much a hunger for admiration as for wealth, and a competitive age knows nothing of what Wordsworth once called "a wise passiveness." It esteems creative activity above all, something to point to, to echo, and to touch. The late British architect Basil Spence was once asked what the chief motive of his life had been, and he replied: "I should like to have designed a building so good that I would want to pat it."

3. *The fear of boredom.* "Work is the scythe

of time," Napoleon is reported to have said on his way to St. Helena, wondering if he might not while away the tedium of exile by writing his memoirs. Memoir-writing, especially by retired statesmen, is well known to be highly characteristic of the age, and behind it, and much other work, lies a terror of vacancy and the dread of a wasteland with nothing to do. Television, a cynic has remarked, is driving people back to life; modern household equipment makes housekeeping, at least for the better off, almost childishly easy; and children who abandon the habit of obedience as early as the age of 12 have made the role of parental responsibility look trivial, unrewarding, and short. Meanwhile the advance of longevity stretches the gap between the end of parental responsibility and death. Of course women want to work, in such a world: It would be surprising if they did not.



ing if they did not. Their real compulsion is not oppression, as feminist propaganda sometimes suggests, but the simple fact that by historical standards the life of a housewife is boringly easy. The male, in any case, has no interest (to speak generally) in

keeping women out of the professions. Since about half the workers of the Western world are now female, the wealth of that world depends solidly on women going out to work; if they did not go, men as well as women would be dramatically impoverished. I do not imply that feminism was a male trick to get women into the factory or office. Men are nothing like clever enough to have thought of that. But now that it has happened, the situation has some evident advantages to the male, and boredom may have been a prime impulse behind it.

4. *Leisure.* The wealth and variety of leisure activities in the present age—television as well as cinema, videos as well as TV programs—should have made leisure more attractive. No one, I believe, predicted that it would make work more attractive. But then the media are lavishly



involved in culture propaganda—Kenneth Clark's famous TV series *Civilization* was a classic instance—and watching movies that extol achievement in the sciences, art, and exploration can make people want to achieve something too, or at least make them want to take a course to learn more about the achievements of others. Even the performances of pop stars such as Madonna, lacking as they may be in musical virtues, can be seen as an incentive to action. They extol success. The Achievement Society can be faintly perverse in its judgments, and what it esteems above all else is fame. I once stumbled over this truth in a manner little short of farcical by attending a concert in the Royal Albert Hall in London which happened to be televised. Sitting by chance behind the piano soloist, I was caught by the cameras and found myself congratulated for weeks afterwards as never before. Even being famous for nothing is apparently a great achievement.

The decay of idleness, genteel or otherwise, has led to certain strains in the new morality that has engendered it.

The first is a fear of failure. Never, surely, can the unemployed and the unpromoted have felt so humiliated, in a social sense, as they do in the Achievement Society of recent years. Alexis de Tocqueville perceived that unhappy effect of liberty when he visited the United States in 1831–32. To make individuals freely responsible for their own lives, he observed,

leads inevitably to a sense of personal guilt. In unreformed Europe, he wrote in *Democracy in America* (1835–40), he saw happy faces about him, whereas Americans had “a cloud habitually upon their brow” and took their pleasures sadly, “forever brooding over advantages they do not possess.” Such is the burden of liberty, which Eastern Europe is about to discover for itself. To be free to choose is to be free to get it wrong; and to get it wrong can mean a life of self-reproach. The principal task

of the modern mind, in that event, is self-forgiveness, and it is an undertaking highly characteristic of the age we are in. Other ages have asked God, or other people, to forgive them: Nowadays we ask it of ourselves.

The second demand is that work should be interesting. This is a recent development in human history, and workers in field or factory over the centuries would have been greatly puzzled by it. Work used to be something you did because you had to do it. Now it is supposed to be interesting. That lies at the heart of the vogue for higher education, which cannot chiefly reflect a longing for riches, since plumbers and mechanics can easily be paid more than college graduates, not to mention their professors. Education is a demand to be interested. All that reverses a traditional assumption of mankind, by which leisure was supposed to be interesting and work, almost by its nature, dull. Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* (1866), for example, tells of a governess who marries a prosperous widower whom she likes well enough, her principal motive, however, being her own comfort and security—“she was tired of the struggle of earning her own livelihood.” She gladly gives up teaching to live a life of leisured ease, serving tea to her friends in a household with servants. Her modern equivalent would be more likely to insist on keeping her job as a stepping-stone to a better one. The industrial revolution, once blamed for

creating the drudgery of the factory bench, is now more sensibly seen as the instrument by which mankind released itself from mechanical operations. Compared with work, leisure can be a bore.

The demand that work should be interesting is very unevenly spread through the Western industrial world, with the Germans and the Dutch minding commendably little about boredom, the French and the British minding a good deal more. America, in my experience, comes out well out in this comparison—on the assumption that a high boredom threshold is a merit and an advantage, both morally and materially. I am impressed, when I teach in the United States, by the readiness of students and colleagues to perform boring tasks like reading ill-written but essential texts and spending long hours in highly undiverting classes and committees, and I hope I have not exploited that virtue too relentlessly. British academic life, by contrast, is markedly less tolerant of tedium; French too. A low threshold of boredom is a considerable disadvantage in modern life, and one wonders what the ultimate cost will be.

A third strain is the phenomenon of the workaholic. The word, invented in the United States as recently as 1968, may be less than a quarter of a century old, but the type itself cannot be much older, and it would be difficult to think of instances in European or American fiction or life before the present century. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon* (1941) shows such a character, for whom failure is disgraceful, work interesting, and the work-habit a drug that drives out all other thoughts. Fitzgerald's hero is a Hollywood producer called Monro Stahr, and he is a type new, I suspect, to civilized mankind. In earlier ages people overworked, to be sure, but commonly because they were forced by poverty or impelled by a sense of duty. Now work can be a neurotic addiction. The temptation lies in the fact that, all too often, there is nothing more interesting to do. Work, as Noel Coward said, is much more fun than fun.

The danger now is ultimately to sanity itself. The great Victorians, like Dickens and Trollope, disqualified themselves as workaholics by playing as hard as they

worked, and Trollope jokingly observed in a letter of May 1871 that he regretted the Old Testament should have called labor "the *evil* consequence of the Fall of Man," since it was self-evidently its greatest blessing. On the other hand, though he rose early to write fiction before spending all day at the office, he often hunted in the afternoon and enjoyed dinner parties in the evening, and his last illness was caused by laughing too heartily over a new novel. That sounds like a balanced diet of living. "My only doubt as to finding a heaven for myself at last," he wrote in the same letter, "arises from the fear that the disembodied and beatified spirits will not want novels." That cheerful view of work is nothing like the black pit of compulsive labor into which Scott Fitzgerald's hero falls. Workaholic is a 20th-century word, one suspects, because it is a 20th-century type.

The decay of idleness is not a disaster, and the Achievement Society, by and large, is no bad place to be. Its puritanical contempt for drones and parasites may look faintly grim, at times, or absurdly monomaniacal, but it is still a more rational view than the respect for the unproductive and the useless that reigned in many an *ancien régime* or the worlds of P. G. Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster and Evelyn Waugh's Brideshead. It is not, however, a tolerant world, and not everyone has noticed that the Permissive Age, which once seemed here to stay, has vanished almost without a trace. The new age is naturally censorious. The parent obsessively worrying about the education of offspring, the careerist agonizing over a lack of promotion, the professional who finds it hard or impossible to stop—these are all its children, and one can only wish them the gift of whimsy and a good night's rest.

Odd that a century that began in full confidence that Victorian values were dead and buried should have ended by resuscitating them so willingly and so ardently, and at something more than full strength. The Victorians, after all, never suggested that work was the only life there is. Capitalism, in the event, did not die: it was reformed and reinforced, and it is spreading across the globe. The welfare state did not kill entrepreneurial skills, as

many predicted: It turned welfare, by cheapening it, into a dirty word, and made worldly success look all the more prestigious and imperative. The sexual revolution did not lead to license, for long: It made millions more than ever conscious of the hazards, physical and emotional, that lie outside monogamy. A wheel has come full circle, and moved perhaps a little further on.

Such is the world we are in. As Tocqueville rightly foresaw, the Achievement Society has brought wealth but not joy. He remarked in the 1830s that the English have the enviable faculty of looking downward with complacency, whereas the French look upward with envy. (Hence the French propensity, he argued, to violent revolution.) The Achievement Society characteristically does both. Its players look both upward and downward, applauding and reproaching themselves daily and hourly for their success in having climbed so far, their failure in having climbed no farther.

But then it is a world they have chosen, after all; and often, in lands where the achievement ethos reigns supreme, such as Germany or southern California, one feels this is the first race of mankind to live as it wishes to live, the first generation unencumbered by tradition and free to prosper by choice. Their very discontents are something they have chosen; they select and cherish their anxieties with the discrimination of a connoisseur. They would be far sadder if they had everything they wanted, and they know it.

What they have lost, in all this, is a sense of style that naturally belongs to those

who know how to be richly, deeply, and totally idle, who have never done a day's work or thought to do so. Such beings, by the 1990s, are rarer than rubies, even among English ladies or Balkan counts, and by now one can only plunder literature and memory for hints of the lost secret of their idleness. In a radio reminiscence Sir John Gielgud has told how, as a young actor-director between the wars, he once visited a society hostess in London and watched in wonderment as she entertained her guests in an elegant sitting-room, mixing their teas, directing her servants, and maintaining a dazzling flow of conversation as she did so; and he returned to the theater, where he was rehearsing a period comedy, determined to persuade a young actress in his charge to adopt those manners and that style. He urged in vain: Such behavior, even in the 1930s, was already part of a way of life whose secret had been lost.

Such elegant and animated indolence is not the note of the age, and it lies outside its competence and even its ambition.

We are content to live without style and to admire it, if at all, across footlights. A British academic visitor to the United States, puzzled by the frequency of campus revivals of Wilde's *Importance of Being Earnest*, was told: "I guess it has everything we don't have." If that means style, then it is almost the only thing we do not have. The gap is to be felt. The Achievement Society has already done much, and in the future may be expected to do far more. But a stylish indolence, one suspects, is one thing it will not achieve. It will be too busy.

