

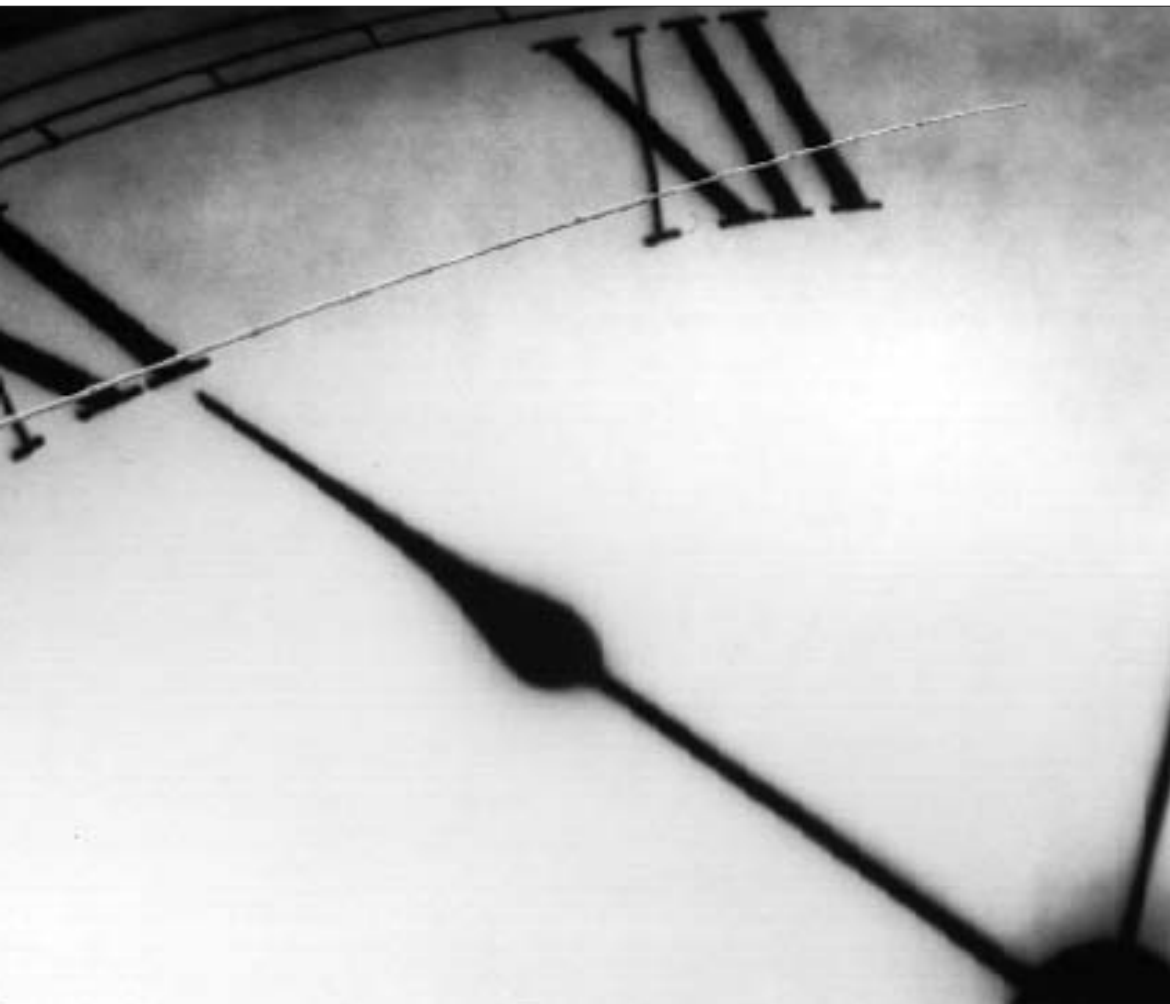


Who Knows Where The Time Goes?

by Steven Lagerfeld

The road to happiness and prosperity,” the philosopher Bertrand Russell declared in 1932, “lies in an organized diminution of work.” Russell made a strong case for the virtues of what he didn’t shrink from calling laziness, and his essay, “In Praise of Idleness,” is often quoted today by writers who bemoan the overwork and paucity of free time endured by contemporary Americans. Seldom is much said about Russell’s particular vision of the promised land of leisure. He thought that a reduction of the workday to no more than four hours would be enough to revolutionize human existence, freeing writers, painters, amateur scientists, and the civic-minded to pursue their true interests. “Above all,” Russell imagined, “there will be happiness and joy of life, instead of frayed nerves, weariness, and dyspepsia. . . . Since men will not be tired in their spare time, they will not demand only such amusements as are passive and vapid. . . . Ordinary men and women . . . will become more kindly and less persecuting and less inclined to view others with suspicion.”

Today we can see how far off the mark Russell was. While we are still some distance from his promised land of the four-hour workday, we



Five Past Eleven (1989), by Edward Ruscha

have drastically reduced the burden of work since his essay appeared. The average workweek, 50 to 60 hours in Russell's day, is now down to 40 or fewer. We have lopped Saturday off the workweek, cut the workday to eight hours, and created for tens of millions of people an entirely new sovereign state of extended idleness called retirement. Despite these and other vast improvements in the lot of the average person, complaints about frayed nerves, weariness, and dyspepsia are louder than ever. An amusement more passive and vapid than anything Russell could have imagined—television—has become our national pastime. And most Americans would probably agree that we are less kindly and more inclined to view others with suspicion than we were 70 years ago.

Yet the argument that overwork and an absence of free time are the source of our discontents has recently reached a new crescendo. The focus now stays narrowly on the last 30 years or so, a period when the pace of life seemed to quicken and when the course of life itself changed for many Americans as vast numbers of women took jobs outside the home. Those who began the latest time debate, however, were less reformist advocates of “family friendly” work practices than critics of

capitalism. If capitalism has not impoverished the masses, as Karl Marx predicted, then perhaps it has robbed them of time—a theme addressed years ago by the eminent Marxist historian E. P. Thompson in an essay titled, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism.” Time is, after all, the most precious resource. An economy can be thought of as an elaborate mechanism for converting time into money, for making my 10 minutes of labor easily convertible into a gallon of gasoline or a jar of mayonnaise or some other product of somebody else’s labor. A group of progressive businesspeople in Montpelier, Vermont, made this connection explicit recently when they launched a new alternative local currency they called Green Mountain Hours.

The modern time debate may have started with *Time Wars* (1987), by Jeremy Rifkin, a kind of New Age advance man on emerging issues such as biotechnology and “the end of work.” Rifkin argued that the contemporary social order imposes an unnatural and exploitative system of social time, and he predicted the emergence of a “new time politics” that would “eschew the notion of exerting power over time” and ultimately bring society into closer accord with the temporal rhythms of nature. But Juliet B. Schor, an economist at Harvard University, created a stir by putting a number to the time stress so many Americans experience. By 1987, she claimed in *The Overworked American* (1991), Americans were putting in much longer hours at work than they had a generation earlier, in 1969. The average increase, she argues, amounted to an extra 163 hours per worker every year—the equivalent of an extra month of work. Desperate corporations, reluctant to hire more workers, “have just demanded more from their existing workforces. They have sped up the pace of work and lengthened time on the job.” Americans went along, Schor wrote, the victims of a “consumerist treadmill and long hour jobs . . . an insidious cycle of ‘work and spend.’”

In the new picture of time that has emerged from the debate begun by Rifkin and Schor, this argument about the creeping burden of work appears overstated and possibly altogether wrong about the direction of change. Yet it is also probably true that certain groups of Americans *are* working harder than before. The United States over the past 50 years has experienced a massive and largely unrecognized redistribution of time. There has been a vast increase in leisure, but it hasn’t fallen into the right hands. The elderly have benefited enormously, while the very group with the greatest need for time, married couples with children, has benefited least, if at all. And many of these younger people have been drawn into demanding elite fields (law, engineering, management) that hardly qualify them as members of the oppressed masses but that do demand longer hours of work. While even retirees complain of too little time, these middle-aged people are the most vocal and articulate critics of the prevailing temporal order.

Psychologist Peter A. Mangan has shown in experiments that, just as

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they often complain, people do perceive time to be moving faster as they age. Mangan and others speculate that there is a physiological basis for this alteration in perception, as changing levels of dopamine and other neurotransmitters in the brain throw off the aging body's internal clock. Mangan's research dealt only with short intervals of time, but changing perceptions do have something to do with today's rising anxiety about time. As those rushing 401(k) contributions behind the surging Dow suggest, clocks are suddenly ticking loudly in baby boomer heads. A generation that rebelled against the economy of love (remember "free" love?) and the economy of money now finds itself confronting the far more painfully exacting economy of time. Raised in affluence, the first generation to be granted on a mass scale that four-year extension of childhood that is college, this generation luxuriated in time. Yet the university's parting lesson was that in a

postindustrial economy with products that are largely ephemeral, success is measured as much in terms of input (time) as output. (This explains why college students are convinced that they are the busiest people in the world.) Its members are now reaching the point in their lives when con-



flicting demands on their time are at a maximum—their careers (and thus their hours at work) are peaking, their children are young. They also have sophisticated palates for leisure, and they know a thing or two about making their views heard. Entering middle age, moreover, they are facing the reality that time is not on their side; it is running out. There may not be enough left to fulfill every hope for family, career, and for play and travel and fun. No wonder time seems short.

Are Americans working longer hours and enjoying less leisure? It's a simple question whose answer, like so many efforts to understand social and economic life, is obscured by a data smog. Part of the problem is that the question really isn't so simple. There is no single set of flawless data one can turn to for an answer, and a host of difficult methodological issues surround the information that is available. Schor, for example, relied on the federal government's Current Population Survey (CPS), which regularly queries some 50,000 Americans about everything from their marital status to the size of their paycheck. The investigators ask their subjects how many hours they worked "last week," and how many hours they usually work in a week. Which number do you use? And how do you calculate the number of weeks per year people work? Because of such uncertainties, Schor found her estimates challenged even by left-of-center sympathizers using the same CPS data (but a different span of years). One pair of



Watch (1925) by Gerald Murphy

researchers, for example, trimmed the estimate of added hours of work per year by 40 percent, to 100 hours. Two other investigators, using different data and endpoints, put the increase at 66 hours.

The controversy reached a new level of intensity last year when John P. Robinson of the University of Maryland and Geoffrey Godbey of Pennsylvania State University published *Time for Life*. Specialized “time researchers,” they came armed with numbers from studies explicitly designed to determine how Americans mete out their hours. Moreover, the studies were not surveys asking people to recall how much they had worked, but diaries that respondents were asked to keep for single days in three separate years: 1965, ’75, and ’85.

It wouldn’t be a controversy if Robinson and Godbey did not contradict Schor in a major way, and of course they did. Far from working harder than ever before, they asserted, Americans are cutting back. This being a data smog, however, they didn’t produce numbers that would allow a neat and direct comparison with Schor’s. (That would have required them, among other things, to extrapolate a year’s work time from a single day of diary time.) Thus, we’re stuck with numbers such as these: among employed men, hours of paid work per week fell, from 46.5 in 1965 to 39.7 in 1985. That’s a 15 percent drop. Overall, Robinson and Godbey found that their subjects actually gained about five hours of free time per week between 1965 and ’85 (most of it in the first half of that period), reaching a total of 40—mainly because

they cut back on both paid work and housework. But virtually all of the new free time was squandered on television—the “800-pound gorilla” that consumes 40 percent of Americans’ spare time.

One of the many other interesting things Robinson and Godbey did was to ask their diarists to estimate how much time they had spent at work the week before, just as CPS respondents do. Comparing the diaries and the estimates, the two researchers found that people significantly overestimate how much time they spend at work. In 1985, for example, people who estimated they worked 50 to 54 hours that week actually averaged 41.6 hours on the job. Even more interesting, the two researchers found that the more people worked, the more they overestimated how much they worked. These findings tend to undercut any conclusions drawn on the basis of the federal government’s CPS data, which rely on just such estimates.

Of course, the Robinson-Godbey findings are a long way from flawless themselves. The people they recruited to keep diaries, for example, may not be representative of the entire population. Other studies? Other problems. But federal government data, generally based on the CPS, point toward this conclusion: working hours have stayed flat or increased by perhaps an hour per week in recent decades. One such study, a 1997 effort by government economists Philip L. Rones, Randy E. Ilg, and Jennifer M. Gardner, found an increase between 1976 and 1993 of about 12 minutes in the workweek of men and an hour in the workweek of women. They say the rise is not the result of a generalized increase in work but of the shift by a tiny fraction of the work force to workweeks of 49 or more hours.

What are we to conclude? Probably that, on average, not much has really changed. The people most likely to be putting in longer hours on the job are not hard-pressed blue-collar workers but a small minority of highly educated and highly paid professionals who have chosen careers known to consume large quantities of time and now profess themselves shocked at the outcome. (Schor, while jousting with her critics and giving a little ground in a paper she presented last year, barely even nods to her argument about growing work time in her latest book, *The Overspent American* [1998], a further critique of the vicious “cycle of work and spend” and a guide for the “downshifters” who seek to escape it.) It’s difficult to square the assertion that everybody is working themselves to the bone with the rising popularity of golf, gardening, and other leisure activities. “Gone fishing” may be the last words in leisure, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s latest recreational survey reveals that while the number of anglers stayed about the same between 1991 and ’96, the number of “angler days” (translation: the time spent fishing) rose by 22 percent.

So are we all happy now?

Of course not. For all the comfort such numbers offer, one might as well say, “Take a statistic and call me in the morning.” Americans *feel* very pressed for time. Evidence of this feeling appears even in Robinson and Godbey’s study, which shows not only that Americans overestimate

their work time but that the size of these overestimates has grown significantly over the years. It's impossible to count the ways in which the pace of life has quickened. Science writer James Gleick reports that a unit of NBC called NBC 2000 has been at work excising the split-second "blacks" between a show's fade from the screen and the appearance of the first commercial. Total savings: 15 to 20 seconds per evening. More important, Gleick says, "is that the viewer is in a hurry, or so NBC 2000 has determined. That's *you* cracking the whip."

Of course, it is misleading to consider only how many hours Americans are working. It is also important to know *who* is among the working. And on this question there is a great deal of agreement. The last several decades have seen a massive redistribution of work and leisure time. Work has been shifted from the old to the young and from men to women. Even unmarried people seem to have reduced the time they give to work. In other words, the very people whom society would most want to endow with free time—people in families with children—are most likely to be working more.

The biggest beneficiaries of this shift have been older Americans—not just the elderly but people over the age of 50. At the beginning of the century, retirement was a condition akin to a short-term membership in a very exclusive and stuffy club. Today, retirement is like a house party that begins early and, thanks to extended life spans, ends late. Men, government data show, start cutting back their weekly hours of work in their fifties. Retirement now usually begins in the late fifties or early sixties. About 80 percent of retirees begin receiving Social Security by age 62, and they can expect to live roughly 20 more years. That's a lot of golf.

What has happened to women's time is by now familiar. Between 1960 and '97, for example, the proportion of married women with children under six who worked outside the home rose from 19 percent to 65 percent. Most families have cut back the time devoted to housework, and men have picked up a somewhat larger share of the household chores. The overwhelming majority of working women with young school-age children either choose part-time jobs or choose not to work outside the home at all. But still, for many families a big chunk of leisure and family time has vanished, and women disproportionately bear the burden of what sociologist Arlie Hochschild called "the second shift" in a 1989 book with that title.

These are the changes that have propelled the plight of working families into the national political debate. Advocates have pushed a variety of palliatives, from "family friendly" employer policies (e.g., "flextime" and generous family leave) to improved child care to revised tax policies that are designed to smooth the integration of work and family life. Other measures might simply reduce the amount of time people spend working. Longer vacations are one possibility. Family allowances (as the Left proposes) or tax breaks for families with children (as the Right proposes) would both make it easier for one spouse to stay home.

What if some of these incentives were offered and hardly anybody took them? That troubling question is provoked by Hochschild's most



The American way of leisure

recent book, *The Time Bind* (1997). Hochschild, a sociologist at the University of California, Berkeley, studied 130 people working for Amerco, her pseudonym for a Fortune 500 company ranked as one of the nation's 10 most "family friendly" by *Working Mother* magazine. Hochschild's subjects were a mixed lot, though many were affluent middle- and upper-middle-class professionals, many in two-earner families that could have gotten by on one salary. Yet most turned down every opportunity to cut back—part-time work, job sharing—or reorder—by doing some work at home—their work time as company policy allowed them to. Many worked longer hours than they needed to, and Hochschild found that very often her subjects found life at home more stressful than life on the job. "Although Denise Hampton counted herself a hundred percent behind family-friendly reforms," Hochschild says of one woman, "she wasn't the least bit interested in shorter hours herself. . . . Her life [at home] was too laced with strain and her life at work too filled with promise and—with the evil eye" of envious male managers.

Her husband, Daniel, who is said to be "more emotionally centered at home," thinks aloud about the family's time bind with Hochschild and concludes that "family teamwork" is essential. "I'm still hoping we can make our family a good production team," he says.

Seeking in 1932 to explain why "there is far too much work done in the world," Bertrand Russell declared that "immense harm is caused by the belief that work is virtuous." Americans have largely abandoned that belief, but they have replaced it with the even

more problematic conviction that work is a form of self-actualization. Writing in the *New York Review of Books* recently, Mark Lilla of New York University argued that we live in an era that has wedded the values of the cultural revolution of the 1960s to those of the Reagan revolution of the 1980s. Americans “work hard, probably too hard, though no longer to amortize their divine debt or to secure an economic dynasty; they work for ephemeral pleasures and for status and esteem, understood as part of the ethos of democratic individualism.”

Whatever its defects, the old view of work, growing out of the fear that Satan would find employment for idle hands, dignified work of all kinds. But if work is a way—perhaps the only way—of creating oneself, then it is more difficult than ever for cooking, doing volunteer work, and taking care of the kids to compete with writing software or selling cars.

Few subjects breed more guilt and hypocrisy than work. In fact, there is plenty of evidence that busy people—or at least some of them—are happy people. People who work more than 60 hours a week report having sex about 10 percent more often than others do, according to the University of Chicago’s General Social Survey. Or consider the people who work more than one job. The usual view is that these are people struggling to make ends meet, and there are plenty of “multiple jobholders,” to use the U.S. Department of Labor’s utilitarian term, who meet this description. But the group most likely to work more than one job consists of people with Ph.D.’s, 9.4 percent of whom hold more than one job, according to a Labor Department study. Only 3.3 percent of workers without high school diplomas work more than one job, and the proportion of multiple jobholders rises with education. It does not decline significantly as earnings rise. In other words, lots of people who are working more than one job aren’t doing it for the money—or to please oppressive capitalist overseers. The last time the Department of Labor asked them, in 1989, only 44 percent said they were moonlighting for financial reasons.

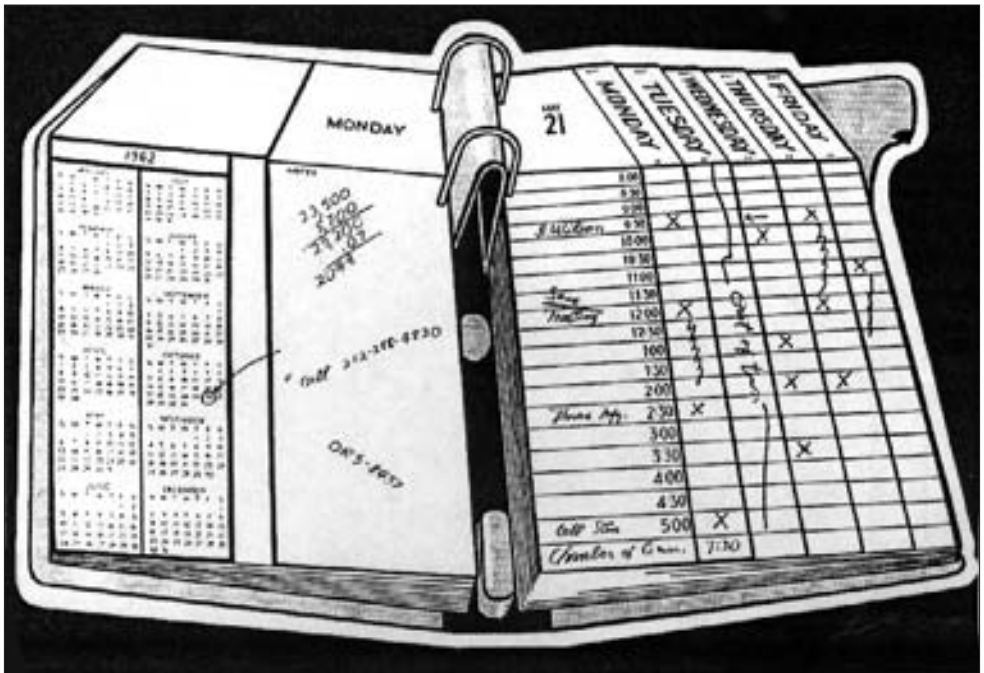
Americans are good at work. It’s leisure they stink at. Arlie Hochschild found that many of her busy subjects at Amerco developed an imaginary “potential self” who did in their mind’s eye all the delightful things they couldn’t seem to find time to do in real life. This view of leisure as something incomparably sweet yet unattainable is essentially sentimental. It is the stuff of the Polo ads and Smith & Hawken catalogues that peddle impossible dreams of idleness. And it is widespread.

Americans are in a strange way not very serious about leisure. In a society that takes it seriously, leisure is the reward of the rich. Benjamin Franklin told us that time is money, and the minute he had enough money he chose time, retiring from business to devote himself to public life and other gentlemanly leisure activities. Today, the rise of wealthy two-income families in which both spouses earn significant sums yet continue to work has become a significant cause of growing income inequality. For all our protestations, we tend to think of downtime as a downer, as something boring, suburban, waiting to be filled. In suburbia, the vogue is for townlike subdivisions designed by New Urbanist

planners who promise to restore all the warmth and neighborliness of the 19th-century small town even as they champion “the 24-hour city” against the boredom and sterility of the standard suburb.

An organization called the Academy of Leisure Sciences—yes, there is such a thing—recently declared that leisure is becoming the engine of the American economy. The academy is a loose association of 80-odd academics, who issue leisure “white papers” (apparently with some sense of humor about what they are doing) and contribute to learned journals such as the *Journal of Leisure Studies* and the *World Leisure and Recreation Association Journal*. Leisure scientists parse such matters as the theory of tourism, the sociology of the surfing subculture, and “visitor management” in parks. The academy reckons that Americans spend about \$1 trillion annually in pursuit of leisure, more than they spend on health care, or cars and trucks, or housing. The figure includes not just outlays for tennis rackets and theater tickets but air travel (60 percent of it undertaken by leisure travelers) and “fun foods.”

The academy and its findings point to an important and neglected aspect of the contemporary time crisis. Americans in the late 20th century treat leisure much as they were once said to treat social problems:



Calendar (1962), by Roy Lichtenstein

they study it and they throw money at it. And they don't get much satisfaction from it. The evidence suggests that they don't have a lot of good ideas about what to do with it. They don't enjoy it; they work at it or they waste it watching television. Yet they constantly complain that they don't have enough of it.

It may be that the contemporary American time crisis has as much to do with the structure of leisure as the structure of work time. In *Waiting for the Weekend* (1991), Witold Rybczynski of the University of Pennsylvania shows that it took centuries of effort and evolution to wall off two days from the week and reserve them for rest and recreation. Over the centuries, “Saint Monday,” the informal, sometime day off of urban workers during the early Industrial Revolution, was replaced by the formal Saturday day off. Time, Rybczynski emphasizes, is always being structured and restructured. In the recent past, however, we have busied ourselves breaking down the established borders of time. The week is more and more like a piece of postmodern art, full of pastiche and discontinuities. Many of the breaches in the old boundaries cut two ways. The cell phone, with its endlessly intrusive beeping and its babbling users, may be one of the more fiendish instruments ever invented by humans for peaceful purposes. Yet pagers, laptops, and e-mail allow millions of people to work at home, at least occasionally, or free them from waiting by the phone. (Of the five hours of weekly leisure that Robinson and Godbey say Americans have gained, many come in short bursts during the week.) A *Washington Post* reporter at baseball’s spring training camps earlier this year found the stands filled with electronically armed visitors from the North who swore they couldn’t have come if not for their digital companions. “My cell phone makes it possible to run a business from the ballpark,” one Yankees fan said, summing up the situation. “It also makes it harder to play hooky.”

Even Robinson and Godbey, though arguing that the workweek has shrunk, find that work increasingly intrudes upon the weekend. So does commerce. Sunday, the day of rest, was once guarded by an imposing array of blue laws that restricted or forbade various kinds of commercial activity. All 50 states had such laws on the books as late as 1961; by 1996, only 13 did. In addition to supporting Sunday’s traditional sacred function as a day outside normal time, blue laws spared salesclerks and others a day of work, and, just as important, they helped keep everybody else at home for a day of enforced leisure and family time. Yet much as we may now praise Sunday and recall it nostalgically, we buried it. It was too excruciatingly boring for too many people. Now, for most people in most places, Sunday is just another day at the mall.

If time really is the most precious resource, perhaps we should treat it that way. We now count leisure as something that’s left over after we’ve used all the hours and minutes necessary to work and to do all the other things we “need” to do. This is strikingly similar to the way clean water, open land, and other natural resources were once seen. A number of environmental scholars have suggested recently that we have reached the end of nature—or at least nature as the completely wild and untouched thing of our imagination. Indeed, they argue, this sort of virgin nature has never really existed in the human lifetime. Even the most primitive peoples reshaped the environment. It is best to put aside our romantic hopes and illusions, these writers suggest, and move toward actively managing nature and thus preserving it. Perhaps we

have reached a similar moment in the natural history of time. It's something of a paradox that we may need to manage time more thoroughly in order to create more unmanaged time. We may need to preserve pieces of time much as we now preserve forests and stretches of seashore.

How we manage our own time begins with how we teach our children to manage theirs. Sunday was once a day for stepping outside time, and in the 20th century Saturday morning became a kind of secular twin for children, with its long, idle hours watching TV in pajamas, ranging through the neighborhood, or joining in whatever game was going on. But now children are hustled off to soccer games, to piano lessons, to play dates, to the mall. After-school play is even more thoroughly regimented. An exercise physiologist, Pete Egoscue, wrote recently in the *New York Times* that the narrow range of children's physical activities today is causing great harm, and may be partly responsible for the rise of hyperactivity and other ills. His prescription is "playgrounds, open fields, and tall trees for climbing." Playing at random is the best elixir, he suggests.

What Egoscue is describing is the old-fashioned neighborhood, which, whether urban, rural, or suburban, served as the ultimate playground for children. Many neighborhoods no longer have that quality, in part because there are so many fewer stay-at-home mothers to serve as anchors for their free-floating children. Other factors are also at work, not least a pattern of suburban sprawl that makes it increasingly difficult for children to get around on their own. Then there are fears—some justified, some surely exaggerated—about what could happen to children left at liberty, fears that gain more plausibility in neighborhoods that are largely depopulated by day. A self-perpetuating cycle has been set in motion, as the withdrawal of children from neighborhoods into organized activities shrinks the ranks of playmates and encourages other parents to arrange more of their children's lives for them.

Into all of this there enters a sense of anxiety and worry about what we might ironically call "getting the most out of childhood." It is a feeling familiar to virtually all modern parents, summed up for me one Saturday morning last year as I stood watching my six-year-old daughter play soccer. As the children flitted about the field in their brightly colored shirts, never seeming quite mindful enough of the directions screamed at them by adults on the sidelines, another father remarked to me enthusiastically that this was terrific fun, and great preparation for life in the private sector too.

Leisure comes in several varieties, and those that are most like work—competitive sports, hobbies—have flourished. Witold Rybczynski observes that while such pursuits are refreshing, they carry with them the implication that they are both the consequence of and a preparation for work. Another kind of leisure brings us together in groups—for worship, for sports, for volunteer and civic activities. Robert Putnam, a Harvard political scientist, has argued that

Americans have increasingly retreated from these sorts of activities and warns of dire consequences for American democracy. But, as G. K. Chesterton observed, the most rare and precious form of leisure is simply the freedom to do nothing, and this is the most endangered species of leisure today. Those anglers who gave more time to their great escape in the 1990s also increased their spending on boats and other gear—by five times as much. They made fishing more like a job. They probably caught more fish, but their most important quarry only became more elusive.

Chesterton, a famous workaholic, understood that the joy of work and the joy of leisure are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but do need to live apart. While most writing about the contemporary “time bind” emphasizes the importance of better integrating work and family life, it may be more important in the long run to achieve a greater *separation* in the way we think about work and leisure. Otherwise, Americans may unthinkingly surrender one of their most precious freedoms, the freedom to do nothing.

A campaign for idleness would have to establish the home and the neighborhood as its capitals. Its expansionist energies might be engaged by the fact that people are most likely to enter into the more restful and restorative varieties of leisure—reading, socializing, joining in community activities—when they have three-day weekends. The rise of casual Fridays and the scattered practice of keeping reduced summer hours on the last day of the workweek suggest a promising opening. Saint Friday? It’s something to work on.



Object to Be Destroyed (1959), by Man Ray