The Economy of Time

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James Woudhuysen's forecast of the coming colonisation of the world of work by the ethos of play ought to remind us that it was not always thus. Indeed, for many, many years it was rather the opposite: work was the exemplar for all other uses of time. Not old English 'play', then, but Latinate 'recreation', with all its overtones of worthy self-improvement, guiltily disguised our larking about as a kind of work. Hobbies were an imitation of craft-work undertaken at home, or else you could 'dig for victory' on the allotment. Some of the old work-ethic guilt still attaches to free time, so that we improve our homes and minds with something of a religious fervour, corresponding to those government ambitions noted by Woudhuysen.

The last time any government paid so deliberate an interest in culture was during the Second World War, with the founding of the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts. At that time, Lord De la Warr

> *had Venetian visions of a post-war Lord Mayor's show on the Thames in which the Board of Education left the arts in a triumph from Whitehall to Greenwich in magnificent barges and gorgeous gondolas; orchestras, madrigal singers, Shakespeare from the old Vic, ballet from Sadler's Wells, shining canvasses from the Royal Academy, folk dancers from village greens – in fact Merrie England.*
>
> (Arts Council of Great Britain, 1956: 5–6)

It sounds contemporary – yet the context was not an expansion of leisure time but rather the opposite: long hours at work. The arts were subsidised to protect them against the encroachment of a war effort that threatened to sweep them aside.

In the face of the remarkable contemporary data on the expansion of play, it is worth asking what, if anything, sustains the boundaries between work and leisure, or whether the old drudgery will simply be swept aside by the new fun. We can observe one determinant, the Maslow effect, where rising incomes and cheaper basic goods allow a greater proportion of household expenditure to be dedicated to leisure than food – at least for the richest two-fifths of the population (Heartfield, 2000: 20). At least as important as rising incomes is the greater efficiency in production of basic goods. Economists Cox and Alm have estimated how long on average an American would have to work to earn the money to pay for the selected commodities, in different decades (Table C1).

Technological innovation can transform leisure time, too. Cinema audiences were decimated by television. The same market was further subdivided by video, satellite and now digital channels. New means of communication, lighter cameras and digital editing have all expanded choice in the market by producing more entertainment more cheaply.

But while these revolutions in means of delivery take place on a relatively rapid timescale of five or ten years, a final determinant changes much more slowly: the distribution of leisure time in society.

To understand the distribution of leisure time, we need to understand the distribution of working time. The Labour Force Survey tells us that in 2002, 27.7 million people worked a sum total of 46,525 million hours, producing the goods and services that make up the national wealth. Without this activity, nothing else could happen. Working time dominates the distribution of leisure time, which is effectively slotted in once work has finished.

Table C1 How long on average an American had work to earn the money to pay for various commodities, 1920–1999

Year	Half gallon of milk	Three pound chicken	100 kilowatt hours electricity	3min coast-to-coast call
1920	37mins	2hrs 27mins	13hrs 36mins	30hrs 3mins
1930	31mins	2hrs 1mins	11hrs 3mins	16hrs 29mins
1940	21mins	1hrs 24mins	5hrs 52mins	6hrs 7mins
1950	16mins	1hrs 11mins	2hrs	1hrs 44mins
1960	13mins	33mins	1hrs 9mins	1hr
1970	10mins	22mins	39mins	24mins
1980	8.7mins	18mins	45mins	11mins
1990	8mins	14mins	43mins	4mins
1999	7mins	14mins	38mins	2mins

Source: Cox and Alm, 1999: 43

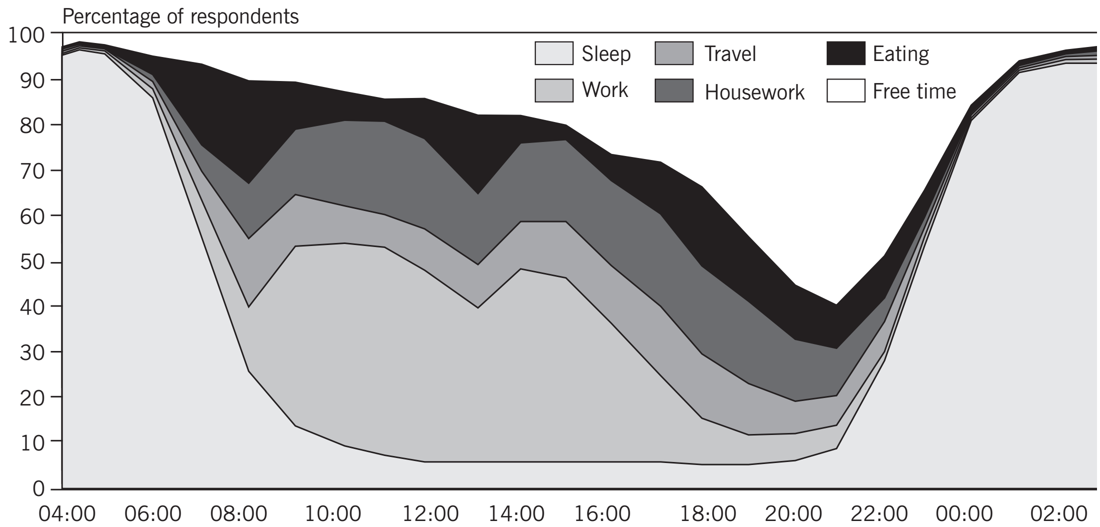
The BBC carried out time use studies in 1939, 1961, 1975, 1983 and 1988, published as *The People's Daily Activities* and latterly *Daily Life in the Eighties*. More recently the University of Essex and the Office of National Statistics have taken on the task, producing a map of the average weekday, for adults and children (Figure C1).

The rough shape of this average day is remarkably similar to average days over the past 30 or 40 years. One can sympathise with the schedulers and programmers fighting over that two-hour slot between coming home, eating and going to bed. Unlike innovations in the technology of play, available playtime changes quite slowly; but it does change. Despite the widespread perception that people are overworked, time spent in paid work shows a gradual, secular decline from 236 minutes a day in 1961 to 193 minutes a day in 1984 to 147 minutes a day in 2000 (Gershuny, 2000: 224; ONS, 2000).

Decreasing work-time points to an historic problem faced by market economies. As Cox and Alm's table suggests, through intensive growth technology creates more from less labour. In providing an economic incentive to abbreviate labour time, market economies have exhibited a less than perfect mechanism for the re-absorption of surplus labourers into the economy (Ricardo, 1984: Chapter 31). In other times this surplus population has starved, emigrated, subsisted on welfare or been called up. The irony that industrial development plunged people into penury just as it released them from drudgery has been a perennial one for market-based economic systems.

With the return of unemployment after the long post war boom, it seemed to some that the solution was a planned expansion of leisure (Jenkins and Sherman, 1979; Gorz, 1982). But such proposals were deemed utopian, putting an unbearable strain upon public finances, as well as undermining the discipline of work. In the 1980s the trend appeared to be a return to the 1930s, with mass unemployment leading to a contrast between the work-rich,

Figure C1 The average weekday for adults and children in the UK, 2000



Note: 'Work' includes attendance at school, 'eating' includes personal grooming.
Source: Office of National Statistics (2000)

double-income families trading time for high living standards, and the impoverished work-poor. In the UK, working hours peaked in 1988 at about 44 a week, as employees maintained their incomes by working more overtime. At the same time, the numbers out of work rose above three million, making a cruel joke of the 'leisure society'.

In the 1990s, though, the picture changed, with a marked increase in the workforce. This was a process of extensive rather than intensive growth. More people were drawn into employment, including record numbers of women (now outnumbering men in the workforce), as well as immigrant populations that had previously been disproportionately unemployed. The cumulative effect of labour market liberalisation had begun to hold down wages, making it possible to employ more people. Employment gains, concluded the European Commission's Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs, reflect 'the effects of several years of wage moderation' (2000: 11). In the US the Federal Reserve concluded that the long period of growth was the consequence of wages being held down by 'worker insecurity' (Federal Open Market Committee minutes, 24 September 1996). And though wages were falling, so too were the prices of consumer goods, mitigating hardships even as more people were in work. The 'feel-good factor' was at last felt.

The weakness of a period of extensive growth, though, is that it lacks the trend towards technological innovation that characterises intensive growth. In Britain, France and Germany spending on Research and Development actually fell as a proportion of GDP in the 1990s (below 2 per cent in Britain's case, below 2.5 in the others'). According to the British Department of Trade and Industry, productivity deteriorated as 'the economy has generated an additional 1.5 million jobs at a quicker rate than it has increased investment' (Department of Trade and Industry, 2001: 75). The workforce expanded with the growth of low-productivity jobs, mostly in the service sector.

These trends are pertinent to the changes in work- as well as play-time. First there was a much more even spread of work time across society, with working hours coming down again to under 40 a week in the 'overworked' UK, much lower unemployment and much more part-time working. Correspondingly, more time was freed up for leisure, and for domestic work, which increased marginally for women (by four minutes per day between 1961 and 1995), and much more so for men (46 minutes over the same period). It should be considered, though, that domestic work itself was less like drudgery, and more like recreation, as young couples sought out child-care responsibilities and home improvements as a welcome alternative to work.

Most compellingly, as Woudhuysen shows, time use at work itself has changed. Where employers in the 1980s were wringing more effort out of a diminished workforce, the work-life balance really did shift in the 1990s. A considerably expanded workforce has a highly productive core (Owen, 2000), but quite flabby periphery. Cox and Alm report an interesting comparison from the US: 'Time-diary surveys show that Americans today spend as many as six of their weekly on-the-job hours on leisure pursuits compared with only one hour in 1965' (Cox and Alm, 1999: 67). Non-work activities at work include phoning friends, playing solitaire or browsing the internet, reading, raising funds for charities, picking up and dropping off kids at school, attending parents' evenings, and exercising, often at work-provided facilities. On top of all this goofing off, there are of course the many ways that employers keep the attention of workers who are not currently engaged in filling orders, such as training schemes, confidence building weekends, pro bono work, and an increasing number of paid, part-paid and unpaid sabbaticals. And then finally there are the society-wide diversions Woudhuysen notes of national celebration and mourning, the World Cup and other sports fixtures, increasing bank holidays and so on.

The contrast between the ethos of the Thatcher–Major governments and the Blair administration is quite pointed. In the 1980s, market discipline and profit maximisation were the dominant motifs, leading to efficiency at work, while public order was a subordinate goal. At the end of the 1990s the order of priorities appears to be reversed. Our current administration is much more concerned with public order, seeing 'social exclusion' as something to be avoided at all costs. Woudhuysen does well to alight on the remark from the prime minister that sport is about 'keeping young people engaged and out of trouble'. The growing importance of play indicates the contemporary form of the historic problem of market economies: how to engage the subjectivity of the population – this time, outside productive work.

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