

SEPTEMBER 2014

No time to play in the USA?

Free Time: The Forgotten American Dream. By Benjamin Kline Hunnicutt, Philadelphia, PA, Temple University Press, 2013, 250 pp., \$89.50/ cloth; \$34.95/ paperback; \$34.95 e-book

Three hours. That's the most time in a day John Maynard Keynes predicted that his grandchildren would need to work to live comfortably. If everyone pitches in and does their fair share of productive work, the economy will produce more than enough, Keynes reasoned, and humanity's greatest dilemma will be to figure out what to do with so much extra time. In an earlier era, Benjamin Franklin prophesied likewise, except that he said 4 hours, tops. Fast forward to the 21st century, and such visions are much closer to reality among European countries such as Sweden, France, and the Netherlands, where the average employee works less than 40 hours a week, than they are in the United States. American busyness and chronic high levels of work-related stress have become news fodder of late, as the United States seemingly continues to earn its moniker of the most overworked nation among the developed Western countries. Despite steady advances in automation and technology that have raised productivity to record levels, Americans face what could be called a "time famine" in terms of leisure hours.

Several explanations have been put forward in the literature, ranging from economic (slow recovery from the recession, high unemployment, rising prices of goods and services, stagnant wages) to psychological (working hard is a badge of honor; busyness is a status symbol; work defines one's identity and purpose in life; jobs are less routinized and more enjoyable). In *Free Time: The Forgotten American Dream*, historian Benjamin Kline Hunnicutt provides a different take. Per Hunnicutt, Americans have long been suffering from a "nationwide, intergenerational amnesia" and, as a result, have largely come to equate *progress* with perpetual economic growth, power, material abundance, and consumerism. Hunnicutt theorizes that Americans have forgotten an important part of the American dream, *Higher Progress*. Hunnicutt adopted the term *Higher Progress* from the author Walt Whitman's *Democratic Vistas* and understood it as referring to "extraeconomic, nonpecuniary quality of life enhancements." For the purposes of this book, Hunnicutt defines it as the "democratic advance of freedom beyond political liberty and economic struggles." He believes that such progress offers workers a "practical way to capture the traditional American dream and to make real the freedoms promised by the Declaration of Independence." Hunnicutt wrote this book for what he felt was a necessary first step to reawaken the original dream, to resurrect the movement for shorter hours, and to reintroduce *Higher Progress* to mainstream consciousness.

Hunnicutt began his research to solve the busyness puzzle after stumbling upon a 1976 *Monthly Labor Review* article reporting that Americans had no increase in leisure time since the Great Depression. In the intervening nearly 40 years since 1976, he combed the literature extensively, and at times carried out personal interviews, to provide a collation of "voices" from a wide range of personalities on the subject. Among those quoted in the book are labor leaders, workers, theologians, journalists, politicians, businesspeople, professors, and economists. Hunnicutt's goal was to chronicle the rise and collapse of the shorter-hours movement amidst the key economic and political turning points in the United States.

Hunnicutt posits that the "amnesia" wasn't always there. Quite the contrary, he argues, going to great lengths to clarify that it was the very vision of *Higher Progress* that sustained workers' campaign

for shorter hours for decades and helped usher in the 10-hour and then 8-hour day in the 19th century. Summarizing the works of well-known 18th century theologians, Hunnicutt traces the religious origins of *Higher Progress* to church sermons in the pre-Revolutionary American colonies, in which pastors used shortening the workweek as one of the metaphors for removing the curse of work dating back to biblical times. Hunnicutt differentiates *Higher Progress* from economic progress, using Whitman's essays on stages of freedom in *Democratic Vistas*, a work that expresses Whitman's belief that economic progress is not an end in itself, but merely a steppingstone to *Higher Progress*. When attained, *Higher Progress* allows an individual to spend more time with families and communities, enjoy nature and culture, and achieve education and enlightenment.

Hunnicutt recounts the fight for shorter work hours, pointing out that it began as an offshoot of the Industrial Revolution and the ensuing laissez-faire capitalism that both interrupted the ancient work-life balance. Workers, including women and children, found themselves toiling under onerous factory conditions for up to 18 hours a day, 6 days a week. To re-create the mindset that fueled the success of the 10-hour and 8-hour campaigns, Hunnicutt specifically targets the voices of workers, labor leaders, industrial feminists, editors, and advocates, sourced from newspapers, speeches, editorials, and circulars. The voices' recurring theme was the ironic failure of the capitalist economy, mechanization, and modern work discipline to liberate workers from the drudgery of jobs and economic worries. This theme carries through to today, notes the author, with the typical workday still pegged at 8 hours and overworking considered acceptable, if not commendable.

In the second half of the book, Hunnicutt describes how the shorter-hours ideology of *Higher Progress* in the early part of the 20th century was eventually eclipsed by the contemporary American dream of "Full-Time, Full Employment," courtesy of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt and succeeding administrations. Hunnicutt's collection of excerpts from leading figures of the time provide context to just how pressing the economic and political realities and patriotic sentiments were during the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War. In combination, these events sidelined the fight for leisure and replaced it with the "glorification of work." He chronicles the paradigm shift among labor leaders: instead of sticking to the century-long battle cry of "shorter hours as gateway to *Higher Progress*," they viewed the fight for a shorter workday as secondary to retaining employment.

In the book's conclusion, Hunnicutt acknowledges his belief in the traditional American dream and in *Higher Progress* as a better alternative than an American lifestyle that revolves around consumerism, wealth, power, and overwork. Nonetheless, he is objective enough to mention at least two of the arguments against the less work, more leisure school of thought: first, that critics view the *Higher Progress* ideology as quixotic and utopian because it runs counter to the tenets of a capitalist economy operating at full capacity and to human nature's insatiable materialistic wants; second, that there is apprehension among some that a majority of people "would never make good use of free time" and will "always need the discipline of full-time work" to have a meaningful existence.

Hunnicutt's arguments resonate, given the slow recovery from the 2007–2009 recession. The lack of political incentive to reduce working hours, and of workers to pursue such a reduction, is understandable in an environment preoccupied with job creation and a workforce with people bent on either keeping the job they have or looking for work. Still, Hunnicutt remains steadfast in his belief that no "inexorable political or economic reality" should prevent the nation from realizing the original American dream. He seems unwilling to accept the notion that priorities and rational choices are subject to change over time; in other words, he does not buy into the idea that the traditional American dream has become obsolete in the face of changing economic conditions. He appears to underestimate the fact that some people derive more happiness and freedom from work, money, and material things than they do from leisure. He also doesn't factor in recent improvements, such as teleworking, that offer

flexibility to workers, are family friendly, and eliminate commuting. Despite Hunnicutt's dismissal of them as short-term solutions, the availability of these alternatives seem to imply that employers are cognizant of the negative effects of increased workloads and an unrestrained hard-working culture. Having these options at the workers' disposal certainly should be considered bread crumbs, at least, in the right direction on the road to *Higher Progress*.

Hunnicutt's supposition in the title of his book, that free time is the forgotten American dream and that Americans suffer from amnesia, really struck a chord with me. I particularly liked the way the early chapters are designed to bring readers up to speed on the seemingly abstract concept of *Higher Progress*. Nontechnical readers may initially find, as I did, that these chapters are not an easy read but are nonetheless important in laying the groundwork for the theme of the book.

I recommend this book highly to those looking for a fresh perspective on the longstanding issue of the work–leisure tradeoff. Although I found the volume dense and redundant at times, Hunnicutt's thorough research and meticulous sampling of quotations serve as undeniable evidence that there once was a vision of *Higher Progress* that even the most hardcore skeptic can't deny and that there could be one again. The book serves as a timely eye opener for any American worker to conduct a self-evaluation of the question "Am I living to work, or working to live?"

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Vidalina Alpuerto-Abadam

abadam.vidalina@bls.gov

Vidalina Alpuerto-Abadam is an economist in the Office of Employment and Unemployment Statistics, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.