DEMOCRACY

ARGUMENTS

The Future of Leisure

It is past time we rediscover the lost art of leisure. Doing so, however, will also mean teaching people how to find fulfillment in their free time.

BY STUART WHATLEY FROM MARCH 12, 2018, 2:40 PM – 9 MIN READ

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Oscar Wilde was one of many thinkers, including Karl Marx, to envision an era of mass leisure.

Over the past few years, publications, consulting companies, and think tanks have been wringing their hands with increasing urgency over the "the future of work." *Politico Magazine* recently dedicated an issue to it, whereas *Quartz* has dedicated an entire vertical. McKinsey and Co. routinely releases new reports about it. Even *Nature* has published a series of essays on the topic. For two years running, *The Atlantic* has convened an annual "**Future of Work Summit**," and it has now been joined by *The New York Times*, which hosted a swanky "New Work Summit" at a Ritz Carlton in California last month. It would seem that we have the future of work covered. The future of leisure? Not so much.

Leisure has long been regarded as a residual to work. But it hasn't always been as neglected as it is today. In the decades after World War II, leisure was a critical concern, because many thinkers assumed that automation would soon eliminate most jobs. In 1964, the British sociologist Anthony Giddens **surmised** that, "the sociological analysis of leisure will come more from out of the shadow of the sociology of work." And by 1967, when John Kenneth Galbraith's ***The New Industrial State*** was published, "The notion of a new era of greatly expanded leisure" had become "a conventional conversation piece."

For social scientists like David Riesman, author of *The Lonely Crowd*, and Robert S. Weiss, the challenge of the age was to **ensure** that "technological developments" would lead to productive and self-fulfilling free-time pursuits, "and not simply unemployment." In the early 1960s, the French sociologist Joffre Dumazedier had visited Riesman in the United States and was **shocked** that no government agency had been established to help the American people find satisfaction outside of work. Without such institutions, **warned** Georges Friedmann, another Frenchman, the "feverish pursuit of happiness by the twentieth-century masses" would be at risk.

Such insights might sound quaint now that skills training and coding boot camps are regarded as the only reasonable response to the rush of automation and artificial intelligence. The age of mass leisure previously envisioned by **Karl Marx**, **Oscar Wilde**, **John Maynard Keynes**, and others never came to pass, partly for the reason that Galbraith himself had predicted: The American economy's productivity gains were converted into ever-more consumption, not ever-declining labor time. Another reason is that growth in productivity itself, along with wages, has been weak for decades.

Regardless, a deeper discussion about the future of leisure is past due. For starters, most advanced economies are rapidly aging. Between now and 2060, the share of the American population 65 and older will grow, **from 15 percent to 24 percent,** implying a substantial increase in the future demand for affordable forms of entertainment and personal development.

But leisure will be no less important for the working-age population. After all, in 2016, the **Pew Research Center** found that only half of Americans "get a sense of identity from their job." And for a third of workers, a job was nothing more than a paycheck.

In discussions about the future of work, it is often said that many jobs in 2038 will be unimaginable to someone in 2018. Yet a key **source of meaning** in work is the psychological fulfillment of not just meeting a specific job's demands, but advancing within a career. That requires a reasonable expectation of one's employment future. The scarcity of such expectations today may explain why, according to **Pew**, "Younger workers are significantly less likely than middle-aged and older workers to view their job as a career."

What are all the workers now swirling around the drain of career uncertainty supposed to do in the meantime? In leisure, Giddens observed, they might find, "satisfactions of achievement and self-realization which are frustrated elsewhere." They might also pursue what the sociologist Robert A. Stebbins calls "**serious leisure**"; that is, activities for which one develops a genuine

interest, so much so that one launches oneself "on a career centered on acquiring and expressing its special skills, knowledge and experience."

Properly conceived, leisure could be the ultimate social safety net for an era of technologically driven uncertainty. It is potentially a space for bootstrapping new "careers," which may or may not adhere to the traditional forms of self-employment or wage labor. It is also a space where one can move beyond the career-as-identity paradigm altogether, and contribute to one's community through cultural and civic activities that are ignored in economic models because they are unremunerated. As the mid-century thinkers understood, leisure is not just a temporal dimension of modern life; it is also an optimal state of mind, one that people can learn to summon up for themselves when afforded the education and means to do so.

To be sure, most people won't realize the full potential of leisure on their own. There is even **empirical evidence** to suggest that leisure activities simply are not as fulfilling as work. The unemployed, after all, tend to live in a state of anomie, not liberation. As the social psychologist Marie Jahoda **argued** in the early 1980s, employment, unlike many leisure activities, offers temporal structure to one's day, a chance to interact with other people, and a sense of identity and purpose.

But while Jahoda's explanation for ennui among the unemployed seems intuitively true, it does not account for, say, the wealthy heir who has packed his schedule with afternoon charity fundraisers, tee times, and dinnertime soirees that, like any job, offer purpose, social interactions, and a sense of temporal structure. Nor does it account for the innumerable workers who in fact do not find meaning in their jobs.

The real problem, says David Fryer, a researcher at the University of Queensland who studies the psychology of unemployment, is social stigma. The "unemployed subject," he contends, is, like the "employed subject," a social construction. And the reason the unemployed often feel like failures is that they

"manufacture themselves" psychologically in accordance with social expectations.

Another problem is that policymakers remain wholly focused on jobs at the expense of publicly provisioned leisure. In fact, funding for parks and recreation, art grants, and other public programs that could enhance leisure options and experiences "is slowly being eroded away," notes Karla A. Henderson, a leisure studies scholar and professor emeritus at North Carolina State University. Since Lyndon B. Johnson launched the National Endowment for the Humanities in September 1965, its funding has consistently **fallen below** its 1979 high. And if the Trump administration's budget proposals are to be taken seriously, funding for the **National Park Service**, **after-school programs**, the **Corporation for Public Broadcasting, National Public Radio**, and many other programs could now be on the chopping block.

Yet another problem is the one identified by mid-century thinkers: Most people haven't been taught to find fulfillment in their free time. To the contrary, rather than learning how to cultivate lifelong interests, students—both in primary and secondary schooling—are increasingly being educated to meet specific labor-market demands, demands that may also disappear or be automated away. Meanwhile, "It just is assumed that everyone knows how to handle their free time," Henderson laments. "Not true!"

The failure to educate for leisure is not just a lost opportunity; it also poses dangers, especially if large-scale job losses really are in the offing. The suggestion that "idle hands are the devil's playthings" is a moralism long uttered by the idle wealthy to impose work requirements on the poor. Still, it is not always false. As the sociologist Norbert Elias once **noted**, soccer hooliganism and similar forms of mob violence may stem from a "deprivation of meaning" in the lives of the under- or unemployed. The same could be said for those now succumbing to "**deaths of despair**" from alcoholism, drug overdoses, or suicide.

Whereas the future of work concerns economic employment, a debate about the future of leisure would focus on its potential for *emotional* and *civic* employment. Unfortunately, most people, but particularly **underprivileged youths** and the less educated, spend the bulk of their leisure time on social media or binge-watching TV, even as **evidence piles up** showing that neither activity bodes well for one's happiness.

So what is to be done? In the near term, policymakers might consider appropriating less to the military, and more to parks, after-school programs, and the arts and humanities. They could also take a look at the commercial leisure and entertainment industries. Over the past decade, more people have been spending more time on Facebook, whose business model is not all that different than the tobacco industry—it **addicts its users**, **denies its own harmful effects**, and expands its user base by **targeting children** and developing countries.

Commercial leisure and entertainment industries are undergoing a technological transformation that will be just as profound as the changes in work. But if the prevailing market incentive is to **manufacture addiction**, then the future of leisure could be bleak indeed. It remains to be seen if those designing social-media platforms, video games, virtual- and augmented-reality applications, and other technologies will feel pressured to do so responsibility.

More broadly, enjoying the fruits of leisure will likely require what Riesman, the sociologist, described as "a change in perspective on the world and the self." Much will depend on whether educational institutions can resist the urge to double down on the most employable STEM fields at the expense of everything else, not least the liberal arts, which concern themselves most with the good life.

Eventually, Robert C. Wolcott of Northwestern University tells me, people may "transition to seeing their limited attention as the primary asset." And at the same time, more goods and services will become "'free' and automated, so

people will become less concerned with competing for them." For Wolcott, the objective, then, will be "for 100% of sentient beings to find purpose for at least some of their attention."

In the meantime, many people might resent the idea of more leisure for more people because they believe that everyone has a duty to contribute to society through traditional employment. But paid labor is only one part of our larger political economy, the health of which depends just as much on cultural and artistic expression, civic engagement, and the kind of social and human capital that is developed during well-spent leisure time.

In a technologically "disrupted" future, work may or may not matter anymore. But leisure most certainly will.

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STUART WHATLEY is Deputy Editor at Project Syndicate. You can follow him on Twitter @StuartWhatley.

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