

All Play?

Limits to the 'Leisure Society'.

The vision of a future in which people lead lives of leisure has been an enduring one. Homeric legend, for example, featured the Lotus Eaters, living in luxurious idleness. The basis of the Leisure Dream today is, of course, automation, which, apparently, will free people to engage in all kinds of cultural, sporting and general recreational activities. Some readers may remember a TV cartoon series called *The Jetsons*, featuring a family whose hardest physical labour was occasionally to push a button, both in the brief time they spent at work and during the much longer periods back in the home, where all kinds of tedious tasks like cooking and cleaning had been automated as well.

In reality, the Age of Leisure always seems to be just out of reach. Today's Industrial Revolution has seen the dawning of a plethora of insecure, mind-numbing and low paid jobs, mainly in the service sector. It is coupled to a general intensification of work duties across many economic sectors. Furthermore, those in formal employment increasingly spend a large part of their day not engaged in any kind of work at all but sit there fuming, stuck in commuter traffic jams.

Those with lots of time on their hands are usually the unemployed, amongst whom miserly welfare benefits severely restrict opportunities, recreational and otherwise. As critics such as Staffan Linder have pointed out, even the super-rich seem to lead harried lives compared to their predecessors of, say, two centuries ago.

From Labour via Leisure to Liberation

Be it a distant dream or an about-to-be-born reality, many people are convinced that a leisure-oriented society would represent real progress. It is widely assumed that a new Age of Leisure will mean more personal happiness, social well-being and environmental sustainability than the Age of Labour and the old Smokestack Economy, with its attendant grime and hard graft.

The positive view of the liberating effects of the Leisure transition is reflected in the terminology its enthusiasts use. The scientist Meredith Thring, for example, wrote of a new "Creative Society" while Walter and Dorothy Schwartz envisaged it as one in which folk engage in "Artwork". The French writer Andre Gorz meanwhile theorised about a revolutionary transformation in how we use our time in his revealingly entitled *Paths to Paradise: On the Liberation from Work*.

Ordinary people might not use the same words but many seem to share such sentiments. When workplaces have been shut down, many employees have voted with their feet, taking the redundancy money and hurrying out of the factory and office door, instead of fighting against the closure. It is also common to find other employees preferring an increase in free time to a rise in wages. Trade Unions have long demanded cuts in working hours, partly to create more jobs for the unemployed but also partly to give their members a better quality of life. Even governments and some employers are now making noise about imperfections in the 'work-life balance'.

Today's demands for more leisure reflect, to a large extent, a deep desire simply to escape from the daily grind. It is reflected in the much repeated dictum that if 'work' were such a good thing, the Rich would have kept it all to themselves. [The toffee-nosed crowds seen at sporting events held on workdays like Royal Ascot suggests that the Rich are doing just that] Despite the fact that, compared to their great grandparents, workers in the richer countries receive longer paid holidays, retire earlier in life and work fewer hours *in toto*, many people feel that life is slipping away as one work day follows another. The proverb "all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy" also captures such thoughts.

'Green' support

Many environmental conservationists also place great faith in a leisure revolution. For example, the writings of British countryside campaigner Marion Shoard portray rural recreation as the key to the "survival" of the countryside (see her essay in MacEwan, ed. *Future Landscapes*, Chatto & Whindus, 1976). Such people seem to regard leisure activities as inherently more benign than other land uses. Many advocates of 'greener growth' similarly endorse both informal recreational activities and formal tourism as environmentally more friendly alternatives to older models of economic development. In the latter case, the notion of 'ecotourism' has been touted as a means of boosting local economies in harmony with environmental systems.

Other organisations in the field of conservation, recreation and culture take a similar view. The British Countryside Commission, for example, has been active in this field through its 'Recreation 2000' initiative. The various "New Forests" projects around the UK are cast firmly in the mould of more leisure opportunities, with ecological goals decidedly downgraded in comparative importance. Many Local Agenda 21 schemes also take up the call for more leisure facilities. The Interim Indicators proposed by Newcastle City Council to judge its progress towards greater sustainability include "the number of new leisure facilities created", including "leisure centres, sports facilities, libraries, art galleries and museums".

Public bodies in the field of tourism are also promoting such development. Northumbria Tourist Board describes the local coastline and uplands as 'England's best-kept Secret' which, according to its objectives, it wants to open to everyone by increasing the number of visitors and by extending the season in which they come. Proponents of 'integrated rural development' also see a more controlled and carefully planned expansion of sport and leisure facilities as part of the way forward, making a multiple use of resources (e.g. a Forestry Commission plantation) otherwise devoted to narrower purposes.

Radical Visions

Calls for more leisure have often come from oppositional movements within society. Generations of radicals, especially on the Left, have railed against the crushing of human vitality under the prevailing system of employment and, conversely, painted a glowing picture of the opportunities to be found outside the workplace. Others have gone further, however. Early Marxists like Paul Lafargue argued for "the right to be lazy" while, a few decades later, the well-known

philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote “in praise of idleness”. Ivan Illich also put forward the right to socially useful *unemployment*. The German writer Rudolph Bahro bluntly stated that “the idea of jobs must fall” as part of what he calls the politics of world transformation.

Similarly, the trend in recent decades to thin out the workforce in many sectors of the economy, ‘downsizing’, is portrayed by some social critics not as simply a social and economic disaster but rather as a potential opportunity for a ‘downshift’ to new lifestyles. Resistance, we are further told, is useless. For example, the American writer Jeremy Rifkin, author of *The End of Work*, view the great clear-out of people from production processes as an inevitable trend, overriding all opposition.

Many critics of orthodox conceptions of employment and unemployment seize on such developments and call for the universal payment of ‘citizen’s dividend’ or ‘basic income’. By such means, it is claimed, people could escape the environmentally destructive and soul-destroying jobs offered in factories and offices. Both individual households and informal, small group activities (e.g. local exchange trading schemes and credit unions) figure prominently in this post-industrial vision.

To some extent, these latter views of a Leisure Society look backwards to the family-oriented economy that existed before the rise of factory production and the industrialisation of agriculture. It also builds upon another tradition, the search for a self-sufficient livelihood, perhaps best personified by Americans Scott and Helen Nearing, whose books describe their experiences in New England. Alongside this standpoint sits another which seeks to liberate people from the humdrum of straight 9 to 5 jobs. The alternative economist James Robertson and many more agree that society must cut down the hours now consumed by paid jobs in the formal sector of the economy.

Part of this radical critique is a recognition that prevailing definitions of work and leisure discount, if not totally ignore, the many socially necessary tasks performed by ‘homeworkers’ and others outside the realm of formal employment. Jobs in the formal sector often are personally stifling and hazardous, both to the workers themselves as well as the wider community — and are diminishing in number anyway. Indeed, tasks done by the unemployed might well be more worthwhile than those performed in paid jobs, where people pointlessly shuffle bits of paper or manufacture mountains of trash, what William Morris called “useless toil”.

Some go much further, drawing the conclusion that today, thanks to technology, no-one need work, an idea preached, amongst others, by the self-styled “yippies” (Jerry Rubin et al), the 60s hippie magazine *Oz* (the source of a popular book of that era called *Play Power*), and by Situationists such as Guy Debord. The phrase “slacker generation” might be a terribly sweeping generalisation but it captures an attitude abroad today that people simply should do their own thing and, if that means being busy doing nothing, so be it.

But perhaps the most extreme endorsement of a shift to a Leisure Society comes from the ‘cyberworld’ enthusiasts. There is, for example, the group around English academic Sadie Plant which argues that automation has solved the

problem of production. Now is the time to reap its harvest by embracing the new technologies, leaving toil to the robots, and using the new sparetime to wallow in the new Lotus-lands of Virtual Reality.

Industrial Leisure Complex

Some advocates of a leisure revolution have a selfish stake in such changes. While millions seek to escape from work into the world of recreation, a huge and fast growing number of people depend upon leisure developments for work. Hotels, motels, travel agencies, tourist airlines, chairlift operators, boatyards, cruise liners, hunting lodges, game reserves, theme parks, sports clubs, fitness parlours, restaurants, leisure equipment shops and other such facilities are now major employers. Behind them stand a host of manufacturers making products that range from fishing tackle and climbing gear to caravans and pleasure boats. Even night club bouncers outnumber factory production line employees in many places.

The whole development lobby of real estate speculators, investors, the construction industry, facility managers, and the like are clear what they mean by a Leisure Society. For them, it will mean more people using more environments, aided by more infrastructure and equipment. They foresee a veritable cornucopia of money-making opportunities, ranging from the construction of yet more ski lifts, boat marinas and so forth to increased sale of all kinds of sporting gear and clothing. Private businesses are not alone in this view. Financial support for tourism by the Scottish Highlands and Islands Development Board was significantly greater than aid provided for land improvement. Perhaps not surprisingly, the HIDB has been an ardent supporter of ski development in the fragile ecosystem of the Cairngorms.

The scale of the industry can be seen in many ways. For example, at the time of the 'foot and mouth' crisis in British agriculture in early 2001, greater concern was expressed at the impact of this disaster not on farmers but on hotels, guest houses, restaurants, museums, and other facilities in the countryside. Many commentators pointed out that leisure and tourism were worth far more than the farm incomes and food production lost because of the disease.

Many High Streets may have lost their local shops but their places have been taken in part by chains of travel agents, though they in turn are threatened by Internet booking. On arrival at many tourist destinations the first sight is a row of businesses trying to persuade the visitor to go somewhere else. Many colleges and universities courses have sprung up in areas such as 'travel and tourism' or 'leisure management' to supply future staff to the burgeoning industry.

Indeed whole areas have been transformed into leisure and tourist 'monocultures', planted with, for example, ski resorts, seaside complexes, safari lodges, museums ...plus innumerable gift shops. 'Historic quarters' have been spruced up to play their part too. Often there are few alternative employment opportunities in the locality and, to be fair, such occupations sometimes offer more attractive work than the back-breaking toil that used to characterise many traditional economies.

Already, in richer countries like Britain, millions of people take leisure very seriously. As the last millennium closed, the average Briton was spending, for the

first time ever, more on leisure than any other kind of household expenditure. The former figure was boosted by inclusion of dual purpose items such as computers but sporting events, cable TV equipment and subscription, gambling and holidays account for some 71% of all leisure-related spending which, combined, is greater than expenditure on food or housing.

Leisure Dream or Nightmare

There are good grounds for thinking that the Leisure Society is as much Fool's Gold as its close cousin, the Information Economy. Far from Leisure - as currently practised - being a post-industrial, "post-Fordist" shift in our use of time, it represents the industrialisation of yet another part of our being, a veritable consummation of the whole consumerist ethic.

It is far from easy to assess the likely environmental and social impacts of any shift towards a 'Leisure Society'. One difficulty is the hostile response any critical evaluation is likely to attract. To criticise the dream is to run the risk of being labelled a kill joy, a truly sad case incapable of having fun. Similarly, in our politically correct times, critics of how other enjoy themselves positively invite condemnation of snobbery and élitism.

Yet leisure activities should be assessed just the same as any other aspect of society. If they can be shown to be destructive, wasteful or cruel, they should be subject to public regulation. After all, an increasing number of people rightly expect governments to intervene in areas such as road safety, fire prevention, industrial pollution or take action with respect to more general concerns about communal well-being and ecological sustainability.

However, different sets of standards seem to dominate conventional thinking about leisure. Few are prepared to entertain the stark thought that the total ecological impact of all activities that might be grouped under the general umbrella of leisure is already unsustainable, even though the same people are quick to demand the instant closure of, say, nuclear power plants or fur farms. Few are ready to accept restrictions on perceived freedoms such as the right to roam. Indeed when it was proposed recently to charge for (group) access to the heavily-trodden slopes of Ben Nevis in Scotland, there was a storm of protest, with many so-called environmentalists in the vanguard. Groups such as the hunting lobby adopt an even more aggressive stance when its assumed 'rights' are questioned.

One person's work...

Another difficulty relates to what actually constitutes 'Leisure'. It might be spent in a myriad of pursuits, ranging from piano playing in the parlour to package holidays in Disneyland. The very word 'leisure' means very different things to different people. To some, it is the absence of all hard work, paid or unpaid, in or outside formal employment. To others, it means freedom from the constraints of conventional jobs but none the less still involving much expenditure of physical and mental effort.

For all the problems of work intensification, bullying in the workplace, job insecurity and the tedium of commuting, there are still many people also like going to work. There are plenty of people who do not want to retire and some

who continue to work after winning the lottery. After all, employment can offer not just money but also welcome stimulation, status and friendships. Conversely, many people find free time on their hands to be a boring, if not lonely, experience.

Since leisure involves strong subjective elements - what is 'work' to one person may be 'play' to another - one phrase that might cover the activity is 'discretionary time', as used by the economist Charles Handy. Lewis Mumford, perhaps the century's leading critic of modern "Machine Civilisation", anticipated such a description when he described the "final state of leisure" as "free time". 19th. century radical thinkers such as Karl Marx also stressed how control over one's time was the foundation stone of freedom.

Perhaps the safest way to define and assess the kind of activities that might characterise any Leisure society is to look at the things that the mass of people do now in their free time. Clearly watching TV is a major filler of that sparetime. Apparently, typical citizens today in countries like the USA & UK will spend the equivalent of 8 years of their lives staring at the small screen. Actually now, average Britons spend yet more time online staring at their computers each day. Shopping is another leisure activity, not just as a necessary chore to be kept to the minimum but a positive pleasure in its own right.

So too are trips to places like leisure pools and theme parks. Organised sport and games of a less formal nature obviously must be included. as well as should any do-it-yourself home improvements and gardening, at least beyond basic repair work. Then there are 'holidays' in the normal use of the word, usually involving travel to more distant places and stays there for longer periods.

The Price of Leisure

It remains an extremely difficult task to assess in depth the impact of all these activities. Any such assessment must be done on a 'cradle-to-grave' basis, in other words, assessing not the activity itself and its direct impacts but also those of all related activities, both before and after, without which it would not be possible. In most cases, trips by motor car - and the energy and other resources it depletes as well as the various kind of pollution and land-take it generates - must be added to the bill of total costs. Financial costings will only reveal a small part of the bill since many impacts become 'externalities', their bill not paid for by those causing the damage but, instead, picked up by other people in other places or in the future or by other species.

As noted above, members of some future Leisure Society might engage in all kinds of activities. Some would be wholly beneficial to one and all, others far less so. Take, for instance, allotment gardening. It could constitute a much more productive and ecologically less damaging system for growing a variety of foodstuffs than the typical modern farm. In terms of output set against inputs of energy and other resources, it can be much more efficient while the expenditure of physical effort involved probably would do most people a power of good. A similar case could be made for other uses of spare time: assisting incapacitated relatives and neighbours, getting involved in charitable activities, helping out at the local school, mending and repairing things...

Yet the same free time could be spent in less wholesome ways. Take gardening again, for example. At present, it is usually an environmental menace, collectively creating acres of biologically sterile lawn, surrounded by a limited assortment of frequently exotic plants, all liberally doused in heavy helpings of artificial fertiliser and biocides. Also much in evidence are power-guzzling lawn mowers, water-wasting automatic sprinklers and the like.

Furthermore, gardeners are some of the worst culprits in terms of the import of exotic species. Such 'aliens' often spread like wildfire through local environments since Nature has not had time to devise checks and balances to keep them in order. The rhododendrons that now choke many upland areas in Britain are but one of many examples. Such examples suggest that the notion of a Leisure Society should be treated with great caution and its implications carefully scrutinised. One of the more obvious examples is the transformation of shopping into a leisure experience.

On Your Trolley

In our consumerist culture, many people seemingly prefer to use any spare hours trailing from one shop to another. George Romero's satirical horror film *Dawn of the Dead* captured this addiction rather well, as does the phrase 'mall rat'. Typical of the new Mecca's of Shopping-as-Leisure is the Lakeside centre at Thurrock, covered in glass under which are over 200 shops while outside sit 12,000 car parking spaces, complete with a special £22m access road.

Not just during the pre-Christmas spending spree but also on Bank Holidays and many weekends, shopping malls like Britain's biggest, the Tyneside Metro Centre, are surrounded by vast queues of cars, with both their engines and occupants fuming - scarcely a sign of much progress towards ecological sustainability or fulfilled human needs.

Some people simply come to gaze at shop windows but, of course, many others are there to spend... and spend some more. Their purchases are intimately connected to all the environmental destructive mining, manufacturing, and transportation back down the economic pipeline. A look at any Do-It-Yourself superstore, 'greener' ones like B&Q included, quickly reveals the connections between the goods on sale - everything from outdoor barbecues to plastic paddling pools - and the deepening crisis of unsustainability in the world at large. On public holiday weekends, some 26 million Britons will drive to DIY stores. In 1999, B&Q, with some 300 outlets, sold goods worth over £2.3 billion.

On such 'days of rest' it is often difficult to get any peace at all because of people sawing, drilling, hammering, mowing and otherwise making sure their neighbours do not get any relaxation (each year, some 70 people kill themselves doing DIY while another 250,000 are injured). The resource profligacy of such activities is intensified by the fact that many items such as multi-bit drills end up hardly ever used.

The denizens of our imaginary Leisure Society might round off a bout of shopping with a bit of 'grazing', grabbing a bite to eat at a burger joint or pizza parlour. The piles of discarded fast food wrappings strewn along the country's highways and byways are only the tip of a whole string of unsustainable impacts, including much suffering for farm animals, associated with fast food and similar

industries. Then there are the links between burgeoning levels of obesity and the standardised pap found in most food outlets. Human health would suffer still further if the dominant pastime of the Leisure Society were to remain the same as today, that of the couch potato, Homer Simpsons seated for hours in front of TV and computer screens, munching junk food, washed down by junk beer or lager.

Many people, especially in younger age groups, do not want to be stuck indoors. This might mean a trip down to the local bar or a night-on-the-town 'clubbing'. In the latter case, a whole 'weekend' culture has developed. People grit their teeth on weekdays waiting for Friday night to come round. The scale of connected activities can be quite awesome. In just one square mile around the Quayside and Bigg Market of the city of Newcastle in northern England, there are some 160 pubs, 125 restaurants and 16 nightclubs with over 80,000 heading there on a typical weekend. The local council promotes such developments as "party city". Yet one person's party animal all too often is another's anti-social pest. Certainly residents of such areas are justly angered by the noise and litter created by other people's fun, which also has a bad habit of turning into alcohol-fuelled violence and vandalism. No comment is needed on the links between such 'fun' and 'recreational' drugs such as ecstasy, whose health hazards are becoming increasingly clear.

Sport and Tourism

These two aspects of leisure time merit separate discussion. Sport might involve active participation, with some perhaps surprisingly popular activities. Fishing attracts huge numbers, for example. Golf courses spread like green cancer over an increasing number of landscapes. Then there are primarily spectator sports like football, baseball and rugby. Most viewing is done not at the stadium or race course but from the comfort of the armchair. Entire media industries, notably satellite and cable television, have been built on the potential audiences for sporting events on the box.

Tourism is said to be the world's biggest industry. It too covers a diversity of activities. It might be a drive into the countryside, a trip around some historical monument, or a day at a theme park. Some holidays might be very active, skiing down mountains or riding trail bikes over the hills. Others might involve nothing more taxing than lying on the beach, though in many resorts this might be a prelude to heavy duty partying in local discos. The holiday might happen in a purpose built resort or some refurbished but otherwise redundant farm buildings. It might be a short break at some nearby weekend hotel or a trip to the other side of the world lasting several weeks.

The amount of holiday people get varies equally enormously. One magazine, Condé Nast's *Traveller*, is aimed at people who apparently take four holidays a year. Many people get fewer breaks. But added together, holiday-making sets a multitudinous horde of people in motion, especially at the height of summer, over special holiday weekends and at Christmas. 'Leisure miles' are fast increasing. At the time of writing, Tallinn in Estonia had become a popular destination for British binge-drinkers under the guise of 'stag' or 'hen' parties.

The distinctions made above are purely for convenience. Some activities like golf, for example, are usually quite informal affairs but are discussed under Sport. But it could be part of tourism since whole areas have been converted to golf monocultures where people spend an entire holiday to the game. Most walking is not of the heavy duty hiking, which might be classified as a sport, takes the form of informal strolls a comparatively short car drive away from home at, say, the weekend. Many people spend a great deal of more formal holidays browsing in discount warehouses, factory outlet stores and souvenir shops. So the divisions made between sport, tourism and 'everyday' leisure are made merely to make the discussion more manageable.

Day Tripper

Much leisure is not in the form of officially organised sports or longer holidays away from home. It involves short bursts of activity comparatively close to home. Increasingly these take place at new specially built venues devoted directly to fun and games, all of them intensive consumers of energy, water and other resources. They range from 'leisure pools' and bowling alleys to gymnasia and marinas. A new generation of giant leisure complexes is grabbing as much land as out-of-town supermarkets.

One in north London has a multiplicity of cinema screens, computer game arcades, bars, and fast food joints, including a 26 lane bowling alley... and vast car parks. Nearly 30 have opened already and even more are in the pipeline. One such proposal is for Europe's biggest multiplex cinema to be built near the monstrous 'Spaghetti junction' in Birmingham, adding to over 130 such complexes in the country, mainly on the urban fringe. Meanwhile, further south, Luton Borough Council is backing on a greenfield site development, accessible only by road, for a leisure complex with a sports stadium, two drive-through restaurants, a supermarket, a pub, 150 bedroom hotel and over 4,000 car parking spaces. Once again, the ring road is replacing the town centre as a focal point for leisure as well as shopping.

Comparatively sedate leisure activities are not necessarily more sustainable. Photography is hugely popular, for example. Yet, before the advent of digital cameras, it generated far more toxic waste than many industrial activities. Mention has been made already of television viewing with regard to the health risks of too much inactivity. But the manufacture and use of TV sets also consumers enormous quantities of energy and other resources. Colour-TV viewing accounts for 20% of personal energy consumption in the UK.

Placelessness

Leisure activities and especially tourism play a central part on the increasing homogenisation of the planet. Culturally and physically, one place increasingly resembles another as the distinctive features of different localities are bulldozed into one homogeneous mass. Tourist brochures, for example, are usually full of pictures displaying hotels which show few signs of even the continent on which they are located. Food, drink and entertainment equally take on the same face. Sometimes, it takes the bizarre form of the 'themed' venue like the ubiquitous 'Irish pub' offering quite bogus versions of the real thing. Sometimes, 'local

culture' evenings are on offer though their content often bears little relations to the lives lived by locals.

Ideally travel should broaden the mind. Yet now tourism increasingly offer experiences little different to those back home, except perhaps there is more sun and someone else cleans the dishes. More and more, it is a question not of choosing where to go but of wondering whether it is worthwhile. For those in search of sex, sun and gallons of lager, perhaps this is far from their minds. But in terms of the richness of human experience, it marks a grave impoverishment. Furthermore, long-term sustainability depends upon people being sensitive to the specificities of place and learning to do things that maintain its well-being. Such awareness is washed away by the tide of homogenisation.

Stress Time

So far, only the external impacts of leisure activities have been examined. Yet there are other ones. For something supposedly about relaxation and refreshment, about re-creation, leisure often turns out to be a highly stressful experience. It is commonplace to hear people remarking, without irony, that, after their latest bout of holiday-making, they need a rest. One obvious reason is the congestion that plagues both the journey to and activities at leisure destinations. 'Traffic' jams at locks on, say the river Thames on a summer Sunday, make those on neighbouring roads look like minor hold-ups. Many climbs and abseils in areas such as the French Alps regularly require queuing.

On top of such frustrations come the financial burdens, be it club memberships, purchase of requisite gear or simply travel expenses. A less tangible but no less real cause of dissatisfaction is the infestation of leisure time by consumerist status anxieties, perhaps the prize example being the cult of designer trainer footwear. Many people don't just for a run but get decked up in all the right gear, none of which comes cheap. One reason why so many Japanese golfers are colonising huge chunks of South-East Asia is that it is cheaper to fly there for to play than pay local course membership dues.

The desperation of the rat-race mentality so characteristic of other areas of life under Industrialism now pollutes leisure activities. There is a telling scene in the National Lampoon film *Vacation* where the Chevy Chase character announces to his family that "we're going to have a good time even if it fucking kills us". Having gone the furthest... got the best seat... stayed in the best... gone on the fastest... and done the most: all become another set of consumerist medals.

And yet lasting satisfaction remains as elusive as ever. This lack of fulfilment is captured, rather unintentionally, on a TV advert for Pepsi, featuring a group of true dorks, proclaiming in true slacker style that they've "been there...done that", against a backdrop of activities about which previous generations, even the very rich, could only have dreamed (surprise, surprise, the answer is to be found in consumption, this time by drinking the said noxious liquid).

Me...Me...Me

There are other reasons for doubting whether an Age of Leisure will lead to a better world. One is a point which many proponents of the Informal Economy particularly evade. Like it or not, formal employment and all that it involves, from

regular work alongside others to the payment of income tax, is a social activity, requiring participants to put aside purely personal preferences and engage in activities which (rightly or wrongly) society deems to be necessary for the collective betterment. For many, it provides social contact and a sense of personal worth. It is also a vital aspect of socialisation, with young citizens learning alongside older members of society rather than being restricted to - and by - their age group.

By contrast, an economy centred on people doing their thing might well weaken community ties, possibly encouraging the inward-looking, often crudely selfish trends evident today. If subsidised by a Citizens Dividend or Basic Income Scheme, other problems might develop. Clearly, the means by which it might be sustainably financed would need close scrutiny. If funded out of revenue earned by the taxation of resource use, pollution levies and other such charges, an incentive might develop to tolerate the very activities such taxes should be discouraging (as has happened, of course, with taxes on petrol, alcohol and cigarette smoking). It is far from clear, then, how in the long-run the social funding of mass Leisure could be sustained.

It would be wise as well to question what might be being subsidised if the public purse were to financially underwrite individual free time. A great many activities outside of paid employment and formal work are frequently unhealthy and anti-social, sometimes illegal and often downright immoral. They range from drug abuse to blood sports. Then, there are those activities that might be put under the umbrella of that hackneyed term 'self-expression' and 'emotional literacy'. As critics such as the late Christopher Lasch noted, many are little more than narcissistic self-indulgence while others, notably R. D. Rosen in his scathing study *Psychobabble*, have demonstrated the idiocies often involved in such pursuits.

It might be added that many social ills like drunkenness and generally yobbish behaviour stem in part from the fact that some people have *too much* time on their hands and *too much* surplus energy to expend. It might be for the common good that people get tired! It would be naive to suggest that such problems are caused by inadequate education and particularly by a failure to teach people how to use their time constructively. Many schools and colleges already provide classes in personal and social education, including leisure pursuits. There seems no reason to think that the classroom can provide answers to anti-social behaviour.

Many of course disagree with such a prognosis. They claim that today's social problems are not the product of excessive leisure time. They argue, instead, that the root of anti-social behaviour is too little spending power amongst the less economically privileged who sometimes simply steal that which they otherwise cannot get. There is obviously *some* truth in that perception. Yet it would be foolish to think that a redistribution of wealth is the complete answer.

There is plenty of evidence of bad behaviour amongst the Idle Rich, filling the time on their hands by all kinds of anti-social activities. Nero was not alone in such pursuits: the Devil can indeed find work for idle hands, be they callused or otherwise. The selfish, empty, and frequently self-destructive lives of the

international Jet Set are but one example of what happens when life becomes nothing more than the pampering of personal whims.

Leisure as Consumption

All the above flaws of current leisure activities and the goal of a Society dedicated to their maximisation stem from its roots in our consumption-oriented social order. Leisure in its multiplicity of forms is just another act of self-gratifying consumption, be it of technological gadgetry or of physical locations. The more that is consumed, the more places visited, the more activities packed in - the more one is seen by others doing these things - the more bonus points that are clocked up in the mentality of consumerism. For many, anything that gets it the way, a long trek over difficult terrain or engagement with 'difficult' literature and music, for example, must be made easy to facilitate maximum consumption in the minimum time.

The new Pleasure Industries minister the process, converting what once were free and simple enjoyments into expensive leisure 'resources' and 'experiences'. In a market-oriented economy, leisure simply becomes one more arena for things to be bought and sold. Life's once free pleasures become commodities for purchase, once spontaneous activities become niches to be colonised by another layer of administrators, armed with certificates in Leisure Management. In such ways, the world of leisure thus becomes more and more like the thing many people are trying to escape, the regimented and routinised world of work.

This process is typified by the karaoke machine. The author's father used to recall days back in the late 1950s when it was quite common to find pubs in the Yorkshire industrial town of Huddersfield where, at weekend, there would be regular sing-songs. All that has changed. Many pubs have been gutted and 'themed'. Meanwhile there has been the spread of the karaoke machine, whose horrendous noises are less significant than the fact it is a technological gadget and one has to be bought or rented.

Limits to Leisure

There are inescapable limits that mean a leisure society as conventionally envisaged would be far from sustainable. They are not just physical constraints on leisure activities and the unsustainable ecological price tag they cost. They also result from what Fred Hirsch and others have called the 'social limits to growth'. On top of external, ecological limits, they are 'internal' ones, from within society itself. For example, secluded picnic spots, idyllic beaches, sylvan glades, lonely mountain tops, let alone queue-free tennis courts etc., all lose much of their attraction once too many people seek the same thing. That is precisely what must happen in our grossly overpopulated world. The need for management, control and restriction become greater. The quality of leisure experience falls as quantity of leisure-seekers expands.

Over 2,000 years ago, Horace recognised that Leisure is very much a serpent chasing its own tail. As he put it, "we work hard at doing nothing: we seek happiness in yachts and four-horse coaches" but often end up no happier. In the form of industrialised leisure, recreation seldom leads to true 're-creation'.

Furthermore, visions of a Leisure Society, whatever their provenance, make the same fundamental error of assuming that the problem of production has been solved. "Modern methods of production have given us the possibility of ease and security for all". The words are Bertrand Russell's but they could come most part of the political spectrum. In fact, we face a crisis of overproduction since the Earth cannot possibly sustain current levels of economic throughput.

Such limits will rule out the vision of life in the future outlined by French radical economist Alain Lipietz, where his imaginary citizen reports how the whole of April was spent walking in Sicily (*Towards a New Economic Order*, p91). This author too would dearly love to do just that. Sadly so too would many others. Imagine the trains, and boats and planes that would be required... imagine what would left of Sicily's footpaths... imagine how such activities would be resourced...face what a fantasy it all is.

Needs Must?

In conventional economic terms, it would seem an act of madness to try and halt, let alone reverse, the present trends in recreation and tourism. Many businesses would collapse overnight without continued income from leisure activities, most obviously hoteliers and owners of camping sites. Government revenues similarly would plunge.

Yet there can be no automatic right to a job if that work is doing harm or contributing to the erosion of long-term sustainability. Already there is a growing list of localities where tourism, for example, ruined what attracted visitors in the first place and which have now been left high and dry once their original appeal diminished. Any kind of monoculture is likely to go the same way as other kinds such as dependence on a mine or a single farming crop.

Dependency will always be a riskier proposition than self-reliance. Changes in fashion or sudden fears about the safety of particular destination can devastate an economy dependent upon outsiders. More certainly, the coming peak in oil production by itself will lead to inevitable falls in both the total volume of travel as well as the distances people usually will be able to go. This will inflict grievous blows on those economies that have failed to diversify and reconstruct themselves in more self-reliant ways. Generally, then, leisure development frequently turns into a serpent devouring its own tail. Only alternative forms of leisure can sustain economic well-being and employment opportunities in the long run.

Conserver Time

The above criticism of a Leisure Society does not seek to defend the world of formal work as presently constituted. The writer could join the Idle Rich if he had a pound for every time he had wished he could ignore the alarm clock and go back to sleep, instead of going to his place of employment! Similarly, it is not intended to detract from the health-giving, spirit-lifting, downright pleasurable experiences to be gained from many 'leisure' activities.

The core case is that a shift from the Age of Labour to an Age of Leisure, no matter how defined, could well speed up the present slide to ecological ruin. In many cases, extra spins to the downward spiral would result. Meanwhile, the

unsustainable nature of modern resource extraction and manufacturing will not have changed one jot just because machines do all the hard work, instead of humans. Finally, a Leisure Society could weaken even further the ties of human community.

The real issue, then, is not the maximisation of 'discretionary time' but the improvement of worktime. The challenge is to increase the number of personally satisfying and socially useful opportunities, many of which will come within the framework of formal employment. Part of that fight therefore will be resistance to 'labour-saving' technologies and opposition to economic integration (since it is a driving force behind 'rationalisation' and automation).

Discussion about a Leisure Society covers so many topics that it is impossible to deal briefly with an ecologically sustainable approach to the matter. But some strategies might be sketched out. There is much sense, for example, in the traditional trade union demand to cut working hours to create jobs for the unemployed. Indeed, there is a good case for a statutory limit on overtime, stopping the obscene practice of individuals greedily grabbing as much money as they can while fellow citizens languish on the dole.

A paper from the Scottish Centre for Human Ecology by Peter Merry cited an estimate that, across the European Union, overtime working consumes the equivalent of two million potential full-time jobs, which otherwise could go to those on the dole. At the same time, minimum wage legislation obviously helps to reduce the financial pressures driving others to work all possible hours, simply to make up a decent pay packet.

'Job enrichment' too can be a useful process. It should not be written off simply as a capitalist con-trick to keep the workers quiet (though it might be!). Clearly if paid work is to remain the bedrock of a sustainable society, then it is vital that every effort is made to make the time it absorbs as safe and as personally fulfilling experience as possible. Fritz Schumacher's strictures about 'good work' are more relevant than ever.

Despite the above reservations about universal Basic Income Schemes, it is nonetheless essential to find ways to give recognition - in term of both money and status - to all those activities now discounted by the present economic system, be it housework or 'care in the community'. 'Flexitime', job-sharing, and other such initiatives also should be extended wherever possible, with the rights sometimes limited only to permanent staff extended to all.

Conserve, Repair, Restore, Refresh...

More generally, the ecologically sustainable approach to the Work-Leisure conundrum is not one based on individualistic visions of a post-industrial society. Instead it would seek to expand jobs or rather those that are personally stimulating, safe, socially necessary and environmentally-friendly. Though it is clearly desirable to reduce today's dichotomy between Work and Non-Work, it has been to be said that, in an ecological society, there would be renewed emphasis on the basic duty to contribute to the local community's well-being.

Some precedents for collective programmes can be found in the American Roosevelt government of the 30s. Alongside some very anti-ecological measures in the New Deal, it launched the Civilian Conservation Corps, amongst whose

achievements were 44 new wildlife refuges, the planting of 2 billion trees and the provision of 3 million jobs. Goodness knows that are lots of tasks to be done, repairing and regenerating all those things that Industrialism has trashed. It is not a matter of setting up Stalinist Labour Camps or dragooning people into Tree-Planting Brigades. It is simply a recognition that any community has a right to expect its members to 'pull their weight' and that paid jobs will remain a major form of that contribution. The precise ways that it could be done are choices for democratic decision-making.

Furthermore, the failings of much contemporary gardening and D-I-Y do not mean that there isn't much good work that can be done there. Books like Peter Harper's *Natural Garden Book* and Edward Harland's *Eco-Renovation* make many useful suggestions. Then there are many examples of productive work being done to improve local communities in neighbourhood self-help schemes and other volunteer projects. This is where public monies and other support should go, rather than on the construction of capital intensive, high-tech. stadia and gyms (though, in some cases, technological substitutes like artificial climbing walls might ease pressures elsewhere).

Stillness

Despite the criticisms made above 'idleness', there remains a vital need for time to stop, to stand and stare. Even the Bible argued that, on the seventh day, we should rest. One defect of the industrialisation of Leisure is that free time provides so little peace and tranquillity. We need to be able to retreat and recuperate.

Fortunately, there are some inspiring models of what can be done. There is, for instance, the wonderful Chinese Garden in the heart of Vancouver, a veritable oasis of calm, where citizens of all and no faiths can come and contemplate in the most beautiful surroundings. Next to the consumerist horrors of Piccadilly in central London, there is St James and its churchyard, with Green Park a few blocks further along.

The provision of more such sites really would merit the name 'sustainable development'. Similarly, we will need less, not more, distractions from round-the-clock broadcasting, open-all-hours shopping and the like. We would also need drastic reductions in the levels of noise, not least Muzak, we now suffer.

Green Pursuits.

But what about all those activities usually lumped under the Leisure umbrella such as organised sport, hobbies and informal recreational pursuits? The stark truth is that their total ecological impact is already unsustainable. Some form of rationing is absolutely essential in many areas. Financial systems might be inequitable in a society scarred by extremes of wealth and poverty but the problem itself will not go away.

The most equitable option will be one based on personal effort, on, say, the willingness to make the hike to some desired destination, rather than expect a road or cable car to take the strain. The less physically able would lose out, though compensatory opportunities could be devisable, but such measures seem to be the only way to blend ecological sustainability with social fairness. The

deciding factor in terms of quantity and forms of use must be the carrying capacity of the host environment, the protection of its integrity and character overriding all other considerations.

In terms of land use planning, it is as urgent to stop the spread of new Leisure complexes, golf courses, ski pistes and the like as it is to halt the march of the Malls or the cancer of new roads. In the meantime, legislation is in order to compel golf club and similar bodies to produce and invest in nature conservation plans to ameliorate some of the damage they have caused. It is pointless to try and 'green' farming (organic conversion etc.) while letting recreational land users continue to pollute and degrade the environment.

At the same time, it is vital that public investment should be switched from centralised, resource-intensive leisure facilities to the regeneration of local communities, most of which have become 'leisure deserts' due to the closure of local facilities and loss of local open space. Fortunately the 'urban ecology' movement is producing many designs for neighbourhoods in which work, home and play, co-exist sustainably in the locality.

The contrast between the two rival cultures — the Conserver and the Consumer — with regard to work and leisure has been caught rather well in the cinema. Peter Weir's film *Witness* depicts a scene in which a new barn is being raised in an Amish farming community. One does not need to accept all aspects of Amish culture nor of Weir's representation of it to appreciate the film's evocation of communal solidarity as well as the possibility of a successful marriage between mental and physical effort as well as between worktime and leisure. The lifestyle portrayed in *Witness* might be compared to those depicted in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* where it is blithely assumed that people have nothing else better to but contemplate each other's navels and other bits of their anatomy.

One thing is clear, however. No matter how leisure is defined, the most significant factor that turns it from a workable use of time into destructive one is the sheer number of individuals engaged in it. The other two factors in determining ecological load, affluence (in this case the quantity of activities or visits) and technology (the form the activity takes, including associated hardware) also matter. Cross-country skiing creates fewer scars than its downhill cousin, canoeing does less damage than powerboat racing, walkers' feet are lighter than Off-Road vehicles... Whatever the exact character of the activity, it will generate fewer harmful impacts if it happens less frequently.

But the decisive factor is the numbers involved. A pair of trekkers may pass through without a trace but now the pleasant pastime of hiking is proving unsustainable in many areas simply because too many people partake in it. No amount of leisure activity zoning and other remedial measures will work if the number of participants continues to rise. As ever, numbers really do count.

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"(The) latest building frenzy is like the new gold rush and the developments are positively industrial in scale. What the tourist will never see, though, is who might have been forcibly moved from their homes to make way for the new resorts and golf courses, how much biodiversity has been lost in their development, how local needs might be sacrificed - such as water - and the extent of the corruption." Tricia Barnett, the director of Tourism Concern, *Guardian*, Sept. 22, 2007.

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A number of places are metaphorically and sometimes literally crumbling under the weight of visitors who are thus destroying what they come and see. Examples include: Snowdon (Wales), Pompeii (Italy), Pyramids (Egypt), gorilla reserves in Rwanda, Bhutan, the Galapagos Islands, Machu Picchu (Peru), Yellowstone National Park (USA), and many coral reefs in areas such as the Caribbean and Indian Ocean. Even penguin breeding colonies in Antarctica are at risk from human visitors. Much damage is being done not by conventional tour parties but by trekkers and backpackers. The only solution will be the creation of no-go areas plus a rationing system for access.

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<http://ieee-virtual-museum.org/collection/event.php?id=3456889&lid=1> "Play Dough: The Big Business of Televised Sports".

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Sports and Leisure centres

By 2004, there were some 5,000 sports and leisure centres in Britain. Again sport and recreation are being commodified and mechanised, with costly pools, flumes, ice rinks, mechanical flamingos etc. Many such facilities provide little by the way of simple cheap exercise options and many only cater in practice for youngsters in the main (listen to the loud music often played) For case studies, look at the Winter palace development in Croydon, the Coral Reef Waterworld in Bracknell, and the Doncaster Dome centre.

Such developments can become entire villages. For case studies, look at Club Mediterranean and Centrepark villages or the canvas suburbs created by the likes of Eurocamp. Sometimes such centres are created slap in the heart of national parks e.g. Grant Village in Yellowstone. A new variant is the 'clubbing resort' with hell holes like Ibiza (e.g. Manumission) and Ayia Napa on Cyprus.

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Golf

Golfing is a direct environmental menace in many ways, not least as a voracious consumer land, the average British 18-hole course consuming 50+ hectares of land. Added to it is the explosion of 'golf villages'

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The problem is not just skiing and all the chairlifts and gondolas but also massive hotel construction (sometimes, especially in France and Spain, the most horrid concrete blocks) and giant car parks as well tree clearance to create new pistes. Then there is the growing menace of snowmobiles. 'Winter Olympics' add their own blight to the mountains.

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Off-Road Vehicles

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Wuerthner G. (2007). **Thrillcraft: The Environmental Consequences of Motorized Recreation**. Chelsea Green. A look at the serious damage being done by motorised recreational vehicles such as jet skis, dirt bikes, four-wheel quads, snowmobiles, dune buggies, swamp buggies, and the like as well as four-wheel drive off road jeeps. This really is job recreation.

Wilshire, H. (1992). 'The Wheeled Locusts'. *Wild Earth*, Spring: 27-31. The costs of off-road vehicles, an increasing feature of modern 'leisure'.

Water Sports

Dalrymple, J. (1990). 'Trouble ahoy from polluting yacht marinas'. *Sunday Times*, 26/Aug./90.

Morgan, K. (1997). 'Jet Skis Hit Bumpy Water'. *Earth Island*, Fall: 9.

Football

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Buckley, W. (2004). 'Why I'm not singing anymore...' *Guardian*. 05/May/2004. Kicks not just the players and clubs but also the fans and the pernicious hold exercised over not just the media but also culture as a whole, scoring many points about the pernicious way that infantilism, commercial greed and ego entwine in the modern game. Author has written a novel in the same vein called *The Man Who Hated Football* (Fourth Estate, 2004).

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Blood 'sports' & 'Gun Nuts'

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Monbiot, G. (1997). 'Thrown off the scent'. *Guardian*, 16/July/97. Posted @ <http://www.monbiot.com/archives/1997/07/16/thrown-off-the-scent/>

Gardening

Most gardening has become a form of chemical warfare, central to which is the creation and maintenance of virtually sterile lawns ('green cancer'), decimation of wetlands to provide garden peat and the planting of alien species, some of which have become disastrously invasive in their new habitats. To the bill must be added the environmental costs of regular drives to ghastly 'garden centres' for another bout of spending on patio furniture, outdoor heaters, garden lighting and assorted bric-a-brac. Perhaps the biggest ecocrime of all is the make-over 'instant garden', something to which 'lifestyle TV' became addicted in recent years. Gardening is now a big business on which Britons spent £11 billion in 2000.

Bormann, F. et al. (2001). **Redesigning the American Lawn: A Search for Environmental Harmony**, 2nd Edition. Yale UP.

Cox, S. (2006). 'Turf wars'. *Synthesis*, 40, Summer, 2006. How 'care' of garden lawns increases ecological damage. Posted @ <http://www.greens.org/s-r/40/40-05.html>

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Racing to ruin

Despite all noise about greater care for the environment and developments such as ecotourism, the leisure and tourist industry is, for the most part, stuck in the groove of business-as-usual and more of it.

For example

Bowes, G. (2007). 'High Altitude Building Boom'. *Observer* Feb. 18th, 2007. Climate change and other constraints are undermining many ski resorts. The response is not to curb industrialised tourism in areas like the Alps but to colonise previously unspoilt but ecologically more vulnerable areas further up the mountains. Posted @ <http://travel.guardian.co.uk/article/2007/feb/18/italy.skiing.wintersportsholidays>

Calder, S. (2008). 'A revolution in the skies... a disaster for the planet'. *Independent*, March 1, 2008. Rush to more cheap flights despite all the evidence

about aeroplane carbon emissions and global overwarming. Posted @ <http://www.independent.co.uk/environment/climate-change/a-revolution-in-the-skies-a-disaster-for-the-planet-790016.html>

Ionescu, C. (2007). 'Alps to get high-life makeover'. **Observer**, Sept. 16, 2007. Report on plans to build giant tower blocks across the Alps, full of shopping malls and leisure facilities so tourists won't notice that global warming has made regular skiing impossible. Posted @ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/travel/2007/sep/16/alps>

Rackham, O. & J. Moody (2008) 'Harsh course of nature'. *Guardian*, March 5, 2008. Despite all the criticism, the tourist industry still seeks new areas to despoil, ignoring little details like aviation emissions, local water shortages, and rare habitats. Posted @ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2008/mar/05/endangeredhabitats.endangeredspecies> See also the accompanying piece by John Vidal @ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/mar/05/greece.pollution>

Such practice reflect and encourage the irresponsible values and attitudes of large sections of the public. See, for example:

Robbins, T. (2007). "'Green" tourists reveal their true colours'. **Observer**, Nov. 18, 2007. Report of YouGov survey which highlights how few tourists really care about the environmental impact of their travel and holiday-making activities. Posted @ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/travel/2007/nov/18/escape.green>