

Degrowth as Social and Ecological Regeneration

Tom Walker

It is fitting that this conference is, virtually at least, taking place in Manchester. In late November, 1833, "working people of Manchester, and their friends," met at Prince's Tavern to form the Society for Promoting National Regeneration with the objective "to remove the commercial and social evils, which are fast destroying every vestige of happiness and order." The highest priority reform advocated by the Society was reducing the length of the working day. Seventy-six years later, pioneering University of Manchester economist, Sydney J. Chapman's theoretical analysis of the hours of labour vindicated the Society's intuition about the prime importance of reducing the hours of work.

Over the past quarter of a century or so, ecological economists and degrowth advocates have included proposals for shorter working time in their programs. Hundreds of scholarly articles have been published examining some aspect of the relationship between hours of paid work and the environment. I confess I haven't read them all. But I have read enough of them to form an impression of how most authors view the contribution of work-time reduction.

Work time reduction is often advocated as a way to mitigate the unemployment effects of a low growth or no growth policy. Reducing the hours of work is presented as a benign way to absorb the effects of productivity gains without expanding consumption. The time released from working time is presented as a "normal good," leisure, that can serve as a substitute for manufactured commodities. These intuitively appealing rationales are often supported by time series data that show countries that work less emit less carbon dioxide, even controlling for income differences. A minority of studies challenge those empirical results.

All that is well and good as far as it goes. But there needs to be more depth to the analysis. Working time is part of a metabolism, not a mechanism – not even a complex mechanism. For over two hundred years, political economy and economic science have, with rare exceptions, treated the hours of labour mechanically. Sydney Chapman, who I mentioned earlier, was one of those rare exceptions. The other exceptions were often critics of economics or political economy or were outsiders of the discipline. The insights on working time I would like to

highlight in this presentation were by Chapman, William Godwin, Charles Wentworth Dilke, economists Stephen Leacock and Arthur O. Dahlberg, and that old bugbear, Karl Marx.

As Harriet Martineau wrote in 1837, "The first attempt to advocate leisure as the birthright of every human being was made now some half-century ago." Martineau was referring to Godwin's *The Enquirer*, published in 1797, although Godwin had also advocated for universal leisure in his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, published four years earlier. Godwin's rationale was that:

The commodities that substantially contribute to the subsistence of the human species, form a very short catalogue. They demand from us but a slender portion of industry. If these only were produced, and sufficiently produced, the species of man would be continued. If the labour necessarily required to produce them were equitably divided among the poor, and still more, if it were equitably divided among all, each man's share of labour would be light, and his portion of leisure would be ample. ... Those hours which are not required for the production of the necessaries of life, may be devoted to the cultivation of the understanding, the enlarging our stock of knowledge, the refining our taste, and thus opening to us new and more exquisite sources of enjoyment.

Charles Dilke was a devoted follower of Godwin who, in 1821, anonymously published *The Source and Remedy of the National Difficulties*. That pamphlet is the subject of my article, "The Ambivalence of Disposable Time...", in the current *Contributions to Political Economy*, so I won't go into much detail here. Dilke's paraphrase of Godwin's argument that real wealth is disposable time (leisure) had a profound influence on Marx's analysis, in the *Grundrisse*, of the contradictory nature of surplus value. Dilke's deduction from political economy leading to that conclusion about disposable time was that "THE ACCUMULATION OF CAPITAL IS VERY LIMITED, *if happiness of the whole, and not the luxuries of a few, is the proper subject for national congratulation.*" One might quibble with the assumptions Dilke made leading to that conclusion but not with his logic. Almost one hundred years after Dilke wrote his pamphlet, Stephen

Leacock came to the same conclusion as Godwin and Dilke. In *The Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice*, Leacock estimated that perhaps one in ten workers is required for the production of necessary goods.

Chapman's theory of the hours of labour was acknowledged as canonical in the 1920s and 1930s -- at least in England (Alfred Marshall, Lionel Robbins, A.C. Pigou, J.R. Hicks, probably Keynes). His exposition of the theory was ponderous, but his analysis was impeccable.

Chapman's theory convincingly demonstrated the optimal length of the working day for worker welfare was shorter than is optimal for output due the value of leisure and the "wear and tear" of longer hours on the worker. Competition between workers, and between employers compels both of them to settle for a longer workday that would be optimal for either output or worker welfare.

The upshot of this is that worker welfare – *including worker income* – could be substantially improved by progressive reduction of working time. Let me repeat that last point: workers' *income* could be increased by working less. Mary Steward was right back in the 1870s with her famous ditty,

whether you work by the piece or work by the day
decreasing the hours increases the pay

Arthur Dahlberg was fascinated by Leacock's *Unsolved Riddle* and wrote a PhD thesis and subsequently a book in 1932 to flesh out the economics of it. Dahlberg concluded that the failure to reduce hours of work following the introduction of productivity-enhancing technology undermines workers' bargaining power, a resulting decline in the labour share of total income. The increased revenue to the owners of capital is misallocated in the building of excess capacity and marketing of ever more extravagant luxury commodities. Ultimately, these risk-prone investments and non-spontaneously demanded luxury consumer goods result in business cycle recessions and unemployment. Taken together, Chapman's and Dahlberg's analyses amount to a theory of crisis that resembles Marx's in many respects but that emphasizes the role of long hours work in incubating the crisis.

Up to now, I have let Godwin's, Dilke's, and Chapman's idealized (idyllized? Idolized?) vision of leisure/disposable time pass without scrutiny. But if working less is so much better than working too much, why isn't there a mass movement for it like there was for the ten-hour day, the nine-hour day, and the eight-hour day in the 19th century?

The answer may lay with alienated leisure. Marx outlined the problem in his early notebooks that with the artificial dichotomy between work and leisure and the alienation of the workers from the product of their work, leisure too becomes alienated as a consequence. That is to say, after a hard day's night, people are not necessarily drawn to "the cultivation of the understanding, the enlarging our stock of knowledge, the refining our taste, and thus opening to us new and more exquisite sources of enjoyment." Maybe they just want to crack a beer and watch football on T.V. And just possibly, they don't find that activity all that *exquisitely* enjoyable, either.

According to Hinman, "rather than eliminating the problem of alienated labor, the gradual increase in free time serves to reinforce and perpetuate the fundamental alienation of labor." Hinman thus argued that "Marx's position involves an overcoming of the dichotomy between work and play found in capitalist society and a rethinking of the traditional categories in terms of which work and play as forms of human activity are understood." Hinman enumerated "seven conditions under which the worker's leisure can be said to be alienated or the worker can be said to be alienated from his or her leisure" including when leisure is solely justified to the extent it increases worker's productivity and when leisure is "transformed into consumer activity."

Dallas Smythe's analysis of the "audience commodity" offered valuable insight into that transformation of leisure into consumer activity. Smythe argued that mass media aggregates audiences for the purpose of selling the audience's attention to advertisers. He claimed audiences performed work when they were watching or listening to programs and advertising and asked, rhetorically, "Am I correct in assuming that all non-sleeping time under capitalism is work time?" My answer would be no, leisure time doesn't have to be considered as "work" to be none-the-less alienated. Despite its flaws, Smythe's concept of the audience commodity

opened up important lines of inquiry into the political economy of alienated leisure that are being rediscovered now in the context of social media. See Jakob Rigi's and Robert Prey's "Value, Rent, and the Political Economy of Social Media."

So what is to be done about alienated leisure? That question can't be answered in the final 3 or 4 minutes of a conference presentation, so instead I'll just play a video that recapitulates my engagement with Dilke, Chapman and Dahlberg.

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