

## **What is the bare minimum that people must work?**

### **or: Why it is better to regularly work less**

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The essence of the thesis upheld here is indicated in the title of my essay: At least a modicum of work is necessary for human survival. Completing activities that share the characteristics of contemporary paid employment is the necessary precondition for maintaining good health and personal growth. There can be no doubt, however, that these positive aspects of work can still be achieved if employees in the advanced industrial nations work considerably less than has hitherto been the case. This would also have the advantage of allowing for a lasting reduction in unemployment rates that, in some areas, remain very high<sup>1</sup>.

In the present-day discussion on unemployment and its negative impact, it is often overlooked that the effects of technical/technological rationalisation in the production process and administration initially have to be assessed positively. The reduction in demand for vigorous work means we are starting to approach one of mankind's ancient visions of utopia, which always had, and still does have, severe implications within different societies and systems of values. Whether this is represented by the christian vision of paradise or the more secular fool's paradise, these are always worlds without the drudgery of work and the obligation involved therein, and leisure societies are central to the idea of these utopias.

Looking back at history, we can see that man's high estimation of (paid) employment has only been tangible for a short period of time. This period of time is synonymous with a blink of the eye when set against mankind's several millions of years of continuous existence. In earlier, traditional societies – for example in that of the ancient Greeks – the status of having to work was linked to the devaluation of a person. Only people from the lower

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<sup>1</sup> One can deliberate whether every human being actually wants to pursue gainful employment. This is probably not the case. Albeit, in most European countries, present-day unemployment figures for those who want to work are certainly much higher than the figures for those who choose not to work. In other words, in a lot of countries, many more people would probably strive for gainful employment if there were an adequate number of jobs available. Andreas Paul (among the German interviewees in the project) is prototypical for those people, who, while being unemployed officially, would much rather work, and even do it – as one can see – without remuneration.

echelons of society had to work, and work was frequently used as a means of punishment for criminals. It was only through the change in values, which goes back to the Christian reformation movements of the 16th century – predominantly Martin Luther and Johannes Calvin – that a foundation could be built upon in order to help the spirit of capitalism to emerge. According to Max Weber, it was only in the last 200 years and the secularisation of Protestant ideas that first led to the character and meaning of work being seen as positive. This was encouraged by work being made easier and rationalised by technological progress and by the development of supportive tools and machines.

We know from research work on the unemployed, which was conducted in the 1920s by Maria Jahoda, Paul Lazarsfeld and others, what the effects of losing work can have on a person in a society like ours. We know that it's not just a source of income that disappears. In our society, the employed gain *social recognition* and a *personal identity*. Researchers in occupational and social sciences have also been able to show that gainful employment is an important source for developing a sense of *cooperation and contact* with others as well as *activity and the development of responsibility*. Work is, therefore, an important resource for maintaining health and developing personality in people.

Summarising the many research results over the past few decades, it cannot be a desirable characteristic that people do not strive for any type of work whatsoever. Or, more to the point, a society based on leisure time alone should continue to remain an idea of utopian proportions.

Why?

The current discussion - as conducted in the FRG (Federal Republic of Germany) – is, in my view, pointing with absolute surety in the wrong direction. I think it is necessary that as many people as possible strive for paid employment and that their work is recognised by society. And, at the same time, monotonous or underdemanding work should not be an aspect of the professions for those people. We know from our research work that many honorary or unpaid activities, in terms of their content, also show potential for the positive effects outlined above.

Despite this, a distinct downside is clearly apparent due to the lack of payment. They are missing out on the social recognition that gainful employment does provide in a quintessential sense.

Thus, the point of discussion should be directed, in a wider sense, at the types of work that should be remunerated whilst, in the process, receiving comparable recognition in the future. For example, contemplate the work involved in the domestic care of children or your own further education<sup>2</sup>, for which a state-subsidized income is necessary - just as an income is necessary for gainful employment. The amount of payment should also suffice to support an independent lifestyle, which really shouldn't be too much of a problem in rich countries like the Federal Republic of Germany. On the contrary though, it has unfortunately been established that in certain areas of employment the remuneration is even too low for the regularly employed to secure an independent lifestyle. Jobs in old people's care and caring for the sick, which will increase in social importance in the future, spring to mind. In this regard, fundamental processes in the change of values are required in respect of the social recognition of employment.

The question of the necessity of gainful employment for (as far as possible) all members of a modern society can only be partially answered within the narrow textual constraints of this essay. I'll attempt to do this anyway, albeit for only one facet of a complex field. Gainful employment has, according to well founded sociological research results, another positive effect along with the above-mentioned ones; namely, that of the *structuring of time*. It constructs our routine life on a daily, weekly and annual basis - the entire planning of our lives in fact. A suitable balance between work and leisure time (work-life-balance) is important, though it possibly does not quite as much depend on what quantitative proportion of gainful employment and non-work is available. In any case, one should be occupied in at least one sense of the word.

Esther Vilar, for example, has suggested a 25-hour working week for everyone. This is certainly a starting point. In my opinion, an even lower amount of hours in the working week would suffice to achieve the positive effects outlined above. I can also conceive of a working week comprised of 10 hours, spread out over 2 – 5 days. In any case, this would necessitate a detailed investigation that could identify the absolute minimum level of employment.

Regarding the future world of work it would, however, also be necessary to conduct research into the impact of alternative systems of rotation between work and non-work.

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<sup>2</sup> The current developments in the FRG, in respect of educational maintenance allowance and supplements for advanced vocational training, represent a correct starting point for this. Both terms suggest, however, that this income will not match the classic kind of remuneration found in receiving a wage for working. And, apart from that, the amounts being talked about will not be able to secure one's existence.

For example, monthly (i.e: cyclically determined peak peak order times), quarterly: (i.e: seasonal influences on turnover in production and administration); seasonal rotation (i.e.: educational sabbaticals)..

Beside the fact that there is a limited extent to the scale of employment anyway, a certain amount of regularity would seem to be necessary.

To begin with, there is a biopsychological reason for this: people, as biopsychosocial entities, are living organisms. Living organisms retard (in the most extreme case up to their physical death) should they not have any bodily and intellectual tasks to overcome. Not doing anything represents a health hazard for those people<sup>3</sup> who want to rest all the time. Seen in a psychological sense, the overcoming of the high requirements as represented by the challenges of demanding work tasks, tend to also lead to positive feelings. According to the latest research results the so-called flow experience, a feeling that arises when a person proves him/herself to be able to stand up to requirements, emerges more frequently during gainful employment than in leisure time. Nonetheless, requirements cannot be met continuously. Particularly in the execution of manual work there are biological mechanisms that will prevent a person from constantly working. For intellectual work, there are none of these protective mechanisms as such. This results in a health hazard for the permanently active workaholic.

For highly evolved biological organisms, there is clearly a more or less permanent exchange between exertion and relaxation, between work and recovery time, between effort and idleness that is critical to survival<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> This is why, for example, the total lack of movement in an arm or leg (caused by an accident) has a long term result of muscular atrophy. Cognitive and neuropsychology also tell us that central nervous structures used sparingly or not at all can also result in the regression of mental processes. This is mirrored in the expression "use it or loose it".

The newly found praise of idleness, which can sometimes be heard in the circles of the unemployed when involved in the current discussion, can, to a great extent, be explained as the sour-grape effect in the eyes of the psychologist. Just like the fox in the fable, the unachievable is reinterpreted as not (any longer) worthwhile. An attempt is made, in this connection, to gain something positive from a situation that is really quite negative. We know that these types of reinterpretation processes are not normally sustainable.

<sup>4</sup> Incidentally, this dynamic dual alternating principle and the antagonism therein can also be found in many other biological sub-systems. As an example, the interaction of flexing and extending the muscles enables – just like the correlaton of activity and inactivity as a whole – a fluid advancement of movement in preambulatory bipods. There appears to be a profoundly multipurpose system of stabilisation in terms of being able to maintain a steady state. Interestingly enough, the moral concepts linked with dualism are not only found in western cultural circles. The East can also refer back to these types of views being very strongly anchored in their culture, in the dual unity of Yin and Yang for example.

If one looks at the Christian two-thousand year old story of creation, the following sentence can be found: “And on the seventh day God rested and behold God saw that all was well“. What is clear in this formulation, and is a component of modern psychological knowledge, is that without a break from work it is not possible to gain some distance between yourself and what you have created. It is only by virtue of this distance and this intermission that it becomes possible to reflect on what has been achieved and to witness the joy over the success of the activity.

As already mentioned, work and leisure should alternate rhythmically in the ideal case. The human, as a biological system, is subject to various lengths of rhythm. For example, in certain basic processes, such as electronic brain activities or the heart beat, we can detect rhythms in the range of milliseconds or seconds. Significant for the context examined here is, above all, the so-called Circadian rhythm, where the fluctuation of biopsychological efficiency is mirrored and is dependent on the time of day<sup>5</sup>. The culturally determined seven-day rhythm seems to have a similar significance as it differentiates successive uninterrupted workdays from the weekend. At least one day free of work is normal in many cultural circles<sup>6</sup>.

Practical and habituation effects also speak in favour of regular rhythmic alternation. As can be shown in industrial psychological studies, a short-term change from exertion into relaxation and back again is more successful in so-called systems that operate on the basis of set break-periods than in self-controlled flexible break-periods. There's every reason to believe that biopsychological reflexes evolve in fixed rotation systems, which can accelerate the switch-over<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> An example of this is the alternation of “ora et labora“ (pray and work), which is essentially based on the structure of one day as practised by the benedictine monks.

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly enough, even experienced architects cater for a small platform after each set of seven steps when constructing a long flight of steps. So alternating patterns of exertion and (relative) relaxation are also apparent when great heights are ascended .

<sup>7</sup> This type of reflex is also useful for body-related relaxation techniques such as progressive muscle relaxation according to Jacobson. In this connection, an induced change from exertion and relaxation is used in individual muscle groups. This may be the background for rhythmic meditation techniques such as those popular in the Asian cultural circles, for example the so-called Chakren (heart Chakra) or KUNDALINI meditation

Keyword flexibility: In a future world of employment, there will be a definite increase in temporary, short-term activities on demand. These precarious working conditions are incompatible with the conditions accepted up until now, which correspond with the outlined criteria.

In my view, the temporary employment agencies shown in the scope of the “The Social Engine“ project offer a potential that should be applied for the benefit of those people featured. Temporary employment agencies can be effective as a mediating institution for economic institutions, which have to act very dynamically and flexibly, and the employees, for whom long-term contracts with a stable alternation between exertion and relaxation are of importance.

There is still a lot to do here, even in terms of the alternating systems between work and leisure time outlined above. The next few years will show how, in both Germany and Hungary, and in other developed industrial nations, the new definition of employment conditions is going to be perceived. Will the benefits of these agencies become more and more apparent, or will it be the downsides that prevail in the future, as became evident in the comments made by the interviewees?

Just a word to finish on: Even the progressive cooperation between science and art (within the scope of the project) can in a sense be understood as another type of balance. Even though it's difficult for me to view this from the perspective of the artists in the REINIGUNGSGESELLSCHAFT, for me, as an academic, the juxtaposition between the “disciplines“ has always been very stimulating. In this way – entirely in the spirit of Hegelian dialectics – a new quality of understanding has emerged.