

# Why Do We Work More Than We Live?

by JR HAMMER No Comments

<http://www.thenewwolf.co.uk/2011/05/why-do-we-work-more-than-we-live/>

We in the U.K work the longest hours in Europe. According to a survey by the Office for National Statistics we spend an average of 43 hours a week chained to our desks. Once travelling, sleeping, and preparing and eating food is added on (not to mention the kids!), very little time is left to spend as we please. The sad fact is we spend more time with our work colleagues than we do with those we choose. How many times have you an idea of something you'd like to achieve, be it picking up a new skill or learning a new language, before allowing it to fall by the wayside after realising you don't have enough time?

Despite living in an age of relative affluence we insist on working more than ever. Is this part of the modern human condition? Is it part of a false consciousness that makes us believe in the 'virtuousness of work', that Bertrand Russell believed is doing a 'great deal of harm to the modern world'?

Early in the 20th century people, including Russell, looked forward to a time in which we would be able to spend a minimal amount of hours at work and enjoy the civilizing effects of the modern age at our leisure: we were all supposed to have ample time to pursue arts, sports, languages and intellectualism at our own pace. After all, 'without leisure...mankind would never have emerged out of barbarism.'

But the ideal has not transpired. We are locked into a cycle of surplus production and labour: we produce more than is needed (farmers are still subsidised to grow produce that is left to rot), and we work more than we need to survive healthily and happily. This has come about because of a move in the economic structure of capitalism to monopolistic competition with an onus on maximising profit margins which can mean exploitation of us not only the workers but also as consumers. Even though we are rewarded for our surplus labour by being paid overtime it is those at the top of the relations of production that really benefit.

It must be said, however, that things were worse in the past. A long time after the 'golden era' of small hunter-gatherer communities, in which researchers and anthropologists agree the average working day was no more than five hours; came industrialisation. This allowed people to work all year round in large mechanised factories. The advent of artificial lighting stabilised the working day and meant labour was not tied to season. Capitalist owners wanted greater return for their expensive machinery and the average working day grew to 12 to 16 hours- six or seven days a week. It was only the intervention of Henry Ford that shifted the work/life balance back in favour of increased free time. He advocated a reduction in worker hours not for humanitarian reasons but capitalistic ones. By allowing workers more time off he gave them that opportunity. This economic insight still has relevance today.

Other countries seem to manage the balance rather better than we do in the UK, however. Traditionally, Spain's working day is split by a two hour siesta period. France enjoys twice as many bank holidays as we do and even though new conservative legislation has tried to undermine the nation's famous 35 hour week many companies are sticking to it. Sarkozy's government's move to increase the retirement age from sixty to sixty two almost precipitated meltdown. The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) has estimated that the

productivity levels of Belgium, France, Ireland and Luxembourg are the highest in Europe yet 'in most of these countries, high labour productivity has been accompanied by a low level of labour utilisation, i.e. a low level of hours worked per capita'. In essence, even though they have worked on average less, they are more productive!

We need to change the way we view work, wealth and life. We need to find a new balance – by examining our current life style without prejudice or received assumptions. We need to re-assess what we really need in life, and separate it from what we want. We need to find a way to recognize the benefits of pursuing activities that develop us as people: a way to assess value and wealth without recourse to the arbitrary and misleading quantitative designation that money currently provides – and whose authority we are so accustomed not to challenge. We could live healthier, happier lives by appreciating what it means to live more, and work less. However this modus operandi is not supported by our government (who should be acting in our best interests); worryingly our representatives in Europe have twice now 'opted-out' of a maximum 48-hour working time directive put forth by the EEC (European Economic Community). Our leaders say it's good for the economy – but we as a population are here to live a life that's rich, not enrich a system that does not live.

To stop this cycle a change in working habits needs to come from the bottom up. It requires a change in the way we as individuals view our lives, and in where we place our values. The Republican governor of Utah, Jon Huntsman revolutionised social services simply by changing the working week. Instead of 9-5, five days a week, they work 8-6 four days a week, and positive outcomes include a drop in greenhouse emissions, reduced traffic congestion and a happier workforce (82% say they prefer it).

It may be the case, however, that we are suffering from the false consciousness made explicit by Herbert Marcuse. I will be exploring this in my next article. Whether or not that is the case, however, we can and should change this dominant culture of overwork- and allow that change to enrich our lives: according to Russell, if we do 'there will be happiness and joy of life, instead of frayed nerves, weariness and dyspepsia'.