

WORK AND LEISURE

Aldous Huxley

REFORMERS look forward to a time when efficient social organization and perfected machinery will do away with the necessity for severe and prolonged labour, making possible for all men and women an amount of leisure such as is enjoyed at the present day only by a privileged few. Nobody, in that golden age, will need to work more than four or five hours a day. The rest of every man's time will be his own, to do with whatsoever he likes. It is difficult for any sensitive person not to sympathize with these aspirations.

But sympathy with an ideal need not make the sympathizer uncritical of it; one may feel strongly, but one must not therefore cease to think. The majority of human beings are oppressed by excessive labour of the most senseless kind. That fact may, and indeed should arouse our indignation and our pity. But these emotions must not prevent us from criticizing the project of those who wish to change the present state of things. The social reformers desire to see a dispensation under which all men will have as much, or nearly as much leisure as is enjoyed by the leisured classes to-day. We may be permitted to doubt, for all our sympathy, whether consummation is really, after all, so much to be desired.

Let us begin by asking one simple question: What is it proposed that human beings shall do with the leisure which social reorganization and perfected machinery are to give them? Prophets of the future give fundamentally the same answer to this question, with slight, variations according to their different tastes. Henri Poincaré, for example, imagined that the human beings of the future would fill their long leisures by contemplating the laws of nature. Mr. Bernard Shaw is of much the same opinion. Having ceased, by the time they are four years old, to take any interest in such childish things as love, art and the society of their fellow beings, the Ancients in *Back to Methuselah* devote their indefinitely prolonged existences to meditating on the mysterious and miraculous beauty of the cosmos. H.G. Wells portrays in *Men like Gods* a race of athletic chemists and mathematical physicists who go about naked and, unlike Mr. Shaw's austerer Ancients, make free love in a rational manner between the experiments. They also take an interest in the arts and are not above playing games.

These three answers to our question are typical. Different prophets may differ in their estimate of the relative importance of the various activities which make up what is generally known as 'the higher life'; but all agree that the lives of our leisured posterity will be high. They will eagerly make themselves acquainted with 'the best that been thought or said' about everything; they will listen to concerts of the classiest music; they will practise the arts and handicrafts (at any rate until the time comes when even these occupations seem childish); they will study the science, philosophy, mathematics, and meditate on the lovely mystery of the world in which they live. In a word, these leisured masses of a future which there is no reason to believe enormously remote—indeed, our grandchildren may live to see the establishment of the four-hour day—will do all the things which our leisured classes of the present time so conspicuously fail to do.

How many rich and leisured people are there now living, who spend their time contemplating the law of nature? I cannot say; all I know is that I rarely meet them. Many of the leisured, it is true, devote themselves to the patronage and even the amateur practice of arts. But anyone who has moved among rich 'artistic' people knows how much of this cultivation of the arts is due to snobbery, how shallow and insincere their loudly voiced enthusiasms mostly are. The leisured classes take up art for the same reasons as they take up bridge— to escape from boredom. With sport and love-making, art helps to fill up the vacuum of their existence.

At Monte Carlo and Nice one meets the rich whose dominant interests are play and love. Two millions according to my guide-book, annually visit Monte Carlo alone. Seven-eighths of the whole leisured population of Europe must concentrate themselves yearly on that strip of the coast. Five thousand jazz bands play daily for their delectation. A hundred thousand motor vehicles transport them from one place to another at great speed. Huge joint-stock companies offer them every kind of distraction, from roulette to golf. Legions of prostitutes assemble from all parts of the globe and enthusiastic amateurs of the gentle passion abound. For four months in the year the French Riviera is an earthly paradise. When the four months are over, the leisured rich return to their northerly homes, where they find awaiting them less splendid, but quite authentic succursales of the paradise they have left behind. The leisured rich at Monte Carlo are those, I have said, whose chief resources against ennui or serious thoughts are love and play. Many of them are also 'artistic': But it is not, I think, at Monte Carlo that the best specimens of the artistic rich are to be found. To see them at their best one must go to Florence. Florence is the home of those who cultivate with an equal ardour Mah-jong and a passion for Fra Angelico. Over tea and crumpets they talk, if they are too old for Jove themselves, of their lascivious juniors; but they also make sketches in water colour and read the *Little Flowers* of St. Francis.

I must not, in justice to the leisured rich, omit to mention that respectable minority of them who occupy themselves with works of charity (not to mention tyranny), with politics, with local administration and occasionally with scholarly or scientific studies. I hesitate to use the word 'service'; for it has been held up so frequently as an ideal and by such a riff-raff of newspaper proprietors, hard-headed business men and professional moralists from the Y.M.C.A., that it has lost all real significance.

The 'ideal of service' is achieved, according to our modern messiahs, by those who do efficient and profitable business with just enough honesty to keep them out of gaol. Plain shop-keeping is thus exalted into a beautiful virtue. The ideal of service which animates the best part of the English leisured class has nothing to do with the ideals of service so frequently mentioned by advertisers in American magazines. If I had not made this clear, my praise might have been thought, if not positively insulting at least most damnably faint. There exists, then, an admirable minority. But even when the minority and its occupations are duly taken into account, it cannot honestly be said that the leisured classes of the present time, or indeed of any historical period of which we have knowledge, provide a very good advertisement for leisure. The contemplation of richly leisured life in Monte Carlo and even in artistic Florence is by no means cheering or elevating.

Nor are we much reassured when we consider the occupations of the unleisured poor during those brief hours of repose allowed them between their work and their sleep. Watching other people play games, looking at cinema films, reading newspapers and indifferent fiction, listening to radio concerts and gramophone records and going from place to place in trains and omnibuses- these, I suppose, are the principal occupations of the working-man's leisure. Their cheapness is all that distinguishes them from the diversions of the rich. Prolong the leisure and what will happen? There will have to be more cinemas, more newspaper - more fiction, more radios and more cheap automobiles. If wealth and education increase with the leisure, then there will have to be more Russian Ballets as well as more movies, more Timeses as well as more Daily Mails, more casinos as well as more bookies and football matches, more expensive operas as well as more gramophone records more Hugh Walpoles as well as more Nat Goulds. Acting on the same organisms the same causes may be expected to produce the same effects. And for all ordinary purposes, and so far as historical time is concerned, human nature is practically unchanging; the organism does remain in the same.

This being so, we must further assume that increase of leisure will be accompanied by a correspondingly increased incidence of those spiritual maladies-ennui, restlessness, spleen and general world-weariness-which afflict and have always afflicted the leisured classes now and then in the past. Another result of increased leisure, provided that it is accompanied by a tolerably high standard of living, will be a very much increased interest on the part of what is now the working class in all matters of an amorous nature. Love, in all its complicated luxuriance, can only flourish in a society composed of well-fed, unemployed people. Examine the literature which has been written by and for members of the leisured classes and compare it with popular working-class literature.

If to-morrow or a couple of generations hence, it were made possible for all human beings to lead the life of leisure which is now led only by a few, the results, so far as I can see, would be as follows: There would be an enormous increase in the demand for such time-killers and substitutes for thought as newspapers, films, fiction, cheap means of communication and wireless telephones; to put it in more general term, there would be an increase in the demand for sport and art. The interest in the fine art of love-making would be widely extended and enormous numbers of people, hitherto immune from these mental and moral diseases, would be afflicted by ennui, depression and universal dissatisfaction.

The fact is that, brought up as they are at present, the majority of human beings can hardly fail to devote their leisure to occupations which, if not positively vicious, are at least stupid, futile and, what is worse, secretly realized to be futile. To Tolstoy the whole idea of universal leisure seemed absurd and even wicked. The social reformers who held up the attainment of universal leisure as an ideal he regarded as madmen. They aspired to make all men like those rich, idle, urban people among whom he had passed his youth and whom he so profoundly despised. He regarded them as conspirators against the welfare of the race. What seemed to Tolstoy important was not that workers should get more leisure but that the leisured should work. For him the social ideal was labour for all in natural surroundings. He wanted to see all men and women living on the land and subsisting on the produce of the fields that they themselves had tilled. The makers of Utopias are fond of prophesying that a time will come when men will altogether abandon agriculture and live on synthetic foods; to Tolstoy the idea was utterly revolting. But though he was doubtless right to be revolted, the prophets of synthetic food are probably better seers than he. Mankind is more likely to become urbanized than completely ruralized. But these probabilities do not concern us here. What concerns us is Tolstoy's opinion of leisure.

Tolstoy's dislike of leisure was due to his own experience as an idle youth and his observation of other rich and leisured men and women. He concluded that, as things are, leisure is generally more of a curse than a blessing. It is difficult, when one visits Monte Carlo or the other earthly paradises of the leisured, not to agree with him. Most minds will only do work under compulsion.

Leisure is only profitable to those who desire, even without compulsion, to do mental work. In a society entirely composed of such active minds leisure would be an unmixed blessing. Such a society has never existed and does not at the present exist. Can it ever be called into being? Those who believe that all the defects of nature may be remedied by suitable nurture will reply in the affirmative. And indeed it is sufficiently obvious that the science of education is still in a very rudimentary condition. We possess a sufficient knowledge of physiology to be able to devise gymnastic exercises that shall develop the body to its highest attainable efficiency. But our knowledge of the mind, and particularly of the growing mind, is far less complete; and even such knowledge as we possess is not systematically or universally applied to the problems of education. Our minds are like the flabby bodies of sedentary city dwellers- inefficient and imperfectly developed. With a vast number of people intellectual development ceases almost in childhood; they go through life with the intellectual capacities of boys or girls of fifteen. A proper course of mental gymnastics, based on real psychological knowledge, would at least permit all minds to reach their maximum development. Splendid prospect! But our enthusiasm for education is a little cooled when we consider what is the maximum development attainable by the greatest number of human beings. Men born with talents are to men born without them as human beings to dogs in respect to these particular faculties. Mathematically, I am a dog compared with Newton; dog, musically, compared with Beethoven, and a dog artistically, compared with Giotto. Not to mention the fact that I am a dog compared to Blondin, as a tight rope walker; a billiard playing dog compared with Newman; a boxing dog compared with Dempsey; a wine-tasting dog compared with Ruskin's father. And so on. Even if I were perfectly educated in mathematics, music, painting, tight-rope walking, billiard playing, boxing and wine-tasting, I should only become a trained dog instead of a dog in the state of nature. The prospect fills me with only moderate satisfaction.

Education can assure to every man the maximum of mental development. But it is that maximum high enough in the majority of cases to allow a whole society to live in leisure without developing those deplorable qualities which have always characterized the leisured classes? I know plenty of people who have received the best education available in the present age and employ their leisure as though they had never been educated at all. But then our best education is admittedly bad (though good enough for all the men of talents and genius whom we possess); perhaps when it has been made really efficient, these people will spend their leisure contemplating the laws of nature.

Perhaps I venture to doubt it. Mr. Wells, who is a believer in nature, puts his Utopia three thousand years into the future; Mr. Shaw, less optimistically trusting to nature and a process of conscious evolution, removes his to the year 30,000 A.D. Geologically speaking, these times are to all intent equal in their brevity. Unfortunately, however, we are not fossils, but men. Even three thousand years seem, in our eyes, an uncommonly long time. The thought that, three thousand or thirty thousand years hence, human beings may, conceivably, be leading a lovely and rational existence is only mildly comforting and feebly sustaining. Men have a habit of thinking only of themselves, their children and their children's children. And they are quite right. Thirty thousand years hence, all may be well. But meanwhile that bad geological quarter of an hour which separates the present from that rosy future has got to be lived through. And I foresee that one of the minor, or even the major problems of that quarter of an hour will be the problem of leisure. By the year two thousand the six-hour day will be everywhere the rule, and the next hundred years will probably see the maximum reduced to five or even less. Nature, by then, will have had no time to change the mental habits of the race; and nurture, though improved, will only turn dogs into trained dogs. How will men and women fill their ever-expanding leisures? By contemplating the laws of nature, like Henri Poincare? Or by reading the *News of the World*? I wonder.