

A QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY IRC ARCHIVE DOCUMENT

This document was digitized in 2013 as part of the Queen's IRC Archive Revitalization Project. Originally published by Queen's IRC in 1963.



The Concept of Leisure

A. R. C. Duncan



Industrial Relations Centre (IRC)
School of Policy Studies
Queen's University
Kingston, ON K7L 3N6

Tel: 613-533-6628
Fax: 613-533-6812
Email: irc@queensu.ca
Visit us at: irc.queensu.ca

This paper was paper presented at the 1963 Spring Conference Programme of the Industrial Relations Centre, Queen's University, at Kingston, Ontario. The author is Professor and Head, Department of Philosophy, and Dean of Arts and Science, Queen's University.

In introducing my topic I should like to begin by calling attention to some curious aspects of common conversation. We constantly hear people talking about the speed and whirl of modern twentieth century living; we hear men saying that they never have time to do anything; we hear men referring to the rat race in which they appear to be caught; and how often when we rise from the midday meal do we say, admittedly with a smile but we say it none the less, 'Back to the salt mines'. It is more than a little curious that we should so frequently use this expression because, while we think of ourselves as essentially a free people, those who worked in the salt mines were not free, they were slaves. Those remarks point to our need and our desire for leisure; they also suggest that we require to rethink the whole notion of leisure. The Greeks, who invented the concept of leisure, thought of it as absolutely essential to intelligent political activity; they even went further and claimed that it is the prime condition of human happiness. And they were not alone in this. The Hebrew writer of the Book of Ecclesiasticus said "the wisdom of the scribe cometh by opportunity of leisure; and he that hath little business shall become wise". This today may seem like going too far. To our modern ways of thinking these ideas, when stated baldly like this, seem strange and completely out of keeping with the twentieth century, and yet in our casual conversational remarks we unwittingly pay tribute to the correctness of these older ways of thinking. We talk of being slaves in the salt mines, but we do not mean what we say. We hint at a lack of leisure, which is the opposite of slavery, without being fully aware of all that is contained in the idea. I want to say something about the origins of this idea of leisure and also to make some suggestions about how we might think positively and usefully about it.

The word 'leisure' is a word in very common use today, but like a great many other words in common use, the edges of its meaning have become blurred and it has come to mean many things to different persons. When I say that leisure is the opposite of slavery or that leisure was once thought to be the prime condition of human happiness (or if I point out also that religion itself depends on the notion of leisure as we see in the famous words "Be still and know that I am God" where in the original the words translated as 'be still' are more properly translated as 'have leisure') it is quite possible that you may be wondering what on earth I mean. For many years now we have been accustomed to hearing people say that a man finds his true and lasting happiness in his work and that leisure-time is, from any serious point of view, simply wasted time, time frittered away, unproductive time. The gospel of work, as it is sometimes called, was of course a gospel preached by men who knew that wealth rests on productive work, whether it was their own wealth or the wealth of the nation that they had in mind. If anyone makes it his chief object in life to produce wealth, then he must do all in his power to persuade other men that work is a good thing. In our industrial civilisation a great deal has been done to make human work a good deal more dignified than it used to be and this is all to the good. But, at the same time, it does us no harm to remember occasionally that there was a time when work was considered to be a curse laid upon man for his first sin of disobedience. In the Garden of Eden no one worked; when man was thrust out of the Garden of Eden

he was told that henceforward he would have to earn his living by the sweat of his brow. And this was a punishment. All I mean to indicate by these very general remarks is that the notion that work is intrinsically good is bound up with an economic concept of man and that it is possible that man is something more than a mere economic unit.

Even to suggest that productive work is not the only thing that really matters is by many people thought to be tantamount to an admission of moral turpitude, if not mental decrepitude. The opposite of work is said to be idleness and we have all been told that idleness is a condition beloved by Old Nick himself. Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do — most of us had that adage dinned into our ears from very early years. While I am quite prepared to agree with anyone who says that work and idleness are in a sense direct opposites, I am not prepared to agree with the suggestion that leisure has anything to do with idleness. While it is true that we do not think of a man who is at leisure, or who is enjoying his leisure, as engaged in work, it does not follow that such a man is not active, and what is more, it may be that the activities that engage his leisure hours may be those that he prizes above all others. It may even be that he realises himself most fully and most satisfactorily in these activities. To get my point here really clear I must first of all say something about the history of the word 'leisure', for it is a word which has come down in the world in the sense that many people have forgotten or do not even know what the word originally meant. And this particular word has had a very interesting history indeed.

The English word 'leisure' has a history which goes right back to the very origins of our western civilisation in the Greece of the fifth century B.C. where it stood for something which men valued very greatly indeed. As one of the greater philosophers said, men think that happiness is to be found in leisure. When you remember that in the end happiness is what men want above all things, you can see how important the notion of leisure was bound to be. Of course if you think of leisure as somehow connected with idleness you will completely miss the point of the Greek philosopher's remark. The Greek word which we translate as 'leisure' was the word *scholē*, from which comes our word school, and we would surely agree that whatever school children may actually do, they are not supposed to be idle while at school, but they are supposed to be pretty strenuously active. The Greek word for 'business' was the negative form of *scholē*, that is, their notion of business was something negative, something which had to be done indeed, but which was unlikely of itself to satisfy a man. The Romans in this followed the Greeks: the Latin for 'leisure' was *otium* and their word for 'business' was its negative form, *negotium*, from which comes our very businesslike word 'negotiations'. The reason for this opposition between leisure and business, which seems curious to us today, was that to the Greeks a man's leisure-time was the part of his life in which he did the things he really wanted to do, the things which gave him genuine human satisfaction; business was something he had to conduct in order to keep alive or earn a living. Business was thought to be related to leisure as war is to peace. We make war in order that we may have peace; we do business in order that we may have leisure in which we can really do human things. Now, they may have been wrong about this, and in one respect I think they were wrong for reasons which I shall show later, but in the meantime, I am merely explaining how they thought. Another way of putting the matter, which will link up the Greek notion with our word 'leisure', is to say that in leisure-time a man was thought to be really free and master of both his time and himself; he could do what he wanted to do without let or hindrance. He was permitted or allowed to be himself. Now, the Latin verb for to allow or permit was *licere* from which comes our 'licence', a permission to do something, and also the French word

loisir, from which in turn comes our word 'leisure'. Although the etymology of our word has retained the notion of free time, what has been lost is the implication of the original Greek word that it is free time of a special kind, time in which a man is free to be himself, to do the things which he thinks are really worth while. I shall just mention in passing one of the things the Greeks thought eminently worth while, namely taking part in the activity of government. A man whose whole waking life is spent solely in the difficult and exacting task of earning a living, of working as we say, does not have time to think about and to grasp the intricacies of political life. Furthermore, a man who finds himself in a position, social or economic, where he has no choice but to work for someone else and to work so hard and for such long hours that when his work is over he is tired and needs and demands only rest and recreation so that he can continue to work, such a man has only a very small measure of freedom and cannot be expected to take a very deep or serious interest in political affairs. Without leisure it was not thought possible to have freedom.

Now, in our industrial civilisation we tend to think of human life as essentially divided into the doing of productive work and the hours of leisure or free time, but here the free means *free from* work. The notion of leisure has become the negative idea, the time when a man is *not* engaged in productive work. This twofold division of a man's life would have seemed *absurd* and rather *simple minded* to a Greek. It would have been absurd to him, for he would have wanted to know what was to be done with the things which productive work produces, or to put his point in another way, the really important question is not so much how are we to make money or wealth of any kind, but what are we going to do with the wealth once we have got it; to make wealth produce more wealth is alright up to a point, but if it does not have a limit somewhere, the process becomes endless and irrational and pointless. Wealth is not an end in itself; it is something to be used for a purpose. It would have been *simple minded* because in addition to leisure which is most important, and to work which has to be done, there is also recreation and there is also amusement. Every man at some time or other wants simply to be amused or to amuse himself; it may be playing a game or watching a game, but playing, however pleasant it is, is essentially a survival from childhood where play is essential and vital. I am not suggesting that it is childish to play; play in many forms is of great value even if only as a safety valve. But a man whose life was divided into work and play and nothing else would be living a curiously lop-sided life, half man half child. Play has its place, but that place is not the whole of man's non-working or leisure time. If we turn now to recreation, we find that recreation is connected not with leisure but with work. Recreation is something which we must partake in if we are to make ourselves fit both to work and to make satisfactory use of our leisure. We require recreation so that we can remain fit mentally and physically; if you work a man too hard and allow him no time for recreation, he will soon cease to be a useful or efficient worker, and this is pretty widely recognised today in most businesses. One point, however, which can be too easily lost sight of, is that we must recognize that a man's life should be divided into three and not two parts, not work and recreation, but work, recreation, and leisure. To make man use his free time simply for recreation is to deny him genuine leisure.

The conditions of life in our civilisation differ pretty radically from the conditions under which the Greeks lived, and I am not for a moment going to suggest any return to the past. I do think, however, that we can rescue something of value from the Greek conception of leisure. As I have said, we tend to think of leisure as free time in the sense of empty time; the Greeks thought of leisure not so much as free time, which in a sense is indeed a condition of leisure, but as full time. Leisure provided opportunity to develop

the most human, the most interesting and the most satisfying kinds of activity. This is why our word for school, the place where we endeavour to help the young to develop their human potentialities, is simply the Greek word for leisure. You will sometimes hear it said that a liberal or general education is an education for leisure, and indeed it is, but that statement is frequently misunderstood to mean education for free time, whereas what it really means is education in the most fundamental human potentialities. To cut what could be a very long part of my story short, I shall simply say that the man who has been educated for leisure, the liberally educated man, is a man whose interests are wide and active, whose powers of thought and judgment have been trained and stimulated so that he is free, unprejudiced, and self-reliant in his outlook on life, a man who is capable of taking decisions and using his initiative in difficult situations, a man who will never be panicked by external pressures into losing his sense of perspective. Essentially he will be a man who is good at his job whatever that may be, but whose interests are not limited to his work. He will among other things be in a position to take an active interest in political life. Leisure is a condition of genuine democracy.

There is one link in the history of the word and idea of leisure which is still missing. I said earlier that the Greeks thought of leisure as related to work in the same sort of way as war is related to peace. Now, peace excludes war and war excludes peace. In Greek times this would also have been true of work and leisure; working and leisure hours were simply exclusive of one another. The reason for this is not far to seek. Productive work was not something of which the Greeks thought very highly; they tried as far as possible to relegate it to the slave population; in consequence, the concept of work, as something which you have to do to earn a living, acquired a rather pejorative sense. In our society a number of factors have worked together to restore to the concept of work a dignity and freedom not associated with it in earlier times. It is an inevitable consequence of abandoning the institution of slavery that we should come to look upon work as something which every right minded man is prepared to put his hand to, and we admire a man who is good and efficient at his work, whatever that work may be. A further and less fortunate consequence of this new attitude to work, however, has been a denigration of the idea of leisure. It is this tendency to downgrade the idea of leisure that I want to resist when I talk about rescuing what is good and sound in the Greek concept. In this connection I do also want to make it quite plain that I have little sympathy with those who regard their work as simply something that has to be done. In rescuing the true conception of leisure, I certainly do not want to suggest that we should go back to the ideas of the writer of the Book of Genesis and regard work as a punishment. Rather, if my topic were the concept of work, I should want to point out that if a man approaches his work in the right spirit, (and this is a matter of personal adjustment, something at which a man may have to exercise himself) then a very special and intrinsically human kind of satisfaction can be derived from it. If I may digress still further on this topic I should say that one of the really important tasks which face an industrial civilisation like our own is to make the conditions of *necessary* work such that a man may really expect to derive satisfaction from it. A great deal more is being done today in the way of fitting the right kind of men to the right kind of job than was ever done in the past, but we still have a long way to go. However, that is beside my immediate point.

To come back to my real topic, leisure: if we could persuade ourselves to think correctly about leisure, if we could stop confusing it with amusement or recreation or play, if we could stop thinking of it in the negative way that has grown up in the last couple of centuries under the impact of the industrial revolution, as time in which we are not working, as essentially empty time, but come to think of it in a

positive manner as the time which we spend in developing and enjoying our fundamental human capacities, then perhaps we should be able to integrate work and leisure in a manner which will represent a definite advance on previous ages in western history. As I said, I do not want to suggest a return to the past –that would be both absurd and also impossible. But again, I think that we are unwise to neglect what was good and worth while in the past, and one of the ideas which was eminently worth while in the past is the positive concept of leisure.

There are, I would suggest, three areas in which we might rethink the concept of leisure. First, in the field of education. As I pointed out earlier, the word we use for the most widespread of all educational institutions, the school, is simply an anglicised form of the Greek word for leisure. It is essential, I think, that we should never allow the time set aside for education to be either shortened or rushed. The maturing and developing of the mind, which ought to take place in the period of education, is a process which in the nature of the case cannot be speeded up. We can accelerate quite a number of processes in the world, communications, travel and industrial processes, but we cannot accelerate the rate of growth of the human body, nor can we accelerate the rate of development of the human mind. Natural processes have their own rhythm. Real education is a fairly slow process but when it is successful it is beyond all price in the life of a man. And in this connection I would argue that we must not confuse education with training. Every man and woman has a right both to be properly trained to do a job in life, whether it be that of a plumber or a surgeon, and also to be educated so that he can live and enjoy himself as a human being using his essentially human capacities and potentialities. Quite specifically this means that in any educational institution there must be time for that activity which it is so difficult to control but which is so important, discussion of ideas.

Secondly, in our social and economic life it seems to me that we must so plan and arrange things that individuals have time, and plenty of time, when work is completed for both amusement and recreation and also for leisure. We must provide leisure-time in which human beings can develop their own peculiar interests and their own special sources of satisfaction. People will of course vary enormously in the things in which they will seek essential satisfaction; some will listen to music, others will watch plays, some will read, some will paint, some will collect things, some will travel, some will watch birds, and others will indulge in a host of other activities I might mention. This is an age of machines, and machines have very largely taken the place of the slaves of the ancient world. We can make more time available while still continuing to produce at the same high rate, and we have already gone a long way in this direction. But there is a very real danger here, and one to which we do not perhaps pay as much attention as we should. If we are not careful, what will happen is that men and women will have a great deal more time free from work than they know what to do with. If they have not been educated and encouraged in the kind of activities that belong to positive leisure as I have described it, the danger is that they may turn simply to play and the watching of play, and then deep rooted boredom may set in, and with boredom a really dangerous kind of political discontent may develop which might well spell the end of democracy as we know and value it. This has happened before in history, and there is no reason to suppose that it cannot happen again today if we persist in thinking of a man's waking hours as divided simply into work and play and forget about what is meant by true leisure. With growing automation in industry I feel that I cannot emphasize too much the necessity of rethinking the concept of positive leisure activities.

The third area in which this rethinking must be done I have already hinted at, namely our political life. It is not really possible for any man or woman to take an intelligent interest or part in democratic politics unless he is reasonably well educated so that he can grasp and understand the complexities and intricacies of the modern world and unless he can take the time to inform himself of what is going on in the world and to discuss it with his neighbours. Only when there is a real possibility of continual and informed discussion of political matters does our own great political act of casting our vote come to have real significance. If the voting is done by un-informed and unthinking persons, then it might equally well be done for us by a series of giant political computers. Constant discussion is vital in democratic politics, and discussion is and always has been one of the major activities of positive leisure time from Greek days right up to our own days.

In conclusion, then, let me say that if we think of leisure no longer in the negative way to which we have unfortunately become accustomed, but in the positive manner of those who first developed the idea of leisure, then we must think of the man of leisure not as the idler, not as the mere spectator of what goes on, not as the man who fails to play his part along with his fellows, but we must visualize the man of leisure as the man who has really given himself a chance to develop all that he has it in him to be, as the whole and complete man who will not only approach his work in the right spirit and do it with zest and competence, but who will also have discovered for himself the sort of activities in which lasting and permanent human satisfaction can be found.



Industrial Relations Centre (IRC)
Queen's University
Kingston, ON K7L 3N6
irc.queensu.ca



SCHOOL OF
Policy Studies
QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY