

Reducing Work Time as a Path to Sustainability

John de Graaf

There is a silver lining on the cloud of recession that hangs over the industrial world. Contrary to popular expectations, in some countries—particularly the United States—health outcomes are actually improving. Christopher Ruhm at the University of North Carolina finds a decline in mortality of half a percent for each 1 percent increase in U.S. unemployment. How is this happening? Many of the newly jobless suffer acute stress and suicides are up. But some are using the time off to improve the rest of their lives—learning to save, finding time to exercise, bonding more closely to family and friends.¹

More important, the crisis has meant a reduction in working hours for most Americans for the first time in decades. Some companies and public agencies have chosen to cut hours through shorter work weeks or furloughs instead of laying employees off. With more time and less money, people are smoking and drinking less, eating fewer calorie-laden restaurant meals, and walking or bicycling more. While auto sales have plunged, bicycle sales are on the upswing. As Americans drive less, they die less often in accidents—U.S. traffic deaths declined by 10 percent from 2007 to 2008. Air

pollution from cars and factories (as they produce less) is also down, resulting in fewer deaths, especially among children.²

In time, workers may find that the increased family time, improved health, and other benefits of more leisure outweigh the income losses. This should inspire more efforts to trade productivity for time instead of greater purchasing power.

But we need to do this for another reason: preserving the biosphere for future generations.

The Need to Limit Consumption

Data from the Global Footprint Network suggest that if people in the developing world were to suddenly achieve American lifestyles, the world would need four more planets to provide the resources for their products and absorb their wastes. Already—and with half the world's people living in real poverty—Earth's carrying capacity is being overshoot by some 40 percent.³

Some environmentalists suggest that the world can have its cake (expanded production) and eat it too simply by improving technologies and investing in clean energy. Too

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often, however, technological improvements such as greater fuel efficiency simply lead to greater consumption of a product—people drive more, for example. As Gus Speth, former dean of the Yale School of Forestry, puts it: “The eco-efficiency of the economy is improving through ‘dematerialization,’ the increased productivity of resource inputs, and the reduction of wastes discharged per unit of output. However, eco-efficiency is not improving fast enough to prevent impacts from rising.”⁴

Speth spells out clearly the cost of current trends in resources, pollution, and equity: disappearing rainforests and fisheries, exhaustion of fossil fuels, increasing hunger, a rapidly widening gap between rich and poor. Despite the faith of many in “super” cars and order-of-magnitude technical advances, the burden of evidence is clearly on those who think the economy and human activities can continue to grow exponentially without increasingly severe environmental consequences.⁵

Industrial countries cannot deny the rights of developing nations to greater economic prosperity while others continue to consume at current levels. That would be asking them to sacrifice so that the rest of the world can binge awhile longer.

Is There an Answer?

The current situation cannot continue, but people in industrial countries are reluctant to reduce their “standard of living.” Is there a solution to this stand-off? Yes: the rich nations of the world must immediately begin to trade advances in labor productivity for free time instead of additional purchasing power.

And people must understand that doing so will not be a sacrifice. Rather it will mean substantial improvements in the quality of life.

There is a simple economic law that might be called the growth imperative. Technical progress consistently makes it possible to produce more of product per hour of labor

expended. For example, hourly labor productivity in rich countries has more than doubled since 1970. The point is simple: to keep everyone employed at the current number of hours while productivity increases, it is necessary to simply produce and consume more. It is unlikely that scientific progress and increases in labor productivity are going to stop. Therefore in order to limit consumption to current levels (or lower), it will be necessary either to lay off a portion of the workforce or to reduce everyone’s working hours.⁶

Since 1970, the United States has chosen to keep working hours stable—in fact, there is some evidence that U.S. working hours have even increased during the past 40 years. By contrast, most other industrial countries, especially in Europe, have used shorter workweeks, longer vacations, and other strategies to reduce working hours—sometimes significantly. Today, the average American puts in 200–300 more hours at work each year than the average European does. Europeans have made a better choice.⁷

The Benefits of Shorter Hours

Shorter working hours allow more time for connection with friends and family, exercise and healthy eating, citizen and community engagement, attention to hobbies and educational advancement, appreciation of the natural world, personal emotional and spiritual growth, conscientious consumer habits, and proper environmental stewardship. The positive impact of greater free time can be seen by comparing quality of life indices for European nations and the United States.

Since 1980, for example, the United States has fallen from eleventh place in life expectancy to fiftieth. West Europeans now live longer than Americans. On average—although this varies by country—they are also only a little more than half as likely to suffer from such chronic illnesses as heart disease, hypertension,

and type 2 diabetes after the age of 50. The United States now lags behind Western Europe in virtually every health outcome, despite spending about twice as much per capita for health care. Moreover, Americans, with their more stressful and hurried lives, are nearly twice as likely to suffer from anxiety, depression, and other abnormalities of mental health.⁸

Happiness is also affected. While the United States ranks a respectable eleventh in the world in life satisfaction, a recent study found that the four happiest countries in the world—Denmark, the Netherlands, Finland, and Sweden—were all characterized by their remarkable attentiveness to “work-life balance.”⁹

The environmental benefits of reduced work-time are myriad and include:

- Less need for convenience products. Fast food, for example, is in part a response to an increasingly pressured way of life. Highly packaged and processed foods and other products, including throwaway products, also appeal to those who feel time is short.
- More time to reuse and recycle. Separating wastes into paper, plastics, metals, compost or trash takes time. People often skip this if they are feeling rushed or overwhelmed.
- Time to make other behavioral choices, such as drying one’s clothes on a clothesline rather than in a dryer. When pressed for time, “convenience” tends to take priority.
- Time to choose slower and more energy-friendly forms of transport, including walking, cycling, or public transit, rather than driving, or to take trains rather than planes.
- Time to make careful consumer choices, including for certified products like Fair Trade, organic, and songbird-friendly coffee or Forest Stewardship Council lumber.

Moreover, reductions in work time translate rapidly into reductions in energy use, carbon footprints, and pollution (as already seen in the current recession). A study conducted by the Center for Economic and Policy Research, a prominent Washington think tank,

concluded that if Americans were to reduce their working hours to European levels, they would almost automatically reduce their energy/carbon impacts by 20–30 percent.¹⁰

Rushing Through the Environment

Finally, for many people environmental awareness is enhanced by exposure to the natural world, particularly in childhood. From John Muir to Aldo Leopold to Rachel Carson to David Brower, prominent environmentalists have written of the impact of their experiences in natural settings on their later commitment to Earth. A love of nature often results in less desire for material things. Aware of this, Muir was one of the first to call for a law mandating vacation time; he called it a “law of rest.” In 1876, on the one-hundredth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, Muir argued for “Centennial Freedom” that would allow everyone, rich or poor, of whatever race or origin, time to get out into nature. “We work too much and rest too little,” Muir declared. “Compulsory education may be good; compulsory recreation may be better.”¹¹

All Europeans enjoy at least four weeks of paid vacation by law. So do citizens of many African and Latin American nations. Yet the United States still has no law providing vacation time, and half of all American workers now get only one week or less off each year. Consequently, children are now only half as likely to spend unstructured time outdoors as they were in 1970, and visitors to Yosemite National Park—which is more than 300,000 hectares in size—spend on average less than five hours there. People rush through, snapping quick photographs of the granite cliffs and waterfalls, checking their watches, answering their cell phones, and dashing on. There is no time to appreciate the rhythms of Earth or experience a connection to other species, no sense of loss as they pass into extinction, no quiet time to

reflect on the wondrous world that now is threatened with humanity's insatiable material demands.¹²

Trading Stuff for Time

What might people do to begin trading gains in productivity for time instead of stuff? The organization Take Back Your Time has been exploring the possibilities of this for the past eight years, encouraged by such developments as the Hours Adjustment Act in the Netherlands and France's 35-hour week.¹³

The Netherlands has the world's shortest working hours and the highest percentage of part-time workers. In part, this is a direct response to policy initiatives. European Union law already requires pay and benefit parity for part-time workers who do the same work as full-timers. Moreover, in the Netherlands the Work and Care Act and the Hours Adjustment Act encourage parents to share 1.5 jobs, each working three-quarters time, by requiring that employers allow workers to reduce their hours while keeping the same hourly rate of pay and pro-rating the benefits. While the right is used primarily by parents of young children, it applies to all employees. Those who choose this option also commonly fall into lower tax brackets; thus the economic penalty for working less is further reduced.¹⁴

In other European countries, innovative laws allow for such things as regular sabbaticals, phased-in retirement, and guaranteed days of rest, while sharply restricting long hours and overtime work. Europeans would do well to resist calls by corporate leaders to drop restraints on work time and follow the Anglo-American model, as their shorter work time has

brought them a higher quality of life than in the United States.

In the United States and other long-hours nations, change must start with a sober assessment of the costs of the higher production/higher consumption lifestyles—what some now call “affluenza.” Americans have the farthest to go in this and therefore perhaps the best opportunity to make quick progress. The United States stands alone among industrial nations and most other countries in its lack



Seattle Municipal Archives Photograph Collection

Bored in Seattle: the production line of a bottle factory.

of laws guaranteeing such rights to time as paid maternity or family leave, paid sick days, or paid vacations. Paid maternity leave, for example, is now guaranteed everywhere except the United States, Swaziland, Liberia, and Papua New Guinea. Many immigrants to the United States are shocked at how few protections American workers have, particularly where the right to time is concerned. Bills currently being considered in the United States Congress would correct some of these deficiencies, but powerful forces are arrayed against them. Business lobbies resolutely oppose all “mandates” that would restrict their absolute control of working hours.¹⁵

On the other hand, there is some reason for

optimism. The voluntary simplicity movement has helped many Americans choose time over money where the choice was actually theirs to make and not the sole prerogative of their employers. The leaders of that movement understand that making these changes is not only a matter of voluntary action, and it can be helped by progressive policies. Strong organizations that advocate a better work-life balance, like the 1-million member group MomsRising, have emerged in recent years. And the great debate over national health care offers a chance to make points about the health implications of shorter work time.¹⁶

Since 2002, the Take Back Your Time campaign has worked to increase American awareness of the benefits of shorter working hours. These efforts have included celebrations of Take Back Your Time Day (October 24th) in about 200 U.S. municipalities, coverage of the issue in hundreds of media outlets, and campaigns for legislation such as the Paid Vacation Act of 2009 introduced by Representative Alan Grayson. His proposed law is modest by international standards—offering only one to two weeks vacation time for workers in firms of 50 employees or more. But it would be a “down payment” on further improvements and would enhance exposure of the issue in the media. Discussion of paid vacation—the epitome of leisure legislation—can help raise the broader issue of Americans’ time poverty and its social and ecological impacts.¹⁷

In his inaugural address, President Barack Obama honored workers who accepted shorter hours rather than see their colleagues fired. But more can be done. Economist Dean Baker proposes that any further government stimulus packages include tax credits for companies that reduce working hours through shorter workweeks, family or sick leave, or extended

vacation time without commensurate reductions in workers’ pay and benefits. While temporary, such transition funds, which reduce short-term economic sacrifice, would make it possible for workers to see the value of increased leisure and reduced work time.¹⁸

Re-Visioning the Future

Clearly the world is at a crossroads. For all the remarkable benefits that investments in “green jobs” and new energy technologies will surely provide, they are only part of what’s needed for long-run sustainability—necessary change, but not sufficient. To survive and to let people in developing countries somehow achieve secure and modest comfort, material economic growth in rich nations simply must be limited. Yet this must be done without stopping the progress of science and the advance of productivity and without casting millions into the hell of unemployment.

Ultimately, it can only be done by trading gains in productivity for time, by reducing the hours of labor and sharing them equitably. All of this means limiting greed, understanding that a life less rich materially but more rich temporally is not a sacrifice, finding new indices of success to supplant the gross domestic product (which is more a measure of the churn of money in the economy than of true value), and providing real freedom to workers so that their choice to limit their hours of labor does not come at the cost of being fired and losing their livelihoods and health care. It is time to take stock of the “best practices” already being implemented in some countries, expanding them and applying them throughout the world. This way lies hope, sustainability, and greater joy as well.

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