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### The Labors of Leisure

By *Nathan Schneider*

Some might consider it a high honor to have their livelihood ridiculed on the right-wing talk-show circuit. Benjamin Kline Hunnicutt did not.

In February he published an [article](#) in *Politico* celebrating a projection that the Affordable Care Act might result in millions of workers' scaling back from full-time to part-time jobs. *Politico* supplied the headline—"Why Do Republicans Want Us to Work All the Time?"—and the conservatives fired back. Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity roiled their audiences against Hunnicutt, and hate mail poured in.

"What do you suppose this man's job might be, if he even has one?" asked presidential-hopeful-turned-pundit Herman Cain on his radio show. "It turns out he does have one, and it's a Democrat's dream: He is (drum roll) a professor of leisure studies at the University of Iowa."

"Those of you laying around right now listening to the show," [Cain continued](#), "you're getting an A!"



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One commenter at the Daily Caller website opined, "Leisure Studies/Tenure = Why this Country lags behind most other Countries." Another, at least, defended the academic field on the basis of the revenue that the recreation and tourism industries generate.

Among the experts in health, sports management, and child care in Iowa's leisure-studies program, Hunnicutt is the chief historian. History, more than red or blue politics, was the substance of his article. Drawing from the material in his 2013 book, *Free Time: The Forgotten American Dream* (Temple University Press), Hunnicutt cited industrious capitalists like Henry Ford and AT&T's Walter Gifford alongside Walt Whitman and the labor firebrand Fannia Cohn. The forgotten dream he chronicled—that technological and social progress would lead to the gradual reduction of working hours, leaving time for worthier pursuits—once cut across the American political spectrum. With fewer hours on the clock, we could turn our attention at last to citizenship, education, exercise, or whatever else.

That dream, however, has few defenders now. One of the last shreds of consensus left in Washington seems to be that creating more work to do is an intrinsic good. After the projection about Obamacare came out, Congressman Paul Ryan lamented, "It's adding insult to injury."

Recent decades have seen a curious decline of interest in leisure. In 1930, amid continuing labor struggles for shorter hours, the British economist John Maynard Keynes famously predicted that within a century, the need for work would have become nearly negligible. Fifty or sixty years ago, many sociologists saw leisure as an urgent challenge for their field; with more free time surely soon to come, how would people use it? Leisure-studies departments were one result. But by the early 1990s, the Boston College sociologist Juliet Schor documented the failure of Keynes's prediction in *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure*. That same decade, Arlie Russell Hochschild, a sociologist at the University of California at Berkeley, published

best-selling studies on the "second shift" of working parents and "the time bind" by which workplaces force people out of more and more of their waking hours.

Today the very idea of leisure sounds absurd to the ears of such cultural bellwethers as O'Reilly and Hannity, and like a personal insult to hardworking politicians like Ryan. The corresponding decline of academic discourse on leisure is particularly ironic.

The word "school," together with "scholarship," derives from the Greek word for leisure. "Liberal arts," similarly, shares its root with "liberation." It would seem that education was once meant to be a commons of time, a shared and open space in which minds and souls could be free from the dominion of *homo economicus*. Those were etymologies particularly enjoyed by the educational philosopher Robert Maynard Hutchins, one of Hunnicutt's favorite articulators of the dream of leisure.

Beginning at the improbable age of 30, Hutchins served as president of the University of Chicago, where he defended a leisure-centered vision of the liberal arts during the Depression and World War II, just as a century of reductions in working hours was in the process of flat-lining. He championed Great Books and old masters, and criticized the postwar capitalist consensus.

Hutchins believed in Keynes's promise; he foresaw a shift "from scarcity to abundance," a "return to paradise" and an end to the modern idolatry of "salvation by work." It was the job of educators to prepare people for that shift, to teach the right use of leisure time through civilizing activity. He thought that to present the liberal arts as merely preparation for a job, as some educators argued even then, was a waste and a fraud. Hutchins wrote a book after leaving Chicago called *The University of Utopia*, and the reigning curriculum of his utopia's university might be described as leisure studies. Now it seems to have become a punch line.



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The dream of leisure, anyway, is alive and well at Hunnicutt's home, in Iowa City. The green-painted house sits on a triangular lot where two quiet streets converge. There's no backyard, so the accouterments of leisure are out front: a swing, a playground for grandchildren, plastic chairs, a grill, a concrete pool for birds, a compost bin. A statue depicts a frog playing the cello.

Hunnicutt greeted me at the door. He had a scruffy gray beard and spoke with a baritone drawl. The living room where we sat had "peace" and "joy" stocking hangers on the mantle, a large Chagallian painting on the wall, an upright piano, and towels on the chairs for the sake of the two small dogs underfoot. There were charcoal drawings of Hunnicutt and his wife, Francine, a marriage counselor.

They met as teenagers and married in 1963, a year into his undergraduate study at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. From their hometown, Raleigh, she joined him in Chapel Hill. In the years that followed, they had two sons. Hunnicutt took a job at the post office, and after graduation he delivered mail for 30 or 35 hours a week. The rest of the time, they raised their kids and skinny-dipped with friends from their church choir. Hunnicutt eventually pursued a Ph.D. in history at the university. He kept delivering mail, too.

The subject of leisure was one among many on a list of possible topics in a seminar with George Mowry, a scholar of Progressivism, who would become Hunnicutt's adviser. Leisure was something his Southern upbringing had taught him about, but he hadn't realized that it was something he could study. He came from a family, he says, in which "the art of living was ever so much more important than making a living." For the sake of neither a job nor a

credential, he and his mother would watch lectures by professors from Chapel Hill, thanks to the National Educational Television programs that Hutchins had helped create during his tenure at the Ford Foundation. In church Hunnicutt learned about the enjoyment of God as not merely an expectation for the coming kingdom but as something to be practiced in the here and now.

During the early 1970s, his dissertation took shape in Chapel Hill. It chronicled the period during the second quarter of the 20th century when reductions in working hours came to a halt and, after World War II, the eight-hour day held steady.

At the start of the Depression, both Herbert Hoover and Franklin D. Roosevelt campaigned for the six-hour day to ease unemployment; the "higher progress" of democratic leisure that Whitman had hoped for seemed within reach. A six-hour bill passed the Senate in the early 1930s, but pressure from big business stalled it in the House. The version that finally became law, in 1938, compromised at eight hours. After the war, anti-Communist pressure helped banish from the labor movement's leadership those who called for shorter hours. Unions, which had nurtured and fought for the dream of leisure, came to adopt instead the new dream of full-time employment. Since then productivity per worker-hour has more than quadrupled in the United States, yet eight-hour days have remained the standard.

As Hunnicutt continued working on his doctorate, the job market looked grim. "I sort of resigned myself," he says, to delivering mail while still having time for reading, writing, and family.

As he began wrapping up the dissertation, though, he discovered an alternative to the post office: a job opening at the University of Iowa in recreation education, a department soon to be renamed leisure studies. He could teach the history of free time to students who would spend their lives promoting it. But doing so would mean being on the fringes of academic history.

Hunnicutt's dissertation, completed in 1976, sprouted into a book 12 years later: *Work Without End*. "The study of 'leisure,'" he wrote in the introduction, "has been relegated to obscure scholars out of the mainstream of intellectual life by those busy with more important and serious matters, such as jobs and how to make more of them." *The New York Times*, nevertheless, favorably reviewed the book. And although research on working time is beginning to make a comeback nowadays, it is taking place in university settings that have strayed far from modeling the dream of leisure.

Janet Gornick's office at the City University of New York's Graduate Center sits next to the one now occupied by the Nobel laureate and columnist Paul Krugman, newly snatched from Princeton. On the windowsill, copies of Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* are stacked in a tower second in height only to the stack of Gornick's own latest book, on income inequality in affluent countries. As a professor of political science and sociology at CUNY and director of the Luxembourg Income Study Center, a prestigious archive of microdata from countries around the world, she works what amounts to at least two jobs, which together hold claim over nearly her entire waking life. From time to time she testifies before Congress and advises policy makers. This productivity has helped assure her eminence as an expert on the subject commonly referred to as "work-life balance."

Gornick has spent her career examining the data she painstakingly acquires for insights on family policy, gender, work, and inequality. Over the years, those studies have led her to questions about working hours, though her colleagues sometimes have trouble understanding why. Write about wage inequality, and there's no need to justify its importance; write about time inequality, and prepare to supply a generous preface about why anyone should care.

"The thinking in the U.S. is very strange about the whole issue of working time," Gornick says. "The idea of reducing your paid work hours is viewed as totally un-American."

Hunnicuttt enjoys the fact that struggles for shorter hours have often been led by women, from the "factory girls" of 19th-century Lowell, Mass., to the working mothers of today. Gornick's studies have revealed that around the world, women tend to have less control over their working hours than men do, and are more interested in working less. She worries, however, that presenting work time as a women's issue will only marginalize it. When she speaks on panels about the working hours of women and mothers, the audience tends to be almost entirely female. Focusing on women also carries the assumption that only they should be concerned with spending more time at home and taking care of children.

"I think that framing this around women is a disaster," Gornick says. She now refuses to appear with Moms Rising, one of the country's leading advocacy groups for paid leave and flexible hours.

Her position with the Luxembourg Income Study Center means she gets to see another way of doing things firsthand. Every year she spends two months at the center's office in Luxembourg, where the analysts work 40-hour weeks but don't answer email in the evenings or during their annual four weeks of paid leave. It's behavior Gornick wouldn't tolerate from her colleagues and students in New York, for whom a night or weekend out of reach constitutes an offense to be apologized for. That is a standard, of course, that has become the norm for many American academics and the example they set for their students. "I confess I expect it," she says.

**R**obert Maynard Hutchins didn't limit himself to persuasion in trying to spread the gospel of leisure in higher education; he set out to sell it as well, door to door. As chairman of *Encyclopaedia Britannica's* editorial board during and after his time at Chicago, he saw the encyclopedia business as another means of spreading knowledge for its own sake. Perhaps an army of salespeople, armed with stacks of encyclopedias, could beat consumer culture at its own game.

For the past few years, Benjamin Hunnicutt has been trying to follow suit. When Iowa's leisure-studies program was subsumed into the department of health and human physiology, pressure grew to make the curriculum more pre-professional. He has tried to ride the winds of change by fashioning himself an advocate of the newish notion of the experience economy—"the idea," as he describes it, "of designing experiences that people would be willing to pay for." Experience entrepreneurs might tinker with the atmosphere at a chain coffee shop, or arrange for a rocket ride into low earth orbit, or propose a museum, as a student of Hunnicutt's did, at a house in Iowa where John Brown alighted before mounting his uprising against the U.S. government. Advocates of this framework see it as the next big thing for big business.

Hunnicutt now teaches a popular class on the experience economy, and he plans to write his next book on it. There is a bit of a contradiction, Hunnicutt admits, between the dream of leisure and preparing students for new business opportunities, but he believes that an experience industry might encourage a new paradigm. If better and better experiences are out there, there will be more and more demand for free time in which to enjoy them. "It's the good old-fashioned free market," he says. "I have no trouble with that. We are in the business of reawakening the American dream." He sees the experience economy as a shift that leisure-studies departments can help foster. And it may have more promise nowadays than the scrappy labor organizing that is so much a part of the history he studies.

Hunnicutt still finds a vision of well-spent leisure in higher education, even as the most liberal of arts are being sold for their vocational virtues. If the debt-filled bubble of a university system conjoined to commerce is soon to burst, perhaps that's because the dream of leisure is still inscribed in its basic design. The logic of shipping our young away to paradises of insulated exploration loses its cogency in a world where they may never have time to be explorers again. If jobs are the only goal, then buying one's skills in MOOC-sized chunks is far more efficient than old-fashioned classrooms and quads. The very idea of the university is a relic of

the dream of leisure—as well as a reminder that it still might be possible.

"We don't have to be self-concerned and greedy assholes forever," Hunnicutt bellowed in his living room. "We can do better than this!" When our interview was over and I left, he set off to help Francine, who was organizing a Scottish cultural festival later that afternoon.

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