

**“Leisured Utopia:  
Re-imagining the Role of Work and the Generation of True Culture”**

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Whatever utopia we imagine for Cultural Studies must be the same utopia we imagine for the world at large. Cultural Studies, therefore, should not only achieve its own utopia but also contribute to achieving a new universal utopia. For me, this would rest on a much more comprehensive welfare state than we may have now in Europe based, as the Spanish writer Luis Racionero suggests, on “a humanist economy, that puts the moral and intellectual development of mankind before efficiency, benefit and even growth; that takes individuals as an end in themselves.”<sup>1</sup> Capitalism is unlikely to collapse in the near future and because of that we needn’t tolerate its present condition: on one hand, the exploitation of Third World workers to the brink of starvation; on the other, the enslaving of Western or westernised workers to a purchasing power they simply don’t need. In Cultural Studies we can help achieve a new utopia by teaching people that, unlike what capitalism claims, work needn’t be the centre of life but culture could or even should.

Capitalism is today successful enough to guarantee everybody’s survival: we should force the corporations running the world economy to release their grip on the worker, though this begins by convincing the worker to demand that this grip be released. We can start by teaching people to consider leisure the real centre of life not in the basic sense of recreation but as time employed in pursuing interests that make life worth living (maybe including recreation). The success of capitalism can be gauged by the fact that most workers can’t imagine an alternative lifestyle –except that of the capitalist big spender– while the lucky minority satisfied with our work can’t just see life beyond it. Because we have weekends, holidays and a little time off every day –all introduced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to discipline English workers’ resistance to work<sup>2</sup>– we think we do have leisure and have meekly accepted that long hours are here to stay for ever. We complain that we don’t have time either because we work too hard or because work leaves us too tired to enjoy our scarce free time. Yet, as workers we conform because we are afraid of unemployment, and because our greedy materialism forces us to constantly keep up with the Joneses. As the American sociologist Juliet Schor explains,

In the choice between income and leisure, the quest for relative standing has biased us towards income. That’s because status comparisons has been mostly around commodities –cars, clothing, houses, even second houses. If Mrs. Jones works long hours, she will be able to buy the second home, the designer dresses, or the fancier

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<sup>1</sup> Racionero, Luis. *Del Paro al Ocio*. Barcelona: Anagrama, 1983: 150.

<sup>2</sup> Roberts, Kenneth. *Leisure in Contemporary Society* (1999). New York and Oxon: CABI, 2002: 35.

car. If her neighbour Mrs. Smith opts for more free time instead, her two-car garage and walk-in closet will be half empty. As long as the competition is more oriented to visible commodities, the tendency will be for both women to prefer income to time off.<sup>3</sup>

The utopia of Cultural Studies begins by breaking this vicious circle, especially because only real leisure guarantees the generation of true culture. Also, by bringing back a conception of culture as personal and communal enrichment in a non-material sense, totally unlike consumerism.

By true culture I don't mean high culture but culture generated without the expectation of material reward brought about by success in the market place. Our culture is false not because it all aims at material reward but because there is no room for anything outside the market –or only very small pockets in the streets and maybe in academia. Cultural Studies began its life as a project aimed at denouncing the equivalence between culture and high culture, rightly claiming that culture is generated by all classes. Cultural Studies legitimised certain aspects of so-called popular culture seeing them as focus of resistance against the cultural media dominated by capitalism and by its supporting institutions (patriarchy, racism, ageism), missing the fact that this was not fundamentally culture created by the people but for the people's consumption. Without falling into the pitfalls of cultural elitism, it is necessary to see that Cultural Studies has neglected as much as capitalism the workers' right to be more than a consumer of culture –the right to be a producer or generator of meaningful, true culture.

I don't mean by this that Cultural Studies is not aware of the conditions of late capitalism: indeed, it has exposed them to the world. Cultural Studies, though, has failed to see the worker as an individual in as much need of a fulfilling life as anybody else. Instead of presenting a global alternative to the current capitalist model, which forces the worker to accept this false commodity culture aimed at keeping him or her falsely satisfied with life, we have often celebrated the few creative flashes it still manages to offer without considering the whole picture. Thus, we have celebrated Bart Simpson's rebelliousness without first considering why Bart Simpson should exist at all. Or, in Imre Szeman's worlds:

The problem is... that by accepting commodity culture as culture, and by consequently affirming the spiritual dimension of this culture, cultural studies circulates in a perpetual present in which the reality of present day culture amounts to no more and no less than all that culture is and can be. The cultural past, dominated by what cultural studies considers to be the lumbering dinosaurs of bourgeois high culture, is closed off from it but so it the future, since the present of culture is taken as fate.<sup>4</sup>

It's high time we changed this fate.

Cultural Studies has tried to make the most of a desperate situation, illuminating the cultural manifestations that seemingly contradict our universal surrender to

<sup>3</sup> Schor, Juliet B. *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (1992). New York: Basic Books, 1993: 123.

<sup>4</sup> Szeman, Imre. "The Limits of Culture: The Frankfurt School and/or Cultural Studies." Caren Irr and Jeff Nealon (eds.) *Rethinking the Frankfurt School: Alternative Legacies of Cultural Critique* (SUNY Press, 2002: 59-80). <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/%7Eszeman/fs.htm>

capitalism. We have, though, generally behaved towards the dissatisfied workers of all social levels as occasional visitors that can hardly alleviate the pain of the convict serving a life sentence. We have even told the convict that the prison is not so bad – there are far worse prisons outside Western capitalism or there used to be – and have managed not to see the forest about to swallow us whole for a few trees with funny, interesting shapes. It is time to forge a new alliance with the worker of all incomes by telling them a) that commodity culture is not true culture, b) that long hours and unemployment are here to stay, hence our chronic lack of real leisure and c) that we can only resist these two painful truths by replacing the work ethic we endure with a new leisure ethic. This is what union leaders Clive Jenkins and Barrie Sherman have been preaching for almost twenty-five years<sup>5</sup> since they first announced that unemployment is not an accident in the evolution of capitalism but an intrinsic feature of its current phase that will simply not disappear.

The proposal, in short, is that we help workers become part-time gentlemen and ladies of leisure by encouraging them to force capitalism to give up a good portion of its benefits. Since this is utopian indeed, other proposals have been formulated: sharing the available work at a lower income, working even harder to be entitled to longer holiday periods, using technology to generate the income to free workers from labour. The Greeks simply used slavery, which allowed men like Aristotle the leisure to found Western culture. Aristotle, however, felt morally bound to use the privilege for productive or serious leisure in Robert A. Stebbins's denomination,<sup>6</sup> condemning mere recreation. Human nature does incline to recreation rather than effort as the history of the aristocracy shows, but the relevant issue here is how we can guarantee all workers the choice between recreation and serious leisure. What is, after all, the point of working if not guaranteeing our freedom of choice once our basic needs have been secured? As we live now, we don't even choose which commodity we want to buy, conditioned as we are by advertising; we need, therefore, to create the conditions that ensure the worker's right to choose between participating in or simply buying culture.

Different literary utopias have addressed the question of how to ensure the workers' leisure along the lines I've sketched. The utopia described by Edward Bellamy in his 1888 best-seller *Looking Backward 2000-1887* reminds us that socialism originally aspired to putting time back in the workers' hands for leisure. Bellamy's plot concerns a Boston gentleman of leisure, Julian West, who in 1887 falls into a hypnotic trance only to awaken in the year 2000, already our yesterday. As he discovers, the monopolies typical of the 1880s grew so large that finally a single corporation gathered under its wings all the companies in the United States. At that point, the Government stepped in, nationalised the corporation and became the sole employer. Bellamy's utopian socialist capitalism depends on the industrial army, and this is no metaphor. In this system workers of all descriptions are treated like soldiers and expected to work for the same motivations: duty, honour and the reward of public distinction. This smacks today of fascism, either right or left wing, but is realistic in the sense that given the same pay workers need an extra motivation to carry out the most onerous tasks. As happens, though, the actual carrot is not glory but early retirement: citizens are educated until the age of 21 and then employed until the age of 45, when they quit working. As a

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<sup>5</sup> See Clive Jenkins & Barrie Sherman, *The Collapse of Work*, London: Eyre Methuen, 1979 and *The Leisure Shock*, London: Eyre Methuen, 1981.

<sup>6</sup> Stebbins, Robert A. *Amateurs, Professionals, and Serious Leisure*. Montreal & Kingston, London, Buffalo: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992.

prominent citizen explains, "We look upon [work] as a necessary duty to be discharged before we can fully devote ourselves to the higher exercise of our faculties, the intellectual and spiritual enjoyments and pursuits which alone mean life" (148). Pity, though, that a person must wait for 45 leisure-less years before this utopian bliss is reached.

William Morris was so scandalised by Bellamy's Calvinist treatment of work as duty that he answered back with his own utopian novel, *News from Nowhere* (1890). In his review of *Looking Backward*, Morris claimed that "the true incentive to useful and happy labour is and must be pleasure in the work itself"<sup>7</sup>, a dangerous delusion which disregards the harsh realities of work in the mines, at sea, in cleaning services or at McDonald's. This is why in the most successful utopia of recent times, Iain M. Banks' series of science-fiction novels dealing with the civilisation that he simply calls the Culture –what else, indeed?– work has been totally suppressed and entrusted to the Culture's modern slaves: the computers, drones, robots and the AIs aptly nicknamed the Minds. Since technology covers all their needs, the lucky members of the Culture, defined by Banks as a communist utopia, enjoy life to the full using their free time with boundless energy and imagination. As their name indicates, they use their leisure to generate culture in the widest sense of the word, although two factors complicate their existence: the missionary impulse to convert other civilisations to their utopian hedonism, which not all welcome, and their trust in the Minds, which, as one of their enemies observes, will one day "start thinking how wasteful and inefficient the humans in the Culture themselves were."<sup>8</sup> To a great extent, the *human* minds behind the corporations running our globalised world have come to the same conclusion.

There was a time, though, in the West when Banks' utopia seemed to be around the corner. This lasted roughly for three decades bracketed, among many other cultural events, by the publication of Isaac Asimov's short story volume *I, Robot* (1950) and the film by Ridley Scott *Alien* (1979). Asimov's main concern, culminating in his novella *The Bicentennial Man* (1976), is that we may treat our future slaves, the humanoid robots, as inhuman objects. Like many other progressive science-fiction writers, he takes it for granted that mankind will free itself from labour thanks to technology, which shows that Banks is in a sense Asimov's successor. In *Alien*, though, a humanoid robot is secretly employed by a corporation to bring back to Earth a dangerous extraterrestrial creature at the expense of the human crew, working in outer space what appears to be a shift lasting for years. The film narrates how the accidental heroine, Ellen Ripley, fights not only the monster, as could be expected, but also the robot trying to eliminate her on behalf of her employer. In this dystopian view of the future, technology is the workers' enemy and the corporation absolute master of their time, life and death.

At the time when Asimov first imagined his robots, computers were being developed and workers' unions were quickly losing the power to demand further reductions in work time, a loss that began with the 1929 Depression. Both factors are the parents of our nightmarish present. Even though technology could have been used to generate the extra income needed to grant workers more leisure without reducing their paycheques, what happened was the opposite: technology came to be used both to make workers redundant and to create a surplus of attractive but superfluous commodities.

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<sup>7</sup> Morris, William. "Review of *Looking Backward*". 353-358. *News from Nowhere and Other Writings*. London: Penguin Books, 1993: 357.

<sup>8</sup> Banks, Iain M. *Consider Phlebas* (1987). London: Orbit, 1998: 35.

Aided by the threat of mass unemployment employers offered workers a Faustian pact: long work hours in exchange for higher wages, and workers signed in blood, wanting the money for the tempting goods created with the new technology. By the late 1970s the work force had become permanently divided between the unemployed and the employed working long hours, both categories in constant state of flux depending on the needs of global capitalism. Rather than enjoy their leisure, the unemployed feel depressed by the threat of poverty (mitigated by state subsidies generated by tax income on the new techno-capitalism) and by their supposed uselessness in a world dominated by competitive work ethics. The employed are kept at the treadmill by the ugly shadow of unemployment and the fear of losing their material comforts. Women, by the way, massively entered the work-force in this period, losing much more leisure than men since they must combine jobs within and outside the home. Children's own leisure time is often spent with people other than their parents with the results we all know for family life.

Pretending that culture plays a major role in this context except as mere recreation for the weary many or as market-oriented careers for the talented few is absurd. In the past, both the aristocracy and the peasants –living by the rule of the seasons as it affected agriculture and not of the factory clock– had time enough to generate true culture, whether in the form of poetry inspired by the classics or oral narrative told on winter nights. Today, we have delegated our right to be personally involved in creating culture into the hands of the professionals of leisure who pre-package for us everything from the last Booker prize to a holiday in Benidorm –and we call this life. In Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, we are told that low-caste workers are not given shorter hours because of a failed experiment in which the whole of Ireland was put on a four-hour day: "What was the result? Unrest and a large increase in the consumption of soma; that was all. Those three and a half hours of extra leisure were so far from being a source of happiness that people felt constrained to take a holiday from them."<sup>9</sup> As Cultural Studies workers, however, we have the obligation to resist the cynicism of these words and to help the other workers avoid this mental and spiritual hollowness. We need to take time back into our hands and, then, teach people how to fill it with true culture, shunning false culture, or in Huxley's vocabulary, soma. This is utopia as I see it. I only hope it's the actual future.



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<sup>9</sup> Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World* (1932). London: Longman, 1991 (2001): 183.