

David George Surdam

CENTURY OF THE LEISURED MASSES



**Entertainment and the Transformation of
Twentieth-Century America**

Preface by Ken McCormick

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PREFACE

VEBLÉN AND WEBER

Alfred Marshall wrote that “the two great forming agencies of the world’s history have been the religious and the economic.”¹ That has certainly been true for the United States. Early colonists were often seeking a place where they could freely practice their religion (though they did not always extend this privilege to people of different religions).²

The United States is still widely regarded as one of the most religious of developed countries, and with good reason. A 2006 poll found that 73 percent of Americans believe in some kind of Supreme Being, compared to 35 percent in Great Britain and 27 percent in France.³

At the same time, the United States is also regarded as the epicenter of consumerism. Despite astonishing increases in real income over the past century, Americans still seem to have an insatiable appetite for material goods. The relentless pursuit of bigger, better, and more goods is even regarded by some as the fundamental problem underlying most other problems in the US economy.⁴

How can this apparent paradox be reconciled? How can Americans show such reverence for both God and Mammon?

Max Weber offers a partial answer to this question. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber argues that intense religious ideals created the conditions for wealth accumulation. Moreover, the behaviors induced by religious fervor became social norms that persisted long after the religious doctrines that promoted them faded.

Weber argues that “people do not wish ‘by nature’ to earn more and more money. Instead, they wish simply to live, and to live as they have been accustomed.”⁵ In addition, there is a long history of viewing acquisitiveness as a

form of “moral turpitude.”⁶ So how was it that people were induced to increase production, which at the time could only come from working harder and longer?

The answer, according to Weber, can be found in Martin Luther’s idea of a “calling,” which “is a product of the Reformation.” In contrast to the “egoistic lovelessness” of monastic withdrawal from the world, “this-worldly work in a vocation appears to him [Luther] to be a visible expression of brotherly love.”⁷ As his thinking evolved, Luther increasingly emphasized “that the fulfillment of one’s duties in the world constituted, under all circumstances, the only way to please God.”⁸

For the devout, this is strong stuff. Yet Weber argues that Luther was still anchored in economic traditionalism. The spirit of capitalism itself arises only after the emergence of what Weber calls “ascetic Protestantism.” This includes Calvinists, Pietists, Methodists, Baptists, Mennonites, and Quakers. Collectively, these groups are often lumped together as “Puritans.” The details differ, but what these groups had in common was a belief in some form of predestination. This is stated quite bluntly in the Westminster Confession of 1647: “By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men are predestined unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death.”⁹

The contrast to Roman Catholicism could not be starker. The Ascetic Protestants had done away with the sacraments and other “magical means” to obtain God’s grace. It was beyond the power of humans to alter the inscrutable decisions God had made before the foundation of the world.

As there was absolutely nothing one could do to alter one’s ultimate fate, it would be natural for the devout to worry about whether they were among the saved. Ascetic Protestantism recommended the demonstration of “brotherly love” in the form of service to others for the greater glory of God. This was primarily to take the form of dedication to one’s calling. In Weber’s words, “*Work without rest in a vocational calling* was recommended as the best possible means to *acquire* the self-confidence that one belonged among the elect. Work, and work alone, banishes religious doubt and gives certainty of one’s status among the saved.”¹⁰ The believer could take comfort if (s)he were convinced that (s)he was an agent of God. But this is not as simple as it might appear. One must set aside all personal desires, and work only for the glory of God. Leisure must be banished, because it is time devoted to one’s self at the expense of service to God. The Christian life requires “systematic self-control” in “every moment.”¹¹ The “ascetic” in “ascetic Protestantism” should now make sense. As the German mystic Sebastian Franck put it, “now *every* Christian must be a monk for an entire lifetime.”¹²

Wasting time became an extremely serious sin. “An unwillingness to work is a sign that one is not among the saved.”¹³ Pause for a moment and reflect. If

you are devout, it would be absolutely unbearable to believe that you are not among the saved. It would be crushing. Consequently, any temptation to neglect one's work had to be resisted. Relentlessly hard work would be necessary for one's own sanity.

But there is more. As one's work is meant to be of service to the community, its value is affected by its usefulness to the community. Working hard to make something nobody wants is a sinful waste of time. Profitability therefore becomes a practical measure of how useful one's efforts are. Thus people are encouraged to pursue profit opportunities when they arise. Baxter, whose *Christian Dictionary* (1673) is said by Weber to be "the most comprehensive compendium of Puritan moral theology,"¹⁴ puts it like this: "If God show [*sic*] you a way in which you *may*, in accordance with His laws, *acquire more profit* than in another way, without wrong to your soul or to any other, and if you refuse this, choosing the less profitable course, *you then cross one of the purposes of your calling. You are refusing to be God's steward*, and to accept His gifts, in order to be able to use them for Him when He requireth it. *You may labour, for God, to become rich*, though not for the flesh and sin."¹⁵

Working hard at an occupation valued by the community and seeking profit are naturally going to lead to wealth accumulation. But it must only be done for the glory of God. One is never to work to acquire wealth for its own sake. The enjoyment of the fruits of one's labor undermines one's dedication to God. If wealth is sought for its own sake, it is sinful. But wealth acquired in diligent service to God is evidence of God's favor. Weber puts it this way: "Hence wealth is only suspect when it tempts the devout in the direction of lazy restfulness and a sinful enjoyment of life. The striving for riches becomes suspect only if carried out with the end in mind of leading a carefree and merry life once wealth is acquired. If, however, riches are attained within the dutiful performance of one's vocational calling, striving for them is not only morally permitted but expected."¹⁶ Wealth legitimately acquired by hard work is therefore a sign of the elect. As it could not be enjoyed, it was saved. The natural result was the accumulation of still more wealth. Those who sought to please God and so followed the tenets of their religion became rich.

In this fashion, the spirit of capitalism emerged. Wealth was no longer evidence of sin. On the contrary, if it was legitimately acquired, it was a sign that the owner was among the elect. "Now, with Puritanism, every residual of the medieval proverb *deo placere vix potest* [the merchant cannot be pleasing to God] has disappeared."¹⁷

Theologians of the time were acutely aware of an obvious danger. It might simply be beyond the power of most people to live simply when they possessed significant wealth. At the individual level, it might just be a sign that the individual is not a member of the elect. But the theologians worried about the

detrimental effect that extravagant living might have on the community as a whole. John Wesley wrote that

I fear, wherever riches have increased, the essence of religion has decreased in the same proportion. Therefore I do not see how it is possible, in the nature of things, for any revival of true religion to continue long. For religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality, and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, anger, and love of the world in all its branches. . . . So, although the form of religion remains, the spirit is swiftly vanishing away. Is there no way to prevent this continual decay of pure religion? We ought not to prevent people from being diligent and frugal; we must exhort Christians to gain all they can, and to save all they can; that is, in effect, to grow rich.¹⁸

Wesley's observation captures the essence of the problem. Devout, religiously motivated behavior generates ever-increasing wealth; increasing wealth makes it ever harder to keep one's focus on God. Wesley therefore advises those who grow rich to give much of their wealth away.

In time, religion evolved and Puritan beliefs began to soften. Wesley himself, while endorsing much of Calvinism, fiercely opposed the doctrine of predestination.¹⁹ But even though religious beliefs changed, the behaviors that Puritanism had required had by that time become social norms.

These norms put down strong roots in the United States. Weber begins Chapter 2 of his book with a long list of quotations from Ben Franklin, including the deathless phrase, "time is money." Franklin exhorts us to work hard, to not waste time, and to be frugal. In other words, he offers us the secret to honestly acquired material success. But in Franklin's hands, appeals to religious duty are entirely absent. His advice is simply to do what wise, responsible people do.

In a nutshell, that is the point of Weber's argument. The Protestant Reformation not only overturned the medieval idea that wealth accumulation was inherently sinful, but it also made wealth a sign of upright behavior. Even after the original religious doctrines changed, the idea that hard work and frugality were the route to success remained.

A corollary pertains directly to this book. Even in the doctrine's secular form, as presented by Franklin, leisure remains somewhat disreputable. Because time is money, one should not waste it. Consequently, the enjoyment of leisure is often tempered with guilt. People certainly take time for leisure, but they also fret about lost time. Although it is impossible to precisely measure the extent to which this is still true, a Google search of the phrase "guilt about wasting time" returned 689,000 hits. The Puritan ethic still haunts us.

John Wesley worried that wealth might lead to extravagant displays. Thorstein Veblen, on the other hand, saw such displays as inevitable. To understand why, we must understand Veblen's ideas about human behavior.

In Veblen's view, the motives for human action come from instinctive proclivities that are the product of human evolution. Because humans live in groups, the survival of the group is important for individual survival. Consequently, both group-regarding and self-regarding instincts developed. Humans use reason to meet the objectives set by our instincts. As Veblen put it, "Men make thought, but the human spirit, that is to say the racial endowment of instinctive proclivities, decides what they take thought of, and how and to what effect."²⁰

How the instincts manifest depends on social institutions. Consequently, in different historical eras, the methods by which people seek to achieve their underlying objectives change. One should keep in mind that humans are complex beings, and our instincts can conflict with one another. A bit of introspection should convince the reader that individuals sometimes have conflicting aims.

One important group-regarding instinct is the instinct of workmanship. Veblen defines it as "a taste for effective work, and a distaste for futile effort."²¹ People enjoy being productive, and take satisfaction from a job well done. The instinct of workmanship contributes to the survival of the group as well as the individual. It is deeply ingrained, so it is no surprise that people feel guilty about wasting time.

Emulation is another powerful force shaping human behavior. It is necessary for our survival because it is how we learn. Veblen went so far as to say that "with the exception of the instinct of self-preservation, the propensity for emulation is probably the strongest and most alert and persistent of the economic motives proper."²² Because we want to emulate the "best," we acquire the habit of ranking people from better to worse. In other words, we become status-conscious. In some cases, this is quite useful to the group, as, for example, when we emulate the most efficient workers.

Unfortunately, there is also a sinister side to emulation. That is because human behavior is also affected by self-regarding instincts, such as our desire for self-aggrandizement and our predatory instinct. We want to have high status; from an evolutionary perspective, high status enhances our chance of survival. One way to acquire status is to dominate others. Veblen argues that as soon as technology evolved to the point where an economic surplus emerged, the predatory instinct led to warfare. Captives, often women, were made to work for their captor. In this fashion, productive work came to be associated with low-status slaves.

People emulate those with high status. The best warriors had high status; they also did not work because of the slaves they had taken in battle. In other

words, those with high status had leisure time; those with low status did not. Leisure provided evidence of status and consequently became honorable itself.

Warfare, however, was not the only route to status. Shamans, priests, and the like held high status because of their close connection to divine power. They were also able to force others to work for them under threat of divine sanction. Like the elite warriors, the priestly class exhibited the connection between high status and leisure. As Veblen writes, “no employment and no acquisition is morally possible to the self-respecting man at this cultural stage, except such as proceeds on the basis of prowess—force or fraud.”²³ Leisure was a sign of status, and productive labor was something to avoid if possible. The only way to avoid useful labor was to force others to work for you. Force (warfare) and fraud (religion) therefore provided the foundation for the leisure class.

Over the centuries, economies and societies have evolved considerably. Productive labor has lost some of the disapprobation associated with it. This may, in part, be due to the Protestant ethic, supported by the instinct of workmanship. It may also be due to its acceptance as a legitimate route to obtaining wealth, which is the modern mark of high status. According to Veblen, blatantly predatory activities are still the “best” way to acquire wealth, but “so long as work is of a visibly pecuniary kind and is sagaciously and visibly directed to the acquisition of wealth, the disrepute intrinsically attaching to it is greatly offset by its meritorious purpose.”²⁴ Nevertheless, there is a clear status hierarchy of employments: “Those which have to do immediately with ownership on a large scale are the most reputable of economic employments proper. Next to these in good repute come those employments that are immediately subservient to ownership and financiering,—such as banking and the law. . . . Mercantile pursuits are only half-way reputable, unless they involve a large element of ownership and a small element of usefulness. . . . Manual labour, or even the work of directing mechanical processes, is of course on a precarious footing as regards respectability.”²⁵

In the distant past, people often lived in small groups, and everyone knew most everyone else. Consequently, one’s status was common knowledge. In the modern world, however, most people live in urban areas where we are typically anonymous. As just mentioned, wealth is the modern status symbol. But the question arises as to how a wealthy person can gain the recognition he or she “deserves” in such an anonymous setting. After all, “in order to gain and to hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence.”²⁶

Veblen argues that people display wealth through “conspicuous leisure” and “conspicuous consumption.” Conspicuous leisure requires one to provide evidence of “non-productive consumption of time.”²⁷ One way to do so is to

wear delicate or cumbersome clothing that makes it obvious that one is not engaged in productive work. One can also be seen recreating in expensive spas, restaurants, clubs, and luxury boxes at sporting events. Of course much of the time one is not in the public eye, so one must also prove that one is not using that time productively. Knowledge of fine wines and cigars, dog breeding, sports, the fine points of etiquette, dead languages, and grammar all serve the purpose.

Conspicuous consumption requires purchases of expensive goods such as big houses, fast cars, jewelry, and costly clothing. It also provides an opportunity to display conspicuous leisure; one must know which goods to buy. In other words, one must spend time learning to become a connoisseur. Buying one Ferrari is better in this sense than buying many Chevrolets.

The behavior of the leisure class sets the standards of what is considered proper behavior. The rest of us simply try to live up to that standard to the extent we are able. As Veblen put it, "The leisure class stands at the head of the social structure in point of reputability; and its manner of life and its standards of worth therefore afford the norm of reputability for the community. The observance of these standards, in some degree of approximation, becomes incumbent upon all classes lower in the scale. . . . On pain of forfeiting their good name and their self-respect in case of failure, they must conform to the accepted code, at least in appearance."²⁸

In practice, people attempt to emulate the class just above them. There is a continual striving to exceed one's peers. It must be stressed that for most people the driving force is simply a wish to "avoid unfavorable notice." In other words, we just want to fit in and not stand out in a negative way. We want, at a minimum, to maintain our status; it is even better if we can augment it. This desire to conform to social expectations is quite powerful. In Veblen's words, "No class of society, not even the most abjectly poor, foregoes all customary conspicuous consumption. The last items of this category of consumption are not given up except under the stress of the direst necessity. Very much of squalor and discomfort will be endured before the last trinket or the last pretence of pecuniary decency is put away."²⁹ As a consequence, as one's peers acquire more goods and engage in more leisure, one is driven to do the same. Keeping up with the Joneses is a never-ending struggle in a growing economy.

As is well known, Veblen was a relentless critic of the modern business system. The reasons for this are beyond the scope of this essay, but it is important to note that his reasoning has nothing to do with the notion that the system has harmed the poor. Veblen is well aware that the modern economy has benefited the lower classes not only in absolute terms, but also in relative terms:

The modern industrial system is based on the institution of private property under free competition, and it cannot be claimed that these institutions have heretofore worked to the detriment of the material interests of the average member of society . . . the system of industrial competition, based on private property, has brought about, or at least co-existed with, the most rapid advance in average wealth and industrial efficiency that the world has ever seen. Especially can it fairly be claimed that the result of the last few decades of our industrial development has been to increase greatly the creature comforts of the average human being. And, decidedly, the result has been an amelioration of the lot of the less favored in a relatively greater degree than that of those economically more fortunate. The claim that the system of competition has proved itself an engine for making the rich richer and the poor poorer has the fascination of epigram; but if its meaning is that the lot of the average, of the masses of humanity in civilised life, is worse today, as measured in the means of livelihood, than it was twenty, or fifty, or a hundred years ago, then it is farcical.³⁰

The trend that Veblen observed continued throughout the twentieth century. As a result, both the material standard of living and the amount of leisure time available to average Americans grew. Yet Veblen did not believe that the rising wealth would end the competition for status. No matter how rich one becomes, status depends on how rich one's peers are. In other words, "no general increase of the community's wealth can make any approach to satiating this need, the ground of which is the desire of every one to excel every one else in the accumulation of goods."³¹

The book that follows details the democratization of leisure in the United States. Over the course of the century, the lives of average Americans improved enormously and in ways that had been unimaginable. Professor Surdam describes both the theory and practice of this remarkable phenomenon, unprecedented in human history. Ordinary people at long last have the freedom to allocate a significant amount of time however they please. In Alfred Marshall's prophetic words, "Now at last we are setting ourselves seriously to inquire whether it is necessary that there should be any so-called 'lower classes' at all: that is, whether there need be large numbers of people doomed at birth to hard work in order to provide for others the requisites of a refined and cultured life; while they themselves are prevented by their poverty and toil from having any share or part in that life."³²

Ken McCormick, Professor of Economics, University of Northern Iowa

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I dedicate this book to my sister, Sue Surdam-Bean. We spent much leisure time together growing up as children in Pleasant Hill, Oregon.

Introduction

Why Leisure?

The rise of leisure in America during the twentieth century has been largely unheralded. We hear much about the expansion of government spending and the explosion of healthcare expenditures, but few have commented on how the dramatic increase in leisure time and activities has remade our society.

The rise of leisure has been pervasive across the century, whether in terms of expenditures on leisure activities or in the amount of time devoted to leisure. A century ago, iconoclastic economist Thorstein Veblen penned his famous *Theory of the Leisure Class*, a book destined to be much quoted but not always carefully read. The idea that the masses would enjoy large amounts of leisure and expenditures on leisure might have seemed fantastical to Veblen's contemporaries a century ago.

Certainly leisure has been an egalitarian triumph, as one can rub shoulders with the hoi polloi on cruise ships and jetliners, at ballet and opera performances, and at posh spas. Indeed, the truly well-heeled may feel put out, as heretofore exclusive venues have become overrun with the plebian masses.

Why study leisure? Discussions of quality of life are skewed, if increases or occasional decreases in the amount and the quality of leisure are not considered. Gross national product (GNP) only measures goods and services. Gains in leisure also affect the relative quality of life between the poor and rich. The rich continue to have access to higher-quality—or at least more expensive forms of—leisure, but the working classes are likely to have received a greater absolute increase in leisure time and relative increase in consumption than rich Americans during the twentieth century.

An Overview of the American Economy

By 1900, Americans, as did their peers in Great Britain and parts of Europe, had enjoyed economic growth for most of the previous century. There were, to be

sure, sometimes violent fluctuations in the economy during the nineteenth century, but most native-born Americans enjoyed a higher standard of living in 1900 than had their ancestors in 1800. Life in 1900 would have been very shocking to a Rip Van Winkle asleep since 1800: railroads, telegraphs, huge factories, and immensely crowded cities.

During the twentieth century, the country's real, per capita GNP skyrocketed (Tables 1.1 and 1.2).¹ Aside from some recessions and the Great Depression, the trend was upward. You will note that across your parents' and your lifetimes, the real GNP per person increased at a hefty 2 percent or greater per annum rate. Even if the per capita growth rate fell to 1.5 percent per annum, 48 years from now, per capita GNP would still double.

A quick explanation for the increased per capita GNP is that American workers are far more productive than they were 100 years ago. Average labor productivity, which is loosely correlated to real wages, rose during the twentieth century (Table 1.3).² Over the course of the twentieth century, the average worker produced several times as much as (s)he did in 1900, although productivity growth seems to have decelerated during the last quarter century, for reasons that are still being debated. From an international standpoint, the United States experience is not unique, although relatively few people have experienced such sustained increases in per capita output.

We need to be careful when considering per capita GNP. Per capita GNP is only one indicator of living standards. There are important limitations of GNP.

Table 1.1 Gross National Product Per Capita, 1900–1970^a

| | <i>Using Current Prices</i> | <i>Using 1958 Prices</i> |
|------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1970 | \$4,808 | \$3,555 |
| 1960 | \$2,788 | \$2,699 |
| 1950 | \$1,877 | \$2,342 |
| 1945 | \$1,515 | \$2,538 |
| 1940 | \$754 | \$1,720 |
| 1935 | \$567 | \$1,331 |
| 1930 | \$734 | \$1,490 |
| 1920 | \$860 | \$1,315 |
| 1910 | \$382 | \$1,299 |
| 1900 | \$246 | \$1,011 |

^a US Department of Commerce, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Part 1*, 224.

Table 1.2 Per Capita Gross National Product, 1960–2000^a

| | Gross National Product | Gross National Product |
|------|------------------------|------------------------|
| | Current Dollars | Chained (2000) Dollars |
| 2000 | \$34,907 | \$34,907 |
| 1990 | \$23,335 | \$28,600 |
| 1980 | \$12,400 | \$22,956 |
| 1970 | \$5,095 | \$16,520 |
| 1960 | \$2,929 | \$13,938 |

^a US Department of Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States*: 2008, 437.

Table 1.3 Manufacturing Production Workers Output, Earnings, and Hours, 1900–1969^a

| | Index | All Manufacturing | | |
|------|---------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|--------------|
| | Manufacturing | Average Hourly Earnings | | |
| | Per Man-Hour ¹ | Nominal | Real ² | Weekly Hours |
| 1969 | 145.7 | \$3.19 | \$2.52 | 40.6 |
| 1960 | 108.8 | \$2.26 | \$2.21 | 39.7 |
| 1950 | 81.4 | \$1.44 | \$1.73 | 40.5 |
| 1940 | 68.7 | \$0.66 | \$1.36 | 38.1 |
| 1930 | 52.3 | \$0.55 | \$0.95 | 42.1 |
| 1920 | 32.0 | \$0.55 | \$0.79 | 47.4 |
| 1910 | 26.6 | \$0.19 ³ | \$0.61 ³ | 51.0 |
| 1900 | 22.9 | n.a. | | |

n.a.: not available.

¹ 1958 = 0.

² Deflated by Consumer Price Index “All Items,” with 1958 = 100.

³ 1909 figure.

^a US Department of Commerce, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Part 1*, 162, 169, and 210–211.

Many goods are not sold in the marketplace and do not have explicit prices. When you vacuum your apartment, there is no market transaction, so your actions do not affect GNP. If, instead, you pay someone to come in and vacuum, there would be a market transaction. The amount you paid the person to vacuum your apartment would count in GNP. With the massive switch of women from household production to market production, per capita GNP may overstate the increase in material well-being. Instead of family members singing or telling

stories, which does not count in GNP, a family that purchased a phonograph and some discs would suddenly contribute to GNP. Expenditures on leisure activities, therefore, may overstate changes in leisure.

Many goods are sold that are not covered by GNP. An illicit drug deal is a market transaction, but the deal, by its nature, rarely appears in the government's GNP statistics that cover goods and services sold in a legal marketplace. For the purpose of studying leisure, illicit drugs and sex may be considered to count as leisure-time activities and therefore result in an underestimate of expenditures on leisure. On a more benign level, the doctor who visits and diagnoses her neighbor's child for a nominal fee or in exchange for services, and who does not report the transaction in her taxable income, is engaging in the underground economy—economic activities that are not reported to the government record keepers. In some countries, such as the former Soviet Union, the underground economy may have been very significant; in the United States, it is probably non-trivial, but not as significant as in the former Soviet Union. Obviously, we have scant information on the sizes of the illicit and underground economies, although there are ways to make informed guesses—the amount of large denominations, particularly of \$100 bills, of American currency in circulation is one clue.³

Government-provided services are included in GNP. These services, however, are not transacted in a freely operating market. Therefore, the services do not have an explicit market price. We may not know how much people value national defense, education, safety officials, or visits to national parks.

Government statisticians attempt to adjust GNP for new products and improvements in existing products, but the process is difficult. In 1980, a videocassette recorder (VCR) cost \$800 or more; it had nowhere near the recording quality or set of features of a VCR costing \$250 in 2000. Yet, each VCR sold in 2000 added less to GNP than in the past. Of course, if we go back to 1960, there were no VCRs. You can make similar arguments for microwaves, cellular phones, desktop computers, arthroscopic surgery, and myriad other goods. The statisticians have difficulty reflecting improvements in the quality of products and services in their GNP figures. Although Americans wring their hands about the current state of public education, in many ways education has improved. No longer are 40 or 50 students jammed into a classroom to learn their letters and figures by rote.⁴

GNP does not incorporate changes in the amount of leisure time taken, which will be a key argument in this book. Americans work fewer hours per year (roughly half as much as in 1870). Many of today's youths will not start full-time, market work until their early to mid-twenties, and many of the males will aspire to retire in their mid-fifties.⁵ Today's grandparents may expect 15 years of retirement on average. Americans also work fewer hours at home on chores per year and across their lifetimes (although the lifetime

number of hours has not fallen as rapidly, given the greater longevity). We should adjust GNP to reflect the increasing amounts of leisure time taken. Americans could have chosen to work similar, if not more, hours in response to the greater hourly wages resulting from their greater productivity, but for many years they wanted shorter workweeks.

There has also been a shift in the type of work that people do. Extractive industries, such as mining, logging, and fishing, can be both arduous and dangerous. In addition, extractive industries can despoil the scenery. A shift away from these jobs may, for a given level of GNP, indicate better working conditions for American workers.

The distribution of GNP is another important aspect. A rising output level may not mean much, if the poorest segments of society do not share in the general prosperity. In terms of leisure time and spending on leisure goods and services, the gains have been widespread. Across the twentieth century, Americans of all income classes have enjoyed better living standards.

The last statement may seem dubious, given the spate of hand-wringing articles in the 1990s and more recently that bemoan supposedly falling living standards and widening disparities in incomes. A *Wall Street Journal* poll in 1996 revealed that 52 percent of Americans didn't expect their children's generation to enjoy a higher standard of living than they—the parents—did, while 41 percent expected their children to be better off. Surprisingly, perhaps, black Americans were more optimistic: 55 percent thought their children would be better off.⁶ Even a glance at consumption from the 1950s and 1970s, compared with the 1990s, reveals this to be silly.

Rising real, per capita incomes strongly suggest improved living standards. What are we buying with our greater incomes? The proportion of our budgets going to food shrank rapidly, leaving us with more discretionary spending on recreation, health, education, and other items. This was to be expected, based on similar experiences in Great Britain and other countries enjoying rising incomes.⁷

Mass entertainment became ubiquitous as the twentieth century waned. Radios and televisions proved immensely popular, and the rate of diffusion of televisions was astounding (from 0.002 percent of households in 1946 to 87 percent in 1960). The contrast of families watching a wide variety of programming in 2000 with settlers on the prairies in 1870 trying to amuse themselves throughout a long winter's night is stark.

Americans often got these amenities earlier than people elsewhere in the world. The other wealthy nations in 1960 badly lagged behind Americans in acquiring hot running water, refrigeration, and automobiles. The prevalence of home-produced clothing may account for the wider ownership of sewing machines in Europe. Having a greater percentages of homes with wood or coal stoves also indicated European delay in affording electric or gas stoves.

What We Will Examine in This Book

Leisure in America is a multifaceted topic. Even such a basic question as the definition of leisure is complex and dates back to the Greeks. How to measure leisure time and quantify leisure activities, such as spending on recreational or leisure goods and services, will be discussed in the next chapter. The measurement of leisure time will involve a residual approach.

Politicians, clergy, social reformers, and law enforcement officials love to monitor and dictate how people should use their leisure. For some commentators, greater amounts of discretionary time were not necessarily a good thing. The bromide “idle time is the devil’s workshop” appears to have been accepted by many. The twentieth century was a continuous parade of outrages, to take one perspective. From an early kiss on the motion picture screen and ragtime music at the beginning of the century to raunchy sex scenes in mainstream movies and gangsta rap in the late twentieth century, some Americans have perceived and lamented a downward trajectory in morals. At the end of the twentieth century, by their reckoning, presumably we should be in a moral morass outstripping the decadent extremes of Babylon or the declining Roman Empire (too bad those civilizations didn’t have electronic media).

How did Americans wind up with greater amounts of leisure time? What are the economic principles underlying people’s decisions between taking leisure and working? How did economic growth affect these decisions?

A variety of government surveys and sources indicate that the vast majority of Americans enjoyed shorter working hours in 2000 than in 1900. How and why weekly hours and lifetime hours worked fell during the century resulted from several factors. Concurrent with the diminution in working hours, Americans began spending significant proportions of their incomes on leisure activities and services. Spending on recreation, amusement, and pleasure travel rose throughout the century, and new patterns of leisure activities arose.

Americans gained more discretionary hours throughout their lifetimes, in part because of their increasing longevity. Their increased longevity and improved healthiness allowed them to enjoy active forms of leisure for most of their lives.

Even while they are working, though, many Americans enjoy more leisure at work in 2000 than they did in 1900. Working conditions in general have improved. The workplace was a highly disciplined place in 1900, and the rules were, by modern standards, draconian. Working conditions were often dangerous, dreary, and dirty, but these aspects have diminished over the century.

For one group of Americans, the burgeoning leisure society may have seemed chimeric. Women increasingly performed work both at home and in the labor market. Some authors believe that women failed to share in the leisure boom,

although they concede that the nature of women's work changed dramatically across the century and entailed much less arduous toil and drudgery. What happened to women's hours of toil versus their hours of leisure?

How people used their leisure hours changed dramatically. The rise of commercialized leisure pleased most Americans, if their spending habits are an accurate reflection. Some observers, though, were lukewarm, if not downright hostile, to commercialized leisure. Commercialized leisure and leisure produced within the home were intertwined with the invention of automobiles and electricity; an improved infrastructure of freeways and airlines also altered leisure patterns. Although the automobile and airlines have drawbacks, they have revolutionized Americans' lifestyles.

Government, whether federal, state, or local, also became a major player in American leisure. Labor laws and government-provided recreational facilities were only the most obvious interventions, but government antitrust, patent, and other laws also affected leisure throughout the twentieth century. Mass entertainment became ubiquitous, but such industries were often dominated by a handful of producers, triggering antitrust concerns.

These factors are the general topics that are covered in this book.

Definitions of Leisure

Before I can assert that the twentieth century witnessed an expansion of leisure in America, I need to be precise in defining what is meant by “leisure.” The definition is crucial, because it interacts with several other ideas.

If “work” includes both labor-market and household production, then leisure is a general term for non-work, usually enjoyable, activities chosen by the individual. This usage is likely to roughly coincide with most twentieth-century Americans’ understanding of leisure, and this book will often use the term in this sense. Leisure is, in economic parlance, assumed to be a “good,” in the sense that more leisure is preferred to less leisure. Of course, for the unemployed and for the forcibly retired, more spare time may not be preferred to less spare time, and we might hesitate to label their spare time as leisure. There is another aspect to leisure: people usually choose to increase the time spent in leisure activities as their incomes increase; in economic parlance, leisure is considered a “normal good.”

Yet in order to establish that Americans enjoyed more time for leisure and had the ability to spend more on goods and services related to leisure activities, more rigorous definitions are needed. This book will use a residual approach as a definition of “leisure time” for measurement purposes. Economists sometimes measure leisure time in terms of time remaining after labor-market work and basic bodily maintenance (such as sleep, eating, and hygiene). Individuals choose how many hours to work (and to sleep), both on a daily basis and across their lifetime. The hours left over after work in the market and basic bodily maintenance constitute a *supply* of potential leisure hours. This measure of leisure time as the time remaining after subtracting hours for personal bodily maintenance and work for pay from total hours is useful, as there is much available evidence as to workers’ labor-market hours. This simple measurement of the supply of potential leisure hours, of course, has drawbacks. Most people would not consider the time spent commuting to work or performing household chores as leisure time. Time devoted to child care may or may not be considered leisure time. Changing diapers and feeding babies

would likely fall outside a definition of leisure, while pushing a child on a swing set might be leisure for some people.

We then examine what people do with the time remaining after labor-market work and bodily maintenance. The time remaining interacts with the demand for leisure and the demand for other time-consuming activities; people make choices in allocating time to commuting, household chores, child care, and leisure. We could also consider time spent doing volunteer work.

For example, consider two workers working in adjacent cubicles in a downtown office. When the clock strikes five, they head out the office doors. One worker may live in the neighborhood and has a short walk home, where he or she lives in an apartment and has myriad urban leisure options. The other worker chooses to live in the suburbs in a house with a yard. This worker has a 30-minute commute in each direction, thereby spending an hour on the road. In addition, the second worker may have more household chores, including mowing the lawn and cleaning a larger domicile. The suburban worker's leisure options differ from those of the downtown resident; there are plenty of backyard leisure options, as well as a shopping mall. Both workers decide whether to do household cleaning themselves or to hire these chores out to a cleaning service. The remaining time after household chores and commuting has elements of pleasure and discretion and may be considered closer to the concept of leisure held by most people.

The important thing to note is that, after choosing how many hours to devote to labor-market work and to basic bodily maintenance, individuals *choose* to apportion their remaining time between commuting to work, household chores, child care, and leisure. In terms of measurement, whatever time remains after subtracting hours for the activities described above comprises leisure time. It is useful to realize that in the process of apportioning time between the various endeavors, individuals are simultaneously *choosing* how much time to take as leisure. Their choice could be described as reflecting their *demand* for leisure.

We can make a similar argument for spending on goods and services related to leisure activities ("leisure consumption"). An amateur baseball player, for instance, could choose to use time and materials to make a crude baseball or to whittle a tree branch into a rudimentary bat. The player could opt, instead, to purchase a bat and a ball for use in his or her ball-playing activities. The purchase of the bat and the ball would, of course, appear in the government statistics, while the homemade ball and bat would not. As many people had sufficient discretionary income to afford choosing between making or purchasing their baseball equipment, an observer could presume that a player who chose manufactured equipment preferred spending money on manufactured equipment instead of spending time and effort in making his or her own equipment. The

government compiles statistics on consumption expenditures on leisure or recreational goods and services. There is difficulty, at times, in ascertaining whether goods and services are or are not for leisure purposes.

The definition and measurement of leisure as a residual of time left after work, basic bodily maintenance, commuting time, household chores, and some aspects of child care is not universally held. Certainly there are gray areas in defining leisure. Leisure may be in the eye of the participant. The author enjoys reading academic press books for both work and leisure, but many people might not consider such an activity leisure. What have philosophers and other thinkers written regarding leisure?

Ancient Ideas about Leisure

Although we associate the birth of democracy with the Greeks, sometimes venerated as the “Ancient Greeks,” in reality, their society was divided into free men and slaves (ignoring women for the time being). The famed Greek thinkers reflected upon the nature of man and of leisure. To them—and their view provides a boundary for a definition of leisure—leisure involved contemplation. I’m certainly no foe of contemplation, but the Greek standard undoubtedly precluded leisure for the masses. As Sebastian de Grazia points out, “if the many work, a few have leisure.”¹ Along this line of thinking, Plato suggested that “the state provide the necessities for a class of philosophers.”²

Aristotle considered leisure as freedom from the necessity of labor. Holding an occupation, even being self-employed, was not leisure. Nor should one confuse amusement and recreation as leisure in Aristotle’s framework. Amusement and recreation are necessarily coupled with labor; one literally needed to re-create in order to continue working, while “to exert oneself and work for the sake of amusement seems silly and utterly childish.”³ Although Aristotle’s conception of leisure seems narrow, there were compensating benefits attached to it. “Leisure is a state of being in which activity is performed for its own sake or as its own end. . . . Happiness can appear only in leisure. The capacity to use leisure rightly, he [Aristotle] repeats, is the basis of the free man’s whole life.”⁴

Ultimately, de Grazia recognizes a paradox. The twentieth century afforded the masses plenty of free time, but “[a]nybody can have free time. Not everybody can have leisure. Free time is a realizable idea of democracy. Leisure is not fully realizable, and hence an ideal. . . . Leisure refers to a state of being, a condition of man, which few desire and fewer achieve.”⁵ In a similar vein, Joffre Dumasiedier wrote, “I prefer to reserve the word leisure for the time whose content is oriented towards self-fulfilment [*sic*] as an ultimate end.”⁶

A Partition of the Daily Hours

The demarcation between leisure and other activities could be vague. Puritans may have considered church attendance and serious reading of the Bible as worthy leisure, while other people attended church out of a sense of obligation. De Grazia's solution was to divide the day into four categories: work, work-related time, free time, and subsistence time.⁷ The latter relates to basic bodily maintenance, such as sleep, eating, and hygiene.

The limitations of defining leisure as a residual become clear under de Grazia's "work-related" time: 24 hours a day minus 8 hours for basic bodily maintenance minus hours worked = hours of leisure. Many modern Americans spend an hour or two commuting to and from work; others frequently fly for business. In the latter case especially, one can read, listen to music, surf the Internet, or watch television, but de Grazia points out that you are not completely at liberty to do as you choose. In addition, other leisure-like activities, such as a round of golf or dinner and cocktails with business colleagues or clients, straddle the line between work and leisure.⁸

There is another drawback to using de Grazia's formula, as work is defined as work for pay and not domestic housekeeping or volunteer work. Economists usually examine work in terms of participating in the labor force. Labor involved in household production, while gaining more attention from economists in recent decades, has often received short shrift. Economists, though, recognize the contradiction in this definition of work as only work that is done in exchange for money. This narrow concept of work may neglect much of women's efforts; as historian Susan Currell points out, women's domestic work is undervalued and leads to inequality between men and women: "Rather than a greater equality in the dignity of all labor, as envisioned by some in the thirties, workers who service leisure are very often among the lowest classes economically and socially of all workers."⁹

Patients in hospitals or in jails or prisons may have free time, but they are severely limited in their choices. Other people with a plethora of free time choices may feel compelled to limit their choices to drinking, overeating, drug usage, and risk-taking. One can debate whether their activity is leisure.

During the 1930s, plenty of Americans involuntarily had fewer hours of work. Classifying their idle time as "free time" or "leisure" almost seems to mock their predicament. Their "free time" may be marked by anxiety and a financial inability to partake in many leisure activities.¹⁰ Songwriter Ralph McTell poignantly expressed the pain of unemployment in his song, "Stranger to the Seasons," where the unemployed were out of sync with the seasons.¹¹

The association of "free" with "time" is problematic. De Grazia noted, "'Free time' neglects the domination of work that may take over other values that jobs may offer. Leisure is being free of everyday necessity and leisure activities should

be taken for their own sake. By this reasoning, leisure is rarely attained in the modern world.”¹² For those Americans who are or were involuntarily unemployed, there was an imbalance of sorts between their supply of potential leisure time and the uses of such time for pleasurable leisure. De Grazia believes that concurrent with work’s elevation as a good thing was the idea that, “[leisure] was now a matter of time free of work, time off the job. The quest for leisure had been transformed into the drive for free time.” His criticism strikes a blow: “Being considered the opposite of work, and work being now calculated by time, leisure too must be figured the same way.”¹³ With apologies to de Grazia, we will follow this approach and will measure leisure, as best we can.

There is another problem; Max Kaplan asks: How can we quantify time in statistical units comparable to *things*? He believes that the shift to shorter hours was accompanied by an increase in the tempo of work that would not have been sustainable in a 55-hour work week such as existed in 1910. Therefore, shorter hours caused and were as well a result of increased labor productivity. “If . . . our work gives us some creative satisfactions and outlets and our leisure hours are merely boring and unsatisfying, then there is little point to interpreting shorter hours of work as ‘good’ or as ‘progress.’” He also asks whether greater amounts of consumption necessarily imply a better state, especially when much of this consumption has been “the result of the creation of needs by advertising?”¹⁴

For Kaplan, leisure contains several elements: it is antithetical to work as an economic function; it creates pleasant expectations and recollections; it requires minimal involuntary social-role obligations; it involves a psychological perception of free; it relates to a culture’s value; it can be inconsequential or it can be important; and it is often characterized by play. Therefore leisure is rarely a matter of free choice and is often dictated by income, so a clear-cut definition of leisure is difficult.¹⁵

Closely related to leisure, but distinct, is the idea of play. Johan Huizinga, in his *Homo Ludens*, suggested that “Man the Player” should be considered an important figure in the world’s life and activities. Play shares an attribute that some observers attach to leisure: voluntary activity. Huizinga points out, “By this quality of freedom alone, play marks itself off from the course of the natural process.” Play is also disinterested: “Not being ‘ordinary’ life it stands outside of the immediate satisfaction of wants and appetites, indeed it interrupts the appetitive process,” it is an interlude.¹⁶

Huizinga’s characterization of play is not too far afield from the Greeks’ conception. He agrees with Plato that “God alone is worthy of supreme seriousness, but man is made God’s plaything, and that is the best part of him. Therefore every man and woman should live life accordingly, and play the noblest games and be of another mind from what they are at present. . . . Life must be lived as play, playing certain games, making sacrifices, singing and dancing, and then a

man will be able to propitiate the gods.”¹⁷ Huizinga formally characterizes play as “an activity which proceeds within certain limits of time and space, in a visible order, according to rules freely accepted, and outside the sphere of necessity or material utility.”¹⁸

Making music, while sometimes a chore, comes close to epitomizing Greek and other thinkers’ concept of play. Huizinga delineates between music as play and music as not play. He points out that “the term ‘playing’ is never applied to singing, and to music-making only in certain languages, it seems probable that the connecting link between play and instrumental skill is to be sought in the nimble and orderly movement of the fingers.”¹⁹

For Joseph Pieper, a Catholic philosopher, leisure is liberating, as it allows people to transcend the workaday world and to reach out to “life-giving existential forces” that rejuvenate us for a return to daily work.²⁰ For Pieper, “[t]he soul of leisure . . . lies in ‘celebration.’ Celebration is the point at which the three elements of leisure come to a focus: relaxation, effortlessness, and superiority of ‘active leisure’ to all functions.” Leisure is only possible and justifiable as a festival. “*That basis is divine worship* [italics his] . . . man’s affirmation of the universe and his experiencing the world in an aspect other than its everyday one.”²¹

Some Gray Areas of Leisure

Since modern Americans spend more hours and years in school than previous generations, the question of whether being in school constitutes leisure or work is an important one. “School” originally meant “leisure,” but one wonders whether the schoolchildren of America would characterize the activity thusly.²² George Lundberg’s four criteria that distinguished leisure reveal the ambiguity surrounding the time spent in school. Leisure is characterized by being chosen by the individual, being possibly permanently interesting, being activities that are different from compulsory activities, and being compatible with well-being.²³ While many students may find aspects of school “permanently interesting,” some of Lundberg’s criteria argue against school as leisure. There are limits on choices for children younger than 16 years old; they are prohibited from working full-time or, at least theoretically, from dropping out of school. It is probable, of course, that schoolchildren perceive being in school as a mixture of work and leisure. Aristotle thought *scholē* meant being occupied in “something desirable for its own sake—the hearing of noble music and noble poetry, intercourse with friends chosen for their own worth, and above all the exercise, alone or in company, of the speculative faculty.” In a sense, for Aristotle, leisure is connected with learning and creating.²⁴

Joseph Pieper builds upon the Aristotelian framework, including the concept of leisure as *skole* or *scola*. He notes, of course, that our conceptions of leisure and school have evolved in the intervening millennia since Aristotle and his *Metaphysics*: our values regarding work and leisure differ greatly from those of the Greeks, the Romans, and the Middle Ages, “just as we are unable to understand their notion of leisure simply and directly, without an effort of thought.”²⁵ Pieper believes that “leisure appears in its character as an attitude of contemplative ‘celebration.’ . . . Leisure is possible only on the premise that man consents to his own true nature and abides in concord with the meaning of the universe. Leisure draws its vitality from affirmation.”²⁶

An economic perspective views being in school as constituting work: students study, and their studying is work that creates human capital. Students may only occasionally be engaging in leisure or consumption when they study. Students can be seen as “self-employed” producers of capital.²⁷ Part of the opportunity cost of being in school is that of working in a job earning income.

Social commentator Reuel Denney feared that “for many of the young, school turns out to be simply a prison with rather inefficient and wholly unhappy jailers.” Some of the young turned toward delinquency for their leisure pastimes. He also noted that, if the young had difficulty cooling their heels in schools and on the streets, the aged had difficulties adjusting to their “disemployment” that “operates more destructively on men than on women.”²⁸ For older Americans facing mandatory retirement, the ensuing free time may lack the necessary elements of leisure.

Some people are on the fringe of the economy—retirees, the unemployed, and unemployables; Harold Wilensky observes that these people “are also those who are most isolated in community and society.”²⁹ His research suggests that men with “orderly careers” tend to have stronger attachments to their communities, as represented by memberships in formal associations, and “greater vitality of primary relations than men whose work histories are disorderly.”³⁰

More Modern Definitions

Many commentators developed more nuanced definitions of leisure. Leisure might be divided into two branches: spillover and compensation. Compensation leisure depicts the ways that workers react to stultifying jobs; after work, laborers blow off steam, a sort of cathartic experience. Spillover leisure is an extension of work habits, attitudes, and interests into one’s leisure. A carpenter spending her leisure hours building birdhouses is an example of spillover leisure.³¹ One can note the obvious difference between this work-based notion of leisure and Aristotle’s work-free notion of leisure.