

KEYNES' THEORY

Where's our life of leisure?

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In their new book, *How Much is Enough?: The Love of Money and the Case for the Good Life*, the British father-and-son team of Robert (political economist) and Edward (philosopher) Skidelsky cite the famous prediction made by John Maynard Keynes in 1930: Assuming that productivity levels would continue to rise, Keynes said, his grandchildren and great grandchildren would likely have to work only 15 hours a week. The rest would be leisure.

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Man, said Keynes, would then confront “his real, his permanent problem – how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares, how to occupy the leisure to live wisely and agreeably and well.”

It hasn't quite worked out that way. Although Western societies have continued to be more productive and working hours have declined, we aren't even close to enjoying the bounty of leisure promised by Keynes.

What went wrong? And, why, when we could be taking two-hour lunches, three-day weekends and longer vacations, do we continue to work so hard?

According to the Skidelskys, the free-market economy is the villain. It allows employers to dictate terms of work and “inflames our innate tendency toward competitive, status-driven consumption.” Keynes failed to see that “the evils of capitalism ... might become permanently entrenched, obscuring the very ideal they were initially intended to serve.”

That's one view, but other economists, sociologists and leisure experts have their own ideas.

Why don't we have the leisure that Keynes predicted we'd have by now and that, measured by our progress, we could have?

“Keynes underestimated the human desire for relative needs – beyond our basic needs. We think we need more. As a developed society, we can never have enough – bigger cars become a need, rather than a luxury or want.” – **Amanda Johnson**, *professor of kinesiology and recreation management, University of Manitoba*

“I doubt that Keynes could even imagine people wanting to live in places – the suburbs, rural areas – 30, 60, or more minutes away from work. Commuting times have grown exponentially over the last few decades and, not too surprisingly, commuting is one of the things we hate the most.” – **Gordon Walker**, *professor of recreation, University of Alberta*

“Captains of industry have managed to convince workers that they could make a few more bucks to buy new toys by working the same hours. And Americans don't know how to use leisure.” – **John Robinson**, *professor of sociology, University of Maryland*

“I think we do enjoy more leisure – meaning non-productive activities – than meets the eye: Add all the time we spend on Facebook, surfing the net, gaming, or on our mobile devices texting one another, all the time spent web shopping. Technology has taken over not only work, but also leisure.” – **Nicole Fortin**, *professor of economics, University of British Columbia*

“Some studies show that Americans actually do have more leisure now than, say, 40 years ago. However, most of that new ‘leisure’ has been taken up by TV watching. Those studies were done in the late 1990s and I suspect the screen-time phenomenon would be even stronger now. Many people do indeed have more discretionary time than they believe they have, but they fill this time with busy activities that feel less like contemplative leisure, which I believe was the ideal Keynes was after. Importantly, almost all researchers conclude that regardless of what we actually spend our time on, most of us report feeling as if we have less time now. That perception is important, and has ties to well-being and happiness.” – **June Cotte**, *professor of marketing, Ivey School of Business, Western University*

“Generally, people do have more leisure, except at the bottom of the socio-economic scale, where they are always working or looking for work. Most people, however, are caught in a work-and-spend ethic. They aspire to a nicer house, car, clothing and to keep up with their neighbours. The only way is to make more money and that takes work. Others manage to get off the treadmill – a shift to voluntary simplicity – and that breaks open some leisure time, though the next question is – what will I do with it? It's not just about hedonic pleasures, watching more TV and drinking yourself under the table. People know much less about serious leisure, where you develop yourself: hobbies, amateur activities, substantial volunteering.” – **Robert Stebbins**, *professor Emeritus, University of Calgary*

“Many people, in fact, are taking more leisure – but how it is taken and spaced varies with circumstance. Recall ‘Freedom 55,’ a term one heard a lot before the Crash – never now, which suggests that economic loss is at work. Many take their leisure on the job – coffee breaks and the like – rather than after work at the local pub/tavern.” – **Chris Green**, *professor of economics, McGill University*

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