



Should We Rejoice a Post-Work Future? Ctd.

By: Ilana Glazer – February 25, 2013

Ross Douthat's recent column on shortening the workweek in order to make room for more employees is not a new debate. For example, the 40 hour work week is with us as a result of years of struggle from the labor movement.

The Great Recession and the increase of long-term unemployment (particularly for blue-collar workers) have once again sparked the idea that reduced hours would increase prosperity, a Keynesian notion.

Douthat looks at this issue from a cultural perspective and worries that decreased work hours would hurt the already-declining sense of community in America. He equates reduced hours to reduced Church attendance and life that exists only on the Internet. A world with reduced hours, he argues, is a Marxist ideal.

Peter VanDoren of the Cato Institute agrees that shorter work weeks would be detrimental to society, but looks at it from a libertarian anti-Keynes perspective. He believes, and I agree, that mandating shorter work weeks goes against an American ideal. If you work harder than everyone else, you will be rewarded. Right?

VanDoren says culturally being told to work less would be a non-starter. U.S. workers would resent the government saying they could only work a certain number of hours..

[He notes that] the whole discussion of reducing work hours is really so 'public radio.' "It's a middle class and college-educated notion of what work is like." No doubt, reduced work hours wouldn't be sustainable for the large number of America's working poor, scraping by without any budget flexibility.

To those that currently believe shorter work hours would be better for society, John Maynard Keynes' perspective is a more useful perspective than Marx's:

Keynes believed that a wealthy nation could create a society whereby everyone would work less, because there is more wealth to be spread around.

Keynes's discussion of economic possibilities was one of the first to spell out the argument that improvements in living standards, based on a combination of

technological progress and capital accumulation, might be expected to continue indefinitely.

He argued that technological progress at a rate of two per cent per year would be sufficient to multiply our productive capacity nearly eightfold in the space of a century. Allowing for a doubling of output per person, that would be consistent with a reduction of working hours to 15 hours a week or even less. This, Keynes thought, would be sufficient to satisfy the 'old Adam' in us who needs work in order to be contented.

The New Economics Foundation, a British think tank, recently released a study, "21 Hours," which concludes that working 21 hours per week would fix the issues present in the global economy.

The report argues that the current work week is arbitrary, and that despite the reduction in paid hours, "experiments with shorter working hours suggest that they can be popular where conditions are stable and pay is favorable."

In an interview with the BBC, "21 Hours" co-author Anna Coote claims a radical rethinking of the work week would benefit both employers and workers, saying "we could even become better employees—less stressed, more in control, happier in our jobs and more productive." Meanwhile, the foundation's policy director Andrew Simms went for the crowd-pleaser: "Hands up who wouldn't like a four day weekend?"

Even if we could have a 'four day weekend,' is that really good for the mind, body and soul of society? My guess is no. A normal workweek is necessary because it forces us into a routine. As Douthat notes, a workweek is beneficial to society, just like regular Church attendance. Even if you are not a particularly spiritual person, attending on a regular basis adds to the rhythm of life and builds your personal community. As so many of our civil institutions erode, why contribute to the demise of another?