

**Key words: working less leisure time inequality**

**Narrative step: Strategies for Transformation**

### **SUMMARY**

The degrowth vision of working less to enjoy life more is reserved primarily for people who possess certain material or philosophical tools.

From Epicurus to anti-consumerism, overworked masses have indirectly subsidized lovers of idle conviviality.

Therefore, opposition to wealth inequality should feature a struggle for justice in the realm of leisure time.

The idle Thoreau, walking through forests, creates more wealth than the entrepreneur who “productively” cuts down trees.

However, our choice to work less may be facilitated by others who involuntarily work more.

Policy proposals to minimize the unfair transfer of time wealth:

- (a) Internationally mandated and expanded Fair Trade to restructure the mining, textile and electronics industries.
- (b) Expanded labor unions. Time rich northern Europe has a considerably larger percentage of unionized citizens than time-starved nations.
- (c) Extending the right of paid sabbaticals from professional jobs to positions where people truly need the time off, such as miners and sanitation workers.

### **WORKING LESS: POLICIES FOR FAIRNESS IN THE SHARING OF LIBERATED TIME**

“If a man walks in the woods for love of them half of each day, he is in danger of being regarded as a loafer; but if he spends his whole day as a speculator, shearing off those woods and making earth bald before her time, he is esteemed an industrious and enterprising citizen.” Henry David Thoreau, “Life without principle”

“I want to say, in all seriousness, that a great deal of harm is being done in the modern world by belief in the virtuousness of work, and that the road to happiness and prosperity lies in an organized diminution of work.”  
Bertrand Russell, “In Praise of Idleness”

The degrowth philosophy of working less and enjoying life more should be simple to achieve. But before arriving at meaningful simplicity it is necessary to pass through challenging complexity.

I have been researching this possibility for the past forty years, working in a wide variety of fields, more than 60 different jobs, and experimenting from within the workplace as to how such a goal could be achieved. Call it *on-the-job research*.

I would like to think that this experimentation began after I met Ivan Illich in the early 1970s. But the ideas of Illich just happened to coincide with changes in the economy that were making my life more precarious, and practical solutions drove theoretical considerations.

The seeds of my eventual decision to seriously “degrow” my economic life originated from an energizing context. Within the USA, where I lived at the time, people on the streets and in universities had begun challenging the whole idea of growth, and some people in government were actually forced to respond, even if for electoral reasons. One of them was Robert Kennedy, who gave a speech about GDP just 77 days before he was assassinated.

*University of Kansas, March 18, 1968*

*Even if we act to erase material poverty, there is another greater task, it is to confront the poverty of satisfaction - purpose and dignity - that afflicts us all.*

*Too much and for too long, we seemed to have surrendered personal excellence and community values in the mere accumulation of material things. Our Gross National Product, now, is over \$800 billion dollars a year, but that Gross National Product - if we judge the United States of America by that - that Gross National Product counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage.*

*It counts special locks for our doors and the jails for the people who break them. It counts the destruction of the redwood and the loss of our natural wonder in chaotic sprawl.*

*It counts napalm and counts nuclear warheads and armored cars for the police to fight the riots in our cities. It counts Whitman's rifle and Speck's knife, and the television programs which glorify violence in order to sell toys to our children.*

*Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials.*

*It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country, it measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.*

*And it can tell us everything about America except why we are proud that we are Americans.*

*If this is true here at home, so it is true elsewhere in world.*

If there hadn't been counterculture protesters marching in the streets and occupying universities, no public figure would have dared challenge the bedrock of the American economy.

Robert's brother, John F. Kennedy, had the opposite approach to growth, of which he said: “a rising tide lifts all boats.” This became the favorite proverb of Robert Rubin, who spent 26 years at Goldman Sachs, became Secretary of the Treasury under Clinton and then served as chairman of Citigroup. Citigroup's market value went from \$250 billion in 2006 to \$20.5 billion on Friday, November 21, 2008. Citigroup was then bailed out by the United States Treasury.

The tide was down, but the big boats were saved. This is the period we are living in.

It would seem unrealistic at this moment of neo-liberal fundamentalism to imagine that proposals for “work-less-enjoy-life-more” policies that would get a proper hearing.

But the situation can change rather suddenly. Today, new social movements can again alter the *rapport de force*. In other words the balance of power will have to shift in our direction when increasing numbers of organized citizens see that sustainable degrowth is their only hope, for improving their own quality of life (because legitimate self-interest comes first) and for restoring the ecological health of our environment.

“Work less and enjoy life more” is only a slogan, and in order to make it understood and then make it function as a policy, we need to navigate through complex terrains. At the time of Robert Kennedy, there was a chance to break the monopoly of growth. However strong the counterculture was in philosophy, it was weak in concrete policy and prone to being co-opted. The Occupy Wall Street movement was policy poor in that in its ranks were supporters of the American dream side by side with advocates of voluntary simplicity. Result: no policy demands were made. Ditto for the *indignados*.

When a new next wave of indignation floods the streets, we have to be ready with concrete proposals to nourish our rebelliousness. In particular, the whole concept of work needs to be challenged. Otherwise, our demands for justice will “win” us new opportunities to be exploited.

As the great American humorist George Carlin once said, “The reason they call it the American Dream is because you have to be asleep to believe it.”

But why not just fight for a shorter work week? At the time when France initiated the 35-hour work week, in the early 2000s, I happened to witness the transition first hand. I was working with a wide array of companies and I had the chance to ask employees from different sectors what they felt about the reduced work week.

A large majority, regardless of sector, told me that they were simply cramming 39 hours work into 35 hours. They added that their companies were not hiring new people to make up for the 4 hours lost for each employee. Many told me that with the 35 hours, on-the-job stress had increased.

So I asked them whether they would prefer to go back to the 39 hours. Again, a large majority responded no. With all its flaws, the 35-hour formula had provided them with more time for conviviality.

The policies I am about to propose confront the complexity behind reducing work hours. These policies will remain in tune with Bertrand Russell’s goal: “the road to happiness and prosperity lies in an organized diminution of work.”

## **PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS**

### **Problem One: Can we work less and consume less without invisible subsidies from hyper-exploited labor?**

We already have much anecdotal evidence that individuals can work less and enjoy life more, by consuming less and consuming more humanely.

We also have empirical evidence that economies with less consumption and less work can produce happiness or well-being more efficiently than those with more consumption and more work. One notable example, from the Happy Planet Index, is the case of Germany, whose per capita consumption is one half that of the USA but whose level of perceived happiness equals that of the USA. According to OECD statistics, the average German worked 1,397 hours in 2012 while the average American in the same year worked 1,790: a nearly 400 hour difference.

However, the German good fortune of working less is partly dependant on people in Eastern European countries working harder in order to purchase German exports.

In fact, some of the worst exploitation in poorer countries has a connection with the happiness of people in rich countries. According to Oona King, a former member of the British Parliament, “Kids in Congo were being sent down mines to die so that kids in Europe and America could kill imaginary aliens in their living rooms”. Video games depended on rare minerals such as coltan.

“After it is refined, coltan becomes a bluish-gray powder called tantalum... [which] has one significant use: to satisfy the West’s insatiable appetite for personal technology. Tantalum is used to make cell phones, laptops and other electronics” (from *Inside Africa’s Play Station War*, a report by Toward Freedom, July 8, 2008).

Any policy changes leading to a work-less-enjoy-more system need to consider the interactions with southern countries, some of which may still need to grow their economies in order to reach a point where they can have the luxury of taking time off.

For example, in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), we should note that even though the legal retirement age in Mexican and US law is quite similar (65 vs 66), Mexican men continue to work approximately 7 ½ years beyond retirement age. Considering life expectancy, approximately one year less in Mexico, this means that the average Mexican male will be lucky to have 2 years of life after retirement while the average American male can expect to live for approximately 12 years beyond retirement (gleaned from OECD, “Pensions at a glance 2011”).

One thing for sure, NAFTA has not reduced the exploitation of Mexican workers nor has it increased the chances for a Mexican to enjoy the leisure of retirement.

NAFTA exemplifies that many of us in the global “north” may have the good fortune to work less thanks to the fact that others in the global “south” work more. So it is not a simple question of reducing the work week.

Degrowth advocates propose reducing the global ecological footprint to a sustainable level, through diminishing and changing production and consumption in the ‘global North’, while increasing but altering production and consumption in the ‘global South’.

### **Solution One: vastly expanded Fair Trade, mandated rather than voluntary, in mining, textile and other key industries**

In developed countries we may choose to work less and enjoy life more, without realizing that some of our free time is being subsidized by people in poorer countries who are working more and enjoying life less.

One solution involves revolutionary movements in poor countries whose end is to improve working conditions and quality of life for their populations. We can see some positive action in South American countries. Ecuador has been lobbying international organizations for an exchange: Ecuadorians would refrain from exploiting petrol reserves and in return would get paid by international organizations for caretaking the Amazonian lungs of the earth.

In Bolivia, they reduced the retirement age to 58 and wrote a constitution based on "living well but not better than the others". In Uruguay, president José Mujica, an anti-consumerist philosopher, continues to live on his small farm and donates 90% of his salary to charity.

These examples remain glaring exceptions. We cannot wait for revolutions to happen in poor countries around the world. We can, however, dramatically expand what is known as "fair trade". Fair trade creates a mechanism for importing products that come from work situations where labor is treated fairly, producers receive their just amount, and where the environment is respected. However, fair trade is limited in scope (number of products) and in depth (the market share of each product) because it is voluntary rather than legally binding.

If fair trade were both expanded and mandated, for example in the mining and textile industries, we would no longer hear horror stories from Bangladesh and The Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The success of some fair trade items, such as coffee, chocolate and beauty products, shows that consumers in northern countries already have a certain degree of empathy with southern producers and are thus willing to pay more for a product that has not been bathed in workers' blood or ravaged the environment.

With vastly improved working conditions for miners and textile employees and with rigorous environmental regulations for their employers, the price of clothing, computers and cell phones would be forced to rise accordingly in northern countries. This would lead to a diminishing of the voracious consumption of these products.

People who once consumed more would have better incentives to consume less because they would no longer be subsidized by injustice and hyper-exploitation in southern countries. People who already consume less would be assured that their philosophy was not being subsidized by child labor and sweatshops in Africa and Asia.

Long before "fair trade" existed, I witnessed and participated in a boycott of iceberg lettuce, table grapes and Gallo wine in the USA. The motive of the boycott was to improve working conditions of migrant farmworkers and give them the right to unionize.

At its height in the mid-1970s, at least 17 million people joined in refusing to buy table grapes, iceberg lettuce or Gallo wine, according to a Harris poll. It was a simple way for people, as consumers, to "help the farmworkers." With such a degree of social pressure, many supermarket chains and smaller food stores stopped buying the boycotted products.

This boycott action could be viewed as a type of internal fair trade movement.

The powerful grower groups eventually gave in, and farmworkers were allowed to join the union without being beaten or fired, with working conditions improving significantly.

The supply chain for conflict minerals from the Congo is more complex than that of iceberg lettuce or table grapes. The supply chain for textiles produced in Asia may be somewhat less daunting.

The complexity of supply chains is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that conflict minerals from the Congo eventually making their way into our cell phones and laptops go through a convoluted 7-step supply route, even more complicated than heroin or cocaine supply chains. The process begins with overworked, underpaid miners, many of them children, many others women who are raped by their bosses or by soldiers acting as virtual prison guards.

The seven steps go from 1) miners; 2) trading houses; 3) exporters; 4) transit countries; 5) refiners (and of course, all poor southern countries would greatly benefit for the added value of refining at or near the site of extraction); 6) electronics companies; 7) retail stores.

The issue of conflict minerals is so onerous that even the American congress has been considering legislation to trace, audit and certify such minerals. The United Nations is also interested in taking concrete measures. Similar outrage has been expressed in regard to Asian sweatshops.

Those of us who believe in voluntary simplicity can do something that would both reduce our own consuming and defend the right of producers in poor countries to work less.

None of this is simple. For example, “thanks” to Fair Trade in Bolivian quinoa, quinoa prices for Bolivian citizens have skyrocketed. We do good, feel good, help some people, like Bolivian farmers, and then hurt some, like Bolivian consumers. It’s messy.

In order to encourage European and North American governments to enact legislation for a Fair Trade system that would include tracing, auditing and certifying minerals and textiles, we would have to take intermediate measures.

We won’t confront the flood of advertising for electronic products, we could begin a two-level “live-without” or “use-less” boycott. Following the path of César Chávez and the United Farmworkers, we would need to target key products and show how people can do without.

**Problem Two: Some good people see working more as their only solution: a question of survival. Others want to work more because they love their jobs.**

Our second problem deals with the reality that certain people need or simply want to work more.

Free market fundamentalists would love to force us to work more, by increasing the hours of our work week and increasing the years worked before retirement.

But those of us who believe that working less can create well-being cannot force everyone to work less, or we too would become fundamentalists. If someone wanted to work more, not by coercion but by truly free choice, who are we to tell them that they cannot?

I once worked in a picture frame factory in which I was one of only two employees with legal working papers.

It was a terrible job. My part of the factory was steaming hot under the August sun of Southern California. For me this was a temporary situation, and I knew eventually that I would degrow my needs and work less.

But for my companions, economic refugees from Mexico and Central America where work was scarce and substandard, this job was a welcomed alleviation and a source of dignity they were deprived of in their homelands.

On Fridays my companions would cash their checks in currency exchanges with an exorbitant fee and then be gouged by Western Union for the chance to send money orders to their family back home. Exploited at work and then overcharged by banking companies, they still had the satisfaction of knowing that they had sweated through the week to support a family. This was an act of great dignity.

I would see this phenomenon in numerous other settings, restaurant kitchens, horse stables, slaughterhouses, where work no one else wanted to do was nevertheless a source of dignity.

Working less and enjoying life more was not conceivable to my work companions in these settings. In a more just society, such exploitation would not exist. But during a period of transformation into a more humane working culture for all, we should be able to understand why for some people, working more can be a source of pride.

### **Solution Two: defend, expand and recreate labor unions**

The exploitation I witnessed firsthand, in various sectors of the economy, was taking place in non-union settings. My work companions were obligated to work more because their salaries were so low. The option for working less and enjoying life more was not available.

Labor union membership in many northern countries has been plunging to less than 10% of the workforce. The Economic Policy Institute notes that “To a remarkable extent, the level of inequality—which fell during the New Deal but has risen dramatically since the late 1970s—corresponds to the rise and fall of unionization in the United States” (“As union membership declines, inequality rises,” 2014, EPI).

On the other hand, “Highly unionized countries where collective bargaining is more coordinated tend to have low income inequality, and greater compliance with international labor law standards,” according to an International Labor Organization study from 2008.

“In 2010, labour union density was 69.9% in Finland, 68.3% in Sweden, and 54.8% in Norway. In comparison, labour union density was 12.9% in Mexico and 11.3% in the United States” (from “Trade Union Density,” OECD statistics, 2013). If you rank these five countries by hours worked, the two with the lowest labor union membership, Mexico and the USA worked more hours per year than those with the highest union memberships, Finland, Sweden and Norway.

The correlation may not be entirely direct, but certainly union membership plays a role in lowering work hours. Norwegians, with nearly 70% union membership work 1,420 hours per year while people in the USA, with 11% union membership, the average is 1,790 hours per year.

Clearly, in societies with a high level of union membership, it is easier for a person to make the choice of working less in order to enjoy life more. We could call this a democratic choice.

However, labor unions themselves are not inherently built within a degrowth philosophical framework. Unions do support earlier retirement and do indeed support reducing work hours.

However, unions may at times support productivism as a short term defense of jobs, and this could lead to defending ecologically dubious industries to protect jobs: strip mining, nuclear power plants, automobile companies, weapons manufacturers, for example.

Some degrowth advocates might be skeptical about the ultimate role of labor unions but an imperfect union is better than no union at all. I have worked with some unions which were well aware of fighting for what Schumacher calls “intermediate technology” and against advanced technology that would replace jobs with a type of production that would decrease the quality of the goods: for example, tomato picking machines that required genetically hardening the skins of tomatoes, rendering them tasteless. Here was a position that opposed productivism.

I am currently active in a labor union in France. From within the union and representing employees with distinct needs (adjunct professors, known as *vacataires* in France), I have found a willingness among our leaders to listen to our needs and allow us to act democratically, even if some of our demands might be contradictory to some of their principles. We won a demand against replacing language teachers with on-line learning, a victory against productivism that also defended the quality of our product.

Participation of degrowth advocates within unions can play a positive role in helping to bring out the best possibilities of a labor union for leading to a work-less-enjoy-more public policy. Wherever labor unions are under assault, degrowth advocates should defend the right to collective bargaining, even if some of the results are not what we would want in the long term. In societies without labor unions, we can be sure that work hours inevitably increase.

**Problem Three: All work is not equal. Some work can be pure suffering while other work can bring joy. Most is somewhere in between. Nowadays, people with the fun jobs often have more opportunities to work less while there is no mechanism for those who do the most arduous or stressful work to have more time off.**

Working less and enjoying life more can involve early retirement or periods of pre-retirement, referred to as sabbaticals. In some countries, early retirement is linked to the concept of *pénabilité* which refers to the harshness of labor. Sabbaticals, on the other hand, were once the domain of school teachers and privileged employees in larger companies. The trend today is for sabbaticals to be phased out or subject to more stringent requirements.

In fact, people on sabbaticals and as well as retired people are actually contributing to the economy. It's just that they are not paid for their contributions. Even advocates of the GDP are increasingly recognizing that unpaid labor should be considered part of an indicator that reflects economic well-being. In Canada, for example, *unpaid work* is estimated to be worth up to \$319 billion in the money economy or 41% of *GDP* (see UNPAC).

According to a 2011 OECD study, the value of unpaid work is very considerable: about one-third of GDP in OECD countries, ranging from a low of 19% in Korea to a high of 53% in Portugal.

Even by the standards of liberal economics, people who go on sabbaticals or retire have not stopped contributing to the economy. They prepare meals, babysit, and generally help children to become future contributors to social security. They join associations that offer concrete benefits to society. And even by capitalist standards, by consuming, they create jobs for others.



Even if you decided to take a sabbatical, live frugally for a year and backpack around the world, you would still be contributing to society. First, you would be giving your job to someone else for a year: one job created. Even the most ascetic hiker would need shoes of good quality and a strong backpack, and clothing to protect him or her from the elements. Even if he did not eat in restaurants, he would be buying fruit, vegetables and other dietary necessities from vendors. If he chose to not stay in a hotel, he would need to purchase a tent and camping equipment.

If he engaged in all this necessary commerce locally, he would be contributing to the ecology, and his ecological footprint would diminish.

The so-called idleness of the retiree or the worker on sabbatical would be of great benefit for the residents of the planet.

### **Solution Three: Sabbaticals and early retirement for people whose jobs are deemed arduous**

For the most part, our neo-liberal leaders want us to work for longer in life. However, various policy initiatives do exist for establishing early retirement, based on the harshness or oppressive nature of the labor. It's not only the strenuousness of the job, but the health hazards. For example, a person who is developing eye problems and works in front of a computer screen should be eligible to retire early when supplying appropriate medical evidence.

Many enacted or proposed laws for early retirement already exist. Such is not the case for sabbaticals.

My proposal is simple. Establish a universal principle, within the framework of the United Nations, whereby workers with harsh jobs would have the right to take a paid sabbatical every seven years. This could be six months with full pay and if extended, another six months with half pay.

During this time, employees would have the opportunity to search for new types of work, take training in a different area, or simply enjoy the free time and then be allowed to return to their old job.

In large companies, this would be easy to apply. A large mining company, for example, would confront no particular logistical problem in giving back a job to an employee following a sabbatical. It would not be at all difficult for sanitation workers to return to their positions, if they chose to, at the end of the sabbatical.

For smaller companies, it may not be possible to offer the exact same job. But it should be mandated that whatever job is made available for the returnee should have at least the same salary and be at least within the same level of quality.

We can expect companies to argue that a sabbatical system would be of great expense to them. We can respond with a voluntary formula, much the same as social security, retirement or unemployment insurance, with shared contributions to a sabbatical account. The employer could contribute 70% to the fund while the employee contributes the remaining 30%.

This is theoretical but workable. The details would have to be worked out in collective bargaining or by regulations.

For the most strenuous or unhealthy jobs, the sabbatical could be mandated by labor laws.

### **Conclusion**

The luxury of working less to enjoy life more is reserved primarily for people who possess the material or philosophical tools.

Working less to enjoy life more in the absence of any political framework can have unintended consequences, leaving the most overworked of the earth to subsidize our time luxury.

Everyone knows that exploitation subsidizes the wealth luxury of the upper crusts of society, especially the 1%. But indirectly, overworked employees in harsh or oppressive jobs are also subsidizing the free time of other citizens. It is not enough to militate for sharing monetary wealth. We should also be involved in fighting for the sharing of time wealth.