Overturning the Modernist Predictions: Recent Trends in Work and Leisure in the OECD

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The optimistic predictions of social scientists about the coming of a leisured future are increasingly being discredited (Gershuny, 2000; Robinson, 1986; Robinson and Godbey, 1999; Juster and Stafford, 1985, 1991). As early as the 1960s, the optimists expected that by the twenty-first century, citizens of the advanced industrialized nations would be living lives of leisure, perhaps suffering from a ‘crisis of leisure time’, brought on by boredom and a failure to know how to spend time. But instead of boredom, time poverty and high levels of daily life stress appear to be widespread. (On the ‘crisis of leisure time’, see Schor, 1992; on time pressure, see Robinson and Godbey, 1999, and Galinsky et al. 2001.) The trends in the subjective measures are readily explainable by developments in actual hours of work, and in particular a break from earlier patterns of rapid decline in work time. For example, in the OECD, over the last 20 years average hours per working age person fell a meagre 2 per cent, not per year, but for the entire two decades. Hours per employee have fallen by 7 per cent. This is a far cry from the 18 per cent decline over the period 1950–80, the experience that presumably led to such optimistic longterm predictions about declining hours of work and rising leisure time. The experience of the United States, where both predictions and explanations of the ‘growth of leisure time’ were pervasive, is an even more cautionary tale for the teleological, modernist perspective. According to internationally comparative sources, working hours per employee rose 3 per cent in the period 1980–2000, and a whopping 16 per cent per working-age person. Estimates from household survey data show even more substantial increases. The US experience is important because throughout the twentieth century, it has led the way in trends in working hours and leisure. A number of other OECD countries have also seen increases in worktime in the last two decades by this latter metric. These include the Netherlands, Australia and Canada.
Seen in historical perspective, recent trends are striking. The combination of rising US hours, plus rising hours in a subset of Western European countries, means that for the last decade, the majority of the working population in the most affluent parts of the world have been increasing rather than decreasing their annual hours of work. Furthermore, these increases in hours (and output) are occurring just as evidence of ecological overshoot has become far more pervasive, and the need to moderate the environmental impact of consumption far more compelling. As an oft-cited solution to excessive consumption, worktime reduction has implications beyond the quality of life perspective with which it is frequently associated. (On ecological overshoot, see Wackernagel et al., 2002.)

The recent data suggest the need for radical revision in our thinking about work and leisure. Over the last decade, as evidence of rising hours of work in the US has surfaced, its experience has not been taken seriously by observers of trends in hours. On the one hand, there has been debate about whether or not hours have actually risen in the US (see Robinson and Godbey 1999 and the rebuttal by Schor 2000. See also Gershuny 2000). On the other hand, the relevance of the US case to European and other OECD nations has not been universally appreciated. In this chapter, I argue that thinking about current and future trends in work and leisure may need to be radically revised. My argument begins with a rethinking of the long trends in work time over the last three centuries, and a re-evaluation of the modernist, conventional wisdom concerning the impact of capitalist development on worktime. I then consider recent trends in hours in the OECD, and consider the question of whether the US is continuing in its historic role as leader in trends in work time. If so, then the future path of hours throughout the OECD will be far different than the leisure optimists expect.

A short introduction to conventional thinking about trends in work and leisure

The history of the social scientific perspective on leisure time that prevailed from the 1960s through at least the 1980s is by now well known, especially within leisure studies. Indeed, the field owes its existence in part to sociological treatments of time use from the beginning of this era. The hegemonic view was that technical change, bureaucratic rationalization, increased educational attainment and the general march of progress would result in steady declines in working hours. Leisure time was thought to be increasing, and there was every expectation that those increases would continue indefinitely (for example, Gershuny (2000: 32) defines modern industrial or ‘post-industrial’ societies as being characterized by ‘declining work time’). Indeed, simple projections of current trends suggested that working time would eventually reach negligible levels. If working hours were declining in excess of 1 per cent per year, as was the case in a substantial number of Western European countries between 1950 and 1980, the reality of a four-day week or even a four-hour day was not far off. The United States, which had a slightly lower pace of change, began the post-1950 period already having achieved the five-day work week, and