CHAPTER 4

Critical Thoughts on Leisure

In the previous chapter, Lukács’s concept of reification was used to analyze the consciousness of time. More precisely, in modern capitalist society, time (a category of the mind) is treated as an autonomous force in its own right, thereby concealing its true nature as a category of political economy. This process greatly restricts the opportunity for developing deeper and alternative understandings of time beyond that readily provided by the consumer ethos and the culture industry. As a consequence of several historical developments, our ability to think critically about the political-economic factors that frame, structure, and limit “choice” around questions of leisure is significantly hindered if not stymied altogether. The assumption of leisure as freedom needs to be rethought in light of the dialectical relationship between production and consumption identified by Marx, whereby production shapes not only the objects for consumption, but also the subjects who ultimately complete the consumption process.1 Similarly, time spent in production shapes time outside of production in form and content, which is to say, the colonization of time by capital constrains not only the time available for the possibility of leisure, but also our imagination of alternative understandings of what we might want to do with and be in our leisure.

Leisure is central to the development of subjectivity, but only if meaningful choices exist. Meaningfulness, however, depends on the expansion of choices, which in turn depends on the expansion of ideas
about leisure. To create the conditions of autonomy by which individuals can make meaningful decisions about leisure, it is necessary to include an institutional referent that makes leisure possible in the first place. Public policies are that institutional referent. For leisure, required paid vacation is only the most obvious public policy, but even this is severely lacking in the United States compared to other advanced economies, and is not evenly distributed. As Kathi Weeks asks, “Why do we work so long and so hard? The mystery here is not that we are required to work or that we are expected to devote so much time and energy to its pursuit, but rather that there is not more active resistance to this state of affairs.” Weeks provides a thorough answer to her question, but in this chapter, I revisit leisure from a modern point of view to ask a few related questions, “Why is leisure not considered a serious political demand; why are more people not willing to fight for leisure, and what would make leisure worth fighting for?” The short answer is that leisure has been depoliticized, but this was not always the case.

The colonization of time entailed a systematic reorganization and reconceptualization of leisure by business in the early twentieth century that resulted in the reconstruction of the social understanding of time to better fit the needs and logic of the accumulation process, including the debasement of the classical or humanist rendition of leisure to the modern notion of free time for consumption. This debasement signaled a significant defeat for the working classes’ fight for time because it replaced an earlier understanding of progress linked to the democratic ideal of using technology to reduce the need to work and increase leisure for all. The related conceptions of time—progress, leisure, and free time—have been historically linked and politically contested by different social and political actors. With this in mind, a historical approach is useful for developing a politics of time because it acknowledges the political struggles over the form and content of leisure, including what values, capitalist or noncapitalist, ultimately came to define leisure and why. There are several historical developments in the context of the United States that demonstrate why a politics of time needs to extend beyond production to considerations of consumption. They include the historical and conscious