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## Book Review: The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure

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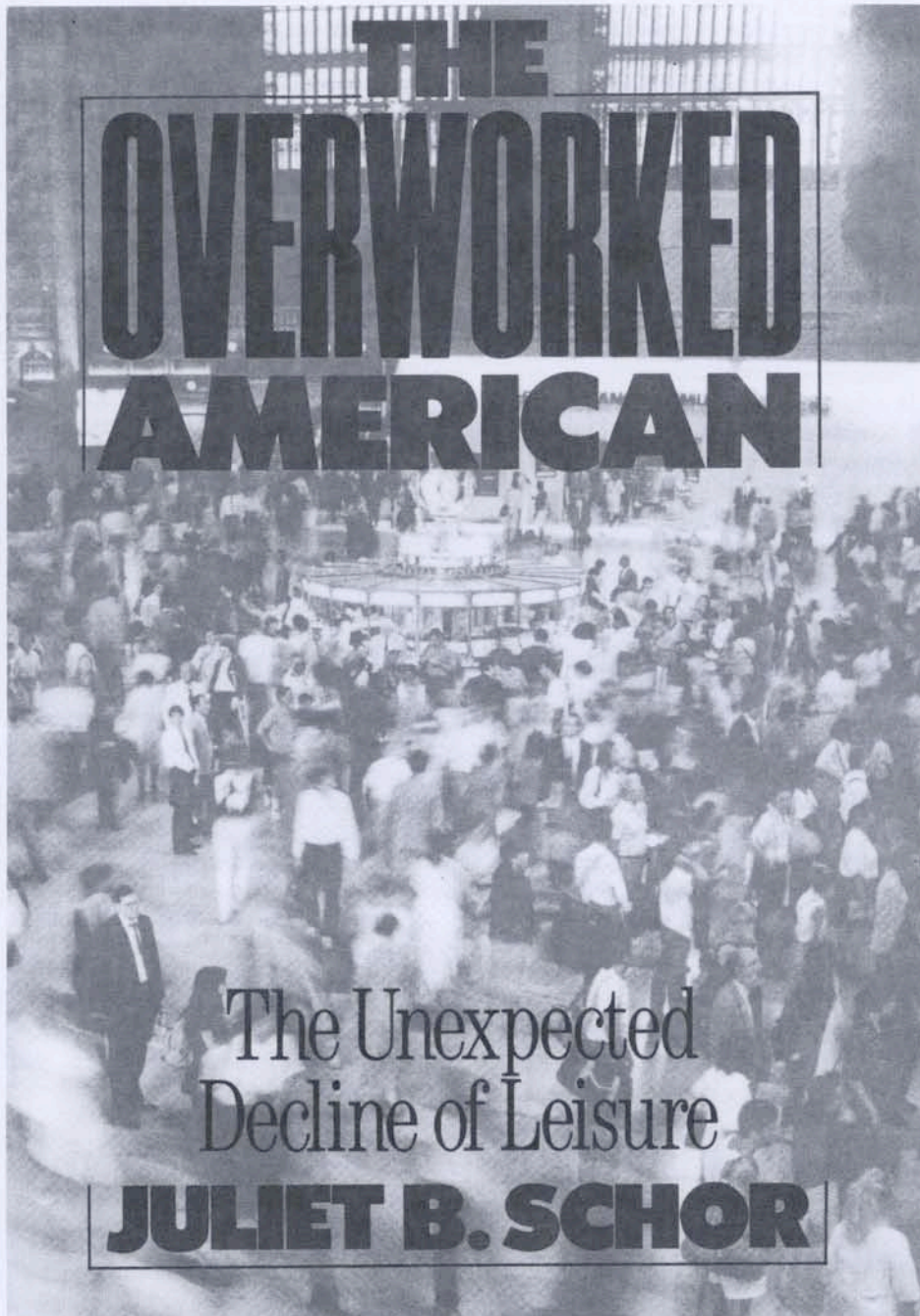
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BOOK REVIEW

# *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure*

Juliet Schor

By Charles Angell



**H**erman Melville wrote in a letter to his cousin Catherine Lansing that “whoever is not in possession of leisure can hardly be said to possess independence. They talk of the *dignity of work*. Bosh. True work is the necessity of poor humanity’s earthly condition. The dignity is in leisure. Besides, 99 hundredths of all the *work* done in the world is either foolish and unnecessary, or harmful and wicked.” Juliet Schor’s *The Overworked American*, documents how contemporary Americans are working longer hours than ever and, in the process, supports Melville’s contention that too much work results in a loss of independence. Schor offers three broad explanations for the rise of overwork: the “incentive structures” within capitalism are biased toward longer working hours; the rising standards and expectations of domestic life, while making domestic life easier, have expanded the hours devoted to cleaning, food preparation, and child-rearing; and the consumer cycle of earn and spend has required long work hours to support America’s material way of life. Together, Schor argues, these tendencies result in Americans working nearly an extra month per year more than their western European counterparts.

Schor describes how, during the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries, industrialism’s preoccupation that time is money led to fixed wages and piece rate pay and allowed employers to reduce hourly costs by requiring longer hours. As unions demanded higher pay for longer hours and as government regulated how many hours employees could be allowed to work, employers introduced technology to control the pace of work—increase productivity—and developed the concept of “employment rent”—as Schor terms it—where the workers so value their jobs that longer hours will be preferred to any risk of losing employment. Employers will increase the rent by relying on overtime

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rather than hiring new workers. Unions, in negotiating generous benefits for their members, have complied with employers in increasing the employment rent. The employment rent produces a more disciplined work force, kept in line by fear of losing their valuable jobs.

Essentially Schor tells us that many overworked Americans—and she is not talking about the unemployed or underemployed but the overemployed professional, white collar management, and skilled workers—have lost any sense of autonomy over their jobs; these workers feel they must submit to the demand of longer hours in order to meet the expectations of their employers and of their own vision of successful American life. To illustrate that conditions were not always thus, Schor compares contemporary workers to medieval workers, claiming she must look that far back in time to find conditions where workers possessed considerable autonomy over their work. The feudal worker's obligation to the manor was precisely delineated. Many civic and religious holidays interrupted the work cycle. Medieval workers had less desire to acquire material possessions. For me, Schor's use of medieval conditions as a benchmark is the least successful part of her argument, based as it is on a nostalgia for a simpler (i.e. more autonomous) age. The argument also rests on a confusion between feudal and pre-capitalist workers. One ought not, for instance, have too many idealized notions about working conditions in the trecento florentine wool industry.

Schor is more convincing when she describes how trade unions, which had originally crusaded for the shorter work week and workplace reform, began after WWII to focus on health, retirement, and other costly benefits. Jobs have become so costly that employers are unwilling to engage new employees. Government has compounded the problem. Statutes mandating overtime as an incentive to hiring new workers have had the unintended consequence of enhancing the employment rent on existing jobs; workmen's compensation has made hiring expensive. As international competition intensified during the 70s and 80s, employers cut costs and benefits; workers saw their earn-

ings decline in real terms to mid-60s' levels, forcing them to work longer hours to maintain a standard of living.

Schor's second explanation for increased work hours, the rising standards and expectations of domestic life, may be treated more briefly. The nineteenth-century revolution in home technologies—washing machines, refrigerators, etc.—steadily brought into the home work that had often been performed elsewhere. The more widespread and sophisticated these improvements became, the higher rose standards of cleanliness and food preparation. Where washing had been done once a week, washers and dryers allowed it to be done daily. Where varied and unusual meals were once found only in restaurants, now they were expected at home. These improvements required time, mostly women's time, and as such have come to represent an enormous unpaid aggregate of labor. As more women have moved into the paid labor force, with no compensatory diminution in the quantity of unpaid domestic labor to be performed, the resulting overwork has produced tremendous social stress.

Schor is at her most eloquent when she indicts American society's slavish adherence to a cycle of work and spend. In any choice between more pay or more leisure, Americans will almost always choose additional income. Starting in the 1920s, the capitalist marketplace began to replace its emphasis on production with a stress on consumption by fostering what Schor calls a "psychology of abundance." Growth in productivity, rather than being the result of investment, became the result of consumption. Material well-being demands continual shopping. To meet their ever increasing levels of demand, workers had to spend more and more time at their jobs. Schor documents, using constant 1982 dollars, that between 1947 and 1990 consumption per person in America has risen nearly \$7000. This increase in material well-being has not produced any concomitant increase in psychological well-being.

Schor's prescription for escaping the tyranny of overwork is essentially to exchange increased productivity for leisure time rather than increased income. She's aware that such a choice exists only for

those whose income permits the choice. Therefore, to avoid creating divisions between the leisured and the unleisured, which would complement the existing division between rich and poor, employed and unemployed, Schor recommends government intervention to mandate four week paid vacations, increased use of flex time, more equitable part-time employment opportunities, paid parental leaves, and opportunities to exchange increased productivity for time off. Schor makes clear what a decade of Reagan and Bush free market economics should have taught us that government in many instances is the only counterbalance to the aggressive marketplace.

Certainly no Marxist, Schor is nonetheless convinced that Americans have made themselves wage slaves different only in kind from the Birmingham mill workers described over a century ago by Marx and Engels. America needs social reform in the form of rejuvenated unions and enlightened government policy. Why do employers insist on overtime for already overworked employees rather than hire new workers? Because expensive fringe benefits, most especially health insurance, make overtime cheaper. Why do employers resist any guarantee of full employment? Because full employment shifts workplace power to employees giving them a more powerful voice in the workplace. Enlightened social policy, something America is short on these days, manifested through government action provides the means for Americans to achieve enough leisure to pursue happiness. Schor's book is, in the end, more morality than sociology. She would agree with Ecclesiastes that "the wisdom of a learned man cometh by opportunity of leisure: and he that hath little business shall become wise."

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