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The Loss of *Leisure* and Its social cost

Everyone in the working world is busy, overwhelmed. Even students' days are filled to the brim. Yet if many are living comfortable, engaging lives, is there a problem, a downside, to being ever busy? A number of observers, from the ancient, democratic Athenians, to Henry David Thoreau, to several contemporary observers and historians all point to a social value of profound importance, *leisure*. While the Athenian clearly treasured it, Thoreau and today's observers worry we have forgotten it.

British historian, H.D.F. Kitto, in his 1951 book, *The Greeks*, pointed out that the ancient Athenians prized *Leisure* second only to *Glory*. Leisure allowed them to take time off in the middle of the day, to go to the gymnasium or baths, talk with fellow citizens, and participate in the running of their democracy, which included attendance at the Assembly, for which their government modestly paid them. A man who took no part in public affairs was called "useless." Today, in contrast, so many citizens are so busy that they have little or no time to read, discuss, or participate in our democracy, at any level. Kitto, amusingly, pointed to mowing the lawn, grass, as "being ... one of the bitterest enemies of social and intellectual life."

But how did the democratic Athenians find the leisure to participate? Kitto explains it was because their life style was "extremely simple." They did not feel they needed the "machinery," or the time to run that machinery in order to

accrue wealth. Their houses were modest, their possessions few. In contrast, our way of life – even in 1951, even in Thoreau’s time – has seemed to require of us an ever growing number of possessions, and the hours spent working to pay for them. While the eight-hour work day is considered the common rule, it is not unusual to work beyond that, or throw oneself into other tasks, such as lawn-mowing or shopping, thereby reducing time for Athenian *leisure*. Yet there has been a trade-off. We have sacrificed the time to investigate life and participate in our communities. Too few set aside time to address the complex issues that are perhaps the unintended consequences of our modern life styles.

Is it not ironic then, that in the machine, or computer age, the very technologies and inventions which were going to free us, have consigned so many to working more than ever? Is this loss of *leisure*, the loss of time to learn, think, and act, a fatal flaw, our Achilles’ heal? Have we unwittingly eliminated the key element that the Athenians so valued? We espouse government by the people, for the people, and of the people ... but where are the people? Busy.

A number of contemporary observers and historians have noted this unsettling trend. The New York Times’ Bill Keller, in reviewing Doris Kearns Goodwin’s new history, “The Bully Pulpit”, quotes the author reporting that in the early 1900s the reading public “*Month after month ... would swallow dissertations of ten or twelve thousand words without even blinking. ... The public could not get enough ...*” How did they do this? They embraced more *leisure* time. Kerns describes a

voyage of discovery that President Taft led, with a congressional delegation of 80 people, on a three month mission to the Philippines and the Far East ... a mission that today, notes Keller, would be condensed into a *“jet-lagged weekend of drive-by-fact finding.”* At the turn of the century, Kerns tells us, the educated classes were prolific letter-writers and journal-keepers, describing, reflecting on, and discussing their lives and the world. Today much, if not most, of that time for reading, reflection, communication, and participation has been reduced, if not eliminated.

In this December’s National Geographic magazine, journalist Paul Salopek reports on his project, To Walk the World. *“By walking,”* he writes, *“I am forced to slow down. The world blurs and flattens with speed. On foot there is clarity.”* Thoreau would have nodded.

Recently English Professor of The History of Warfare, William Philpott, wrote of the *“similarity between the pre-1914 peace movement and today’s environmental movement. Each has some committed activists and many passive sympathizers, are paid political lip service, but are undermined by governments’ inability to co-operate internationally and unwillingness to act unilaterally. ... As we pass through a similar process, it remains to be seen whether popular movements for positive change are stronger in a democratic age than they were at the beginning of the twentieth century.”*

Thus we find ourselves, as did Europe in 1914, facing a daunting and potentially devastating development – in our case

Climate Change or Global Warming – as a result of a parallel inability of our public to adequately understand the threat and respond to it. As Dr. James Hansen, formerly Director of a NASA’s institute for Space Studies, and now of Columbia University’s Earth Institute, warns us, unfortunately there is a gap between what science knows about Climate Change and what the public knows. And yet the information is out there, in all sorts of publications, broadcasts, and on the internet. Is the problem then that people no longer have, or take, the time to inform themselves? While some Americans are ideologically against accepting science’s conclusions about Climate Change, many others are the “passive sympathizers” who have not responded, nor see any point in doing so, or are simply too busy. And yet scientific projections of rising CO2 emissions, and the warming that must follow, estimate we have ten, or maybe 20, years to significantly reduce those emissions before we may lose control of our biosphere’s systems which support us. Even now threats abound, to agriculture and water supplies, to fishing and forests, and thus ultimately to the complex, global economic and political systems on which civilization depends. Many people in The Philippines have been made suddenly and harshly aware of this. But elsewhere too few educate themselves or act. One conclusion from the recent 50th anniversary of President Kennedy’s assassination is that our civilization is fragile. One event, whether in 1914, 1963, or last year’s Hurricane Sandy can tear at our well-being.

To quote Professor Kitto once more: *“The confident way in which the Athenians carried to its logical extreme their desire to*

participate directly and personally in every aspect of government sounds almost like a deliberate challenge to the weakness of human nature. Is it possible for a whole people to have the sustained wisdom and self-control to manage its own affairs wisely?"

The answer to this question remains hanging in the balance, despite the potentially devastating consequences if people don't manage responsibly. One hopeful development – perhaps another unintended consequence – is that our increasing longevity and population now provide us with more educated, skilled, retired citizens who *do* have time. Many are already active, and many communities benefit from a high degree of participation. But still greater numbers must awaken and embrace this Athenian idea of *leisure*, to knowledgably participate, if we are to successfully address the challenges we face, while there is time.