

- Good nature does not proceed from arduous work but from sound leisure.

## IN PRAISE OF IDLENESS

I was brought up on the saying "Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do." Being a highly virtuous child, I acquitted a conscience which has kept me working hard. But although my conscience has controlled my *actions*, my *opinions* have undergone a revolution. I think that there is far too much work done in the world, and that immense harm is caused by the belief that work is virtuous.

First of all: what is work? Work is of two kinds: first, altering the position of matter; second, telling other people to do so. The first kind is unpleasant and ill paid; the second is pleasant and highly paid. The second kind is capable of infinite extension: there are not only those who give orders but those who give advice as to what orders should be given. Usually two opposite kinds of advice are given simultaneously by two different bo-

dies of men; this is called politics.

From the beginning of civilization until the industrial revolution a man could, as a rule, produce by hard work little more than was required for subsistence. Modern technique, however, has made it possible to diminish enormous the amount of labor necessary to produce the necessity of life for every one. This was made obvious during the War. At that time all the men in the armed forces, all the men and women engaged in the production of munitions, or working in offices connected with the War, were withdrawn from productive occupations. In spite of this, the general level of well-being among wage-earners on the side of the Allies was higher than before or since. The significance of this fact was concealed by finance: borrowing made it appear as if the future was nourishing the

present. But that, of course, would have been impossible; a man cannot eat a loaf of bread that does not yet exist. The War showed conclusively that by the scientific organization of production it is possible to keep modern populations in fair comfort on a small part of the working capacity of the modern world. If at the end of the War the scientific organization has been preserved, and the hours of work cut down to four, all would have been well. Instead, the old chaos was restored, those whose work was demanded were made to work long hours, and the rest were left to starve as unemployed. Why? Because work is looked upon as a duty.

Let us, for a moment, consider the ethics of work frankly. Every human being, of necessity, consumes in the course of his life a certain amount of produce of human labor. Assuming, as we may, that labor is on the whole disagreeable, it is unjust that a man should consume more than he produces. Of course he may provide services rather than commodities, like a medical man;

but he should provide something in return for his board and lodging. To this extent, the duty of work must be admitted, but to this extent only.

If the ordinary wage-earner worked four hours a day there would be enough for everybody, and no unemployment — assuming sensible organization. This idea shocks the well-to-do, because they are convinced that the poor would not know how to use so much leisure. In America men often work long hours even when they are already well-off; such men, naturally, are indignant at the idea of leisure for wage-earners; in fact they dislike leisure even for their sons. Oddly enough, they do not mind their wives and daughters having no work at all.

In the West we have various ways of dealing with the problem of doing too much work. We have no attempt at economic justice, so that a large proportion of the total produce goes to a small minority, many of whom do no work at all. Owing to the absence of any central control over production, we pro-

duce hosts of things that are not wanted. We keep a large percentage of the working population idle and make others overwork. When all these methods prove inadequate we have a war; we cause a number of people to manufacture high explosives, and others to explode them. By a combination of all these devices we manage, though with difficulty, to keep alive the notion that a great deal of manual work must be the lot of the average man.

The fact is that moving matter about, while a certain amount of it is necessary, is emphatically not one of the ends of human life. If it were, we should have to consider every navy superior to Shakespeare. We have been misled in this matter by the hereditary rich who, in order to keep the poor contented, have preached the *dignity of labor*, while taking care to remain undignified in this respect.

It will be said that while a little leisure is pleasant, men would not know what to do with too much of it. In so far as this is true in the modern world it is a condemnation of our civilization; it

would not have been true at any earlier period. There was formerly a capacity for light-heartedness and play which has been inhibited by the cult of efficiency. I do not mean that the world's leisure should necessarily be spent in pure frivolity. I mean that four hours' work a day should entitle a man to the necessities and elementary comforts of life, and that the rest of his time should be his to use as he might see fit. It is an essential part of any such social system that education should be carried farther and should aim, in part, at providing tastes which would enable a man to use leisure intelligently. I am not thinking of "high-brow" things. Peasant dances have died out, but the impulse which caused them must still exist in human nature. The pleasures of urban populations have become mainly passive: cinemas, football matches, the radio and so on. With more leisure people would again enjoy pleasures in which they took an active part.

In the past there was a small leisure class and a large

working class. The leisure class enjoyed advantages for which there was no basis in social justice. This necessarily made it oppressive, and limited its sympathies, but in spite of this drawback it contributed nearly the whole of what we call civilization. It cultivated the arts and discovered the sciences; it wrote the books, invented the philosophies, and refined social relations. Without the leisure class mankind would never have emerged from barbarism.

In a world where no one is compelled to work more than four hours a day every person possessed of scientific curiosity will be able to indulge it, and every painter will be able to paint without starving, however excellent his pictures may be. Above all, there will be happiness and joy of life, instead of frayed nerves, weariness, and

dyspepsia. The work exacted will be enough to make leisure delightful, but not enough to produce exhaustion. Ordinary men and women, having the opportunity of a happy life, will become more kindly and less inclined to view others with suspicion. Good nature is, of all moral qualities, the one that the world needs most, and good nature is the result of ease and security, not of a life of arduous struggle.

Modern methods of production have given us the possibility of ease and security for all; we have chosen instead to overwork some and starve others. Hitherto we have continued to be as energetic as we were before there were machines. In this we have been foolish, but there is no reason to go on being foolish forever. — *Bertrand Russell, condensed from Harpers, October, '32.*