

BOOK REVIEWS

ROSENBERG, STEPHEN D. *Time for Things. Labor, Leisure, and the Rise of Mass Consumption*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2021. 346 pp. \$49.95; £39.95; € 45.00.

This book addresses a puzzle. Why did a former decline in hours of paid work in first-wave industrial countries fizzle out during the third quarter of the twentieth century? I have been gazing at this same puzzle for fifty years, albeit from a position in leisure studies rather than economic theory, which is where Rosenberg starts. I have seen a stream of economists venture into the leisure field, offer equations accounting for changes and continuities over time in workers' time/money preferences. Before long, the economists all stepped back, when their models failed to fit the facts. So, I enjoyed Rosenberg's systematic rebuttal of the solutions proposed by classical economics' utility maximization theory, as tweaked by behavioural psychologists and exponents of the various Marxisms. Rosenberg has his own novel solution: a theory of commensuration, which is an "abduction" from the original research in this book on the development of industrial capitalism in the USA from the late-nineteenth century.

Rosenberg's history starts in the late-nineteenth century with the legitimization of wage labour, which meant its release from associations with unfree slave labour. This made it possible to conceive of a fair exchange between time lost to labour and the wages that enabled a person to purchase goods of commensurate time use value. "A fair day's work for a fair day's pay" became a slogan of organized American labour during the early twentieth century, with fairness agreed transactionally rather than set by custom. Then, between 1900 and World War II, the mechanized mass production of standardized products created spectacular gains in productivity from which labour's share was a mix of shorter work hours and higher pay. The continuation of these trends enabled John Maynard Keynes, in 1930, to envision that, by the end of the century, a full-time work week would last no longer than fifteen hours. Rosenberg emphasizes standardisation in "Fordist" production. Quality guarantees and product testing enabled consumers to assess (approximately) the free-time use value stored in the commodities that their wages enabled them to purchase.

After World War II, American capitalism entered its "golden age". Keynesian macro-economic management led to sustained year-on-year gains in output and productivity. Labour claimed and won a greater proportion of these gains than pre-1939, and took a rising and, eventually, its entire share of wage increases rather than reduced hours. Mass consumption was the complementary side of the "Fordist regime", and a crucial part of the post-war "settlement" between capital and labour. The expansion of sales and ownership of consumer products was unprecedented, and remains so. According to Rosenberg, consumer goods represent congealed future

free-time activity. Workers could “get ahead” and join the great American middle class by acquiring more possessions. All were able to rise together instead of competing to climb a status hierarchy. There is a fascinating chapter on the moral panic over planned obsolescence, which peaked between the 1950s and 1970s. There is so much fascinating detail within the history that a reader easily loses sight of the puzzle that Rosenberg claims to solve.

Fortunately, Rosenberg restates and completes his theory in the final chapter. Standardization will clearly facilitate comparisons of the amounts of labour invested in different products, and it will assist consumers in comparing the time-use value of two or more commodities that they might purchase. However, the value of any good available for purchase will vary from person to person, depending on subjective judgements. As will the value of the amounts of labour invested. The loss to any worker of time lost to labour and the value to a consumer of a product offering any amount of congealed free-time activity, are incommensurable. There is no common unit of comparison. Judgements of commensurability are ill-defined, unstable, and impossible to quantify. Rosenberg admits all this. So, does his commensuration theory flounder? No. Rather, Rosenberg argues that consumers are plunged into an insatiable quest to consume enough so that they can feel that they are receiving at least fair pay. Rosenberg compares this to Max Weber’s protestant ethic, which impelled Europe’s early capitalists into an insatiable quest to accumulate. Hence the propensity for capitalist production and consumption, work and spend, to spiral upwards indefinitely. Dual earning couples have increased the typical household’s total hours of paid work so that consumption can be maximized. Households do not save but accumulate increasing levels of debt.

The historical narrative in this book ends as the golden age of American capitalism closes in the 1970s. Historians might find this satisfactory but other readers will want the narrative brought up to date to demonstrate that the commensurate theory still works. There will be many similarities with earlier times, like customers queueing overnight for the latest iPhone just as they once went on waiting lists for the latest model of car. However, we have entered an age in which flexibilization has replaced standardization as the buzzword, in which just a small minority of employees actually make things, and a great deal of consumption offers instant gratification on holidays, meals out, and streamed or televised media content, rather than value stored for future use in manufactured possessions. People may not be working longer, but they are working harder, more intensely. Despite this, real incomes have been stagnating among and beneath middle earners. I am sure that the commensuration theory will prove able to cope, but this needs to be demonstrated. Maybe this is the topic for Rosenberg’s next book.

The evidence in this book is all from North America, and, more specifically, from the USA. Rosenberg suggests, but does not demonstrate, that the theory that he develops will be applicable in other economically advanced capitalist countries. This looks likely to be confirmed in Europe, though there will inevitably be differences in historical details. Wage labour in Europe became super-legitimate when serfdom was abolished centuries ahead of capitalist industrialization (except in Russia). In Britain, in the early twentieth century, organized labour campaigned for a living wage, not a fair wage, and the most bitter industrial disputes followed

employers' attempts to reduce wages. I expect the commensuration theory to triumph in East Asia where, in some countries, "Victorian" work schedules have been common in the twenty-first century, and some governments (South Korea and Japan, for example) have found it difficult to persuade workers to reduce their working time and to boost demand for time-costly domestic consumer services, such as excursions and live entertainment. Instead, workers purchase goods that they rarely or never use.

I think Rosenberg is plain wrong to treat work simply as lost time. People who lose their jobs miss more than the income, they miss: socializing; opportunities to use skills and experience; feeling that they are needed; solving problems; and overcoming challenges. I also think that he underestimates the role of reference and comparison groups in whether people feel fairly rewarded. He does not acknowledge that spare time can be plain boring.

That said, Rosenberg is to be congratulated for a book that, unusually nowadays, has something genuinely original to say. However, from my position in leisure studies, I thought that we already had a surfeit of solutions to "the puzzle": the expectation of Keynes and many leisure scholars from the 1930s to the 1960s that the pre-1939 decline in hours of paid work would continue leading to some kind of leisure society. Rosenberg had added a plausible explanation to several others. If we lengthen the historical perspective, we find that the exception that needs a special explanation is the steep hike in hours of paid work during the take-off of industrial capitalism, since when work-time in Europe and America has fallen back and settled around its historical norm. Then, there is the ease with which one decade's luxuries become necessities in the next. This happened to the motor car and, more recently, to smartphones. If we lengthen the life course perspective, we see that, over the last half century, years of non-working life have been added to childhood and youth, and to retirement. The economically active need to earn enough to redistribute consumption between age groups via private or public channels. Rosenberg adds his commensurability theory to these (and other) solutions to the puzzle.

In the closing paragraphs of his book, Rosenberg asks whether there is an alternative to the work-and-spend spiral. He suggests public discussion to establish a consensus on the balance between work and free time that will maximize human welfare. This seems close to what Soviet communism was trying to achieve with the addition of uses of free time that should be accessible to all citizens who did work fewer hours and owned fewer consumer goods than their Western counterparts. China is different. Its socialism has Chinese and many capitalist characteristics. Maybe now that the alleged threat of Ronald Reagan's evil empire has receded into history, it is time for a calmer and more balanced reevaluation of the Soviet experiment.

Ken Roberts

University of Liverpool, Department of Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology, United Kingdom

E-mail: K.Roberts@liverpool.ac.uk

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