
books in review

THOMAS STORCK

POSSESSED by OUR POSSESSIONS

Take Back Your Time: Fighting Overwork and Time Poverty in America. Edited by John de Graaf. Berrett-Koehler. 270 pages. \$14.95.

Josef Pieper's book *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* is justly held in high repute among Catholics. But how many Catholics who praise Pieper's theories are aware of the serious lack of leisure time in the U.S.? Not only do Americans labor more hours per day and year than western Europeans, we labor longer than our fathers did, even though productivity per worker has continued to increase in recent decades. Some of us work hours that approach those of early 19th-century English factory workers.

The book under review, self-

described as the official handbook of the national "Take Back Your Time" movement, is a collection of essays on various aspects of long working hours and the lack of leisure time in the U.S. It includes an essay by Juliet Schor, whose book, *The Overworked American*, first brought this matter to public attention in the early 1980s.

In order to understand the problem of lack of leisure time, one must first recognize that it *is* a problem. And here it is perhaps best to ask such questions as: What is the purpose of work; what is the purpose of economic activity; what, indeed, is the purpose of human life on this earth? No Catholic can claim that the mere piling up of material goods fulfills any of these purposes. But, as Schor says, "we as a society have chosen money over time, and this unconscious value pattern has had a powerful and less than beneficial impact on the quality of our collective lives." Indeed, everything from the raising of our children, the divorce rate, our health, voter turnout, and crime are all negatively affected by our lack of

leisure time. And the blame is divided by the authors among workers, corporations, and the government. Workers because many of us prefer money to time; corporations because they have been more concerned with their own profits than with their workers' lives; the government because we are one of the few countries in which there is no legally mandated minimum vacation — even China mandates three weeks of vacation per year for workers — and because no law prevents companies from compelling their employees to work overtime. As a result, we have a society of many willing workaholics with low civic participation, families falling apart, unsupervised children, and lonely old people.

Some might think that if leisure time increased for most contemporary Americans, we would simply waste it in front of the TV. But the authors of this book are aware of this possibility and address it in two ways. First, they point out that excessive TV watching can actually be *caused* by excessive work. "International com-

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parisons show that annual hours spent in front of the tube correlate strongly with annual hours worked. The more a country's people work, the more they watch TV. When you're exhausted, it's easier to curl up on the couch and grab the remote." Moreover, when the contributors to this volume speak of leisure time, they do not mean simply sitting around doing nothing, necessary though that can sometimes be. They include civic and volunteer activities of all kinds, all those unpaid things that benefit family, neighborhood, church, and community, but which, since they are unpaid, never show up in national economic statistics, no matter how beneficial they are to our national life.

Most of us are familiar with the story of the progressive shortening of the work day to the eight-hour standard that was achieved in the first half of the 20th century. But why stop at eight hours? In 1930 the Kellogg company in Michigan instituted the six-hour

work day, and in 1933 the U.S. Senate passed a bill to provide for a 30-hour work week. Unfortunately, the bill did not pass the House of Representatives, and we pretty much have forgotten about it ever since. At the time, Msgr. John Ryan, one of America's greatest Catholic social thinkers, wrote, "Just why a people should spend its time in turning out and consuming a hundred kinds of luxuries which minister only to material wants, instead of obtaining leisure for the enjoyment of the higher good of life is not easily perceptible.... Human life is primarily qualitative. It consists in thinking, knowing, communing, loving, serving, and giving rather than in having or enjoying." We find the same thought in these words of John Paul II from his encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, "It is not wrong to want to live better; what is wrong is a style of life which is presumed to be better when it is directed towards 'having' rather than 'being,' and which wants to have more, not in order to be more but in order to spend life in enjoyment as an end in itself."

Increasingly, our work is not even directed toward "enjoyment as an end in itself." I think of a young cousin of my wife's who manages an upscale restaurant and who works 12 hours a day, seven days a week. If he wants to take a day off, he must arrange it six months in advance. Or lawyers who work 70 hours a week and more. Or many poor people who work two or more jobs at minimum wage. This book tells the story of the "Registered nurses at St. Vincent's Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts [who] won a bitter strike against their for-profit

management's demand that they work eight hours of mandatory overtime on top of their regular eight-hour shifts." Most of us can probably find more examples from our relatives, friends, or even our own lives. That we do not recognize this as an absurd way to live is a sad statement about our national priorities as well as our lack of imagination.

In his essay "What's an Economy For?" David Korten, a former Stanford Business School Professor, points out that Americans are often told that we need to work as hard as we do because it's good for the economy. But, he responds, what is the economy for? Do we serve the economy or is it supposed to serve us? If we are destroying our families and our health for the sake of the economy, something would seem to be askew. As he says, "the purpose of an economy is to help us live fully and well. We devote so much of our personal time...to making money, we have forgotten how to live."

Take Back Your Time is full of examples of American overwork and of a variety of proposals for alleviating the situation. In an essay titled "Working Retired," Beverly Goldberg suggests "a phased retirement program... that could ease the transition for baby boom retirees and actually keep more of them working part time, thereby also reducing the burden on pension systems.... For example,... at age 55, workers cut back their hours to 32 hours a week...then at 60, they might cut back to 24 hours...at 65 to 16 hours, with the amount received in pensions rising commensurately."



In addition to directly helping the many among us who work long hours, these proposals might go a long way toward reducing unemployment, because many companies rely on forced overtime to obviate the need for hiring additional workers.

This book includes many suggestions for practical projects to educate Americans about overwork, including forming study circles, placing items in the press,

and especially promoting the national Take Back Your Time Day (www.timeday.org). Catholics, who presumably accept the words of Jesus Christ that "a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Lk. 12:15), ought to be among the most enthusiastic supporters of this cause. We should not ignore what is in fact an entirely Christian concern because we fear that those who promote it are "lazy" or

"Leftists" or what have you. Here is another way for Catholics to be countercultural, to reject the materialism that sacred Scripture so often warns us about, to promote better family and community life, maybe even to rekindle our spiritual lives. Surely all of this would be pleasing to the Creator of human life who did not place us on the earth primarily to increase without measure the Gross National Product. ■

William J. Tighe

WASTING CHRISTIANITY

Saving Christianity: New Thinking for Old Beliefs. By Hilary Wakeman. Foreward by Bishop Willie Walsh. *The Liffey Press (Ashbrook House, 10 Main St., Raheny, Dublin 5, Ireland).* 171 pages. \$19.75.

This is a fatuous book, instructive (if at all) only due to its intellectual incoherence, but nevertheless worth the attention of NOR readers for a reason that bears acutely upon the confusions so prevalent in the Catholic Church today. Hilary Wakeman, so she tells us, was raised a Catholic, "a very devout child," but in

her late teens "became an intellectual rebel and left the Church." Ten years later she began to attend the Anglican parish church in her English village, became active in it, and in 1994 was among the first women ordained to the priesthood in the Church of England. In 1996 she moved to Ireland, became Rectoress of an Anglican parish in County Cork, from which she retired in 2001.

In this book she presents us with her version of the thesis more notoriously expressed by Jack Spong, the retired Episcopalian Bishop of Newark, N.J., in his book *How Christianity Must*

Change or Die, that Christianity must, if it is to survive as a world religion and avoid "fundamentalism," jettison just about every element in its doctrinal proclamation and moral teaching that has characterized it throughout its history. Spong supports his case with arguments based on social change and the views of a certain

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