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Beyond Time and Money

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Next to the extinction of communism, nothing has disconcerted labor historians as much as the proliferation of cultural studies about mass consumption. By contrast, the critique of economism begun two decades ago under the influence of E. P. Thompson was a snap, for workers and the *making* of the working class remained the main focus, even as emphasis shifted from workplace to community contests over pub life, public parks, and other arenas of popular culture. Cultural studies of mass consumption, however, challenge whether it is still valid, much less possible, to focus uniquely on workers, except perhaps to deal with their *unmaking* as a class. Some are influenced by the “linguistic turn” associated with poststructuralism and deconstruction, putting pressure on labor historians to relate complex processes of signification to the changes in strategies and structures that are the meat and potatoes of the labor-history field.

In this sense, the corpus of Gary Cross’s work, produced over the last decade and a half, is paradigmatic. Starting at the point of production, with a workmanlike master’s thesis on trade unions and Taylorism in France,¹ Cross shifted to study labor movements and policy-making related to leisure, concentrating on the struggles for shorter hours in Britain and France, though not on the significance of the practices of leisure and consumption in themselves.² With his latest book, of which his contribution to this scholarly controversy is a tantalizing synthesis,³ he wants to interpret the meaning of consumer culture by examining why workers came to prefer more money to more leisure. Critical of the unrevised labor history that spotlights work and distributional politics to the neglect of cultural issues, Cross is nonetheless dismissive of all those varieties of cultural studies – a rubric under which he indiscriminately plops postmodernists, poststructuralists, and so on – that allegedly forsake historical context and are indifferent to the dynamics of class and collective action. His route is perhaps closest to British cultural critics of Gramscian persuasion, in particular John Clarke, who argue for studying the hegemonic functions of consumption (as well as opposition and resistance) in the context in which the needs and pleasures associated with consumer culture originally evolved.⁴ Cross’s strength with respect to those studies is his broad grasp of distributional politics and his endeavor to place labor politics in comparative perspective.

In particular, Cross wants to recapture the moment in which workers made fundamental choices about entering into consumer society, the main one, as he characterizes it, being whether to bargain for time or for money. Why was it that workers chose to earn more at the expense of freedom from the workplace? Why did they opt for more goods and longer hours rather than for more free time and proportionately fewer goods? Put another way, why did workers buy into consumer society, relinquishing a more authentic and autonomous sociability for commodities of dubious cultural worth? This decision was not inevitable,

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Cross argues, however natural it looks today. Time or money was a hotly disputed issue between labor and capital, resolved in the latter's favor only during the hard times of the 1930s.

Historically, it is true, workers were on the side of less work. From the start of industrialization, management found it expedient to keep workers on the job for relatively long hours, and work weeks of seventy-eight to eighty hours were not uncommon in the absence of countervailing pressures. The labor movement, seizing advantage from Fordist-type innovation, battled on behalf of shorter working time, bringing the work week down to forty-eight hours in the aftermath of World War I. Government wages and hours regulation, promoted by unions, brought the work week down to forty hours and in Europe even lower in the 1970s.

Cross's central question, then, is why hours did not decrease further in view of the huge productive capacity of rationalized firms and the pressure from labor and government to spread work in the face of widespread unemployment in the 1930s. Implicitly, he also is asking why labor and its allies did not seize the occasion to generate a modern alternative to what he elsewhere calls "consumerist modernity," when it was still possible to conceive of an autonomous or alternative worker leisure. Asymmetries of power between capital and labor were the underlying cause, he responds. But under the threat of layoffs, organized labor also was inclined to defend wage levels rather than pursue shorter hours. The desire to keep up consumption levels and thus preserve personal status may also have biased workers toward money, though in France and Britain at the time (the countries Cross knows best), consumer goods seemed not to have been readily enough available to prompt such acquisitive behaviors. Ultimately, job and wage insecurity, together with the waning of any convincing vision of the regenerative powers of free leisure, accentuated the bias toward money.

Blame for preferring money to time is thus laid not only on the obvious culprits, capitalist employers, with the acquiescence of labor elites, but also on what Cross calls modernist intellectuals for failing to sustain a powerful enough critique of and an institutional alternative to individual acquisitiveness (and who may prefigure the poststructuralists, and so on, of today). To support his argument, he could have cited the failure of the grand traditions of municipal socialism, which were mobilized in the 1920s and 1930s. Helmut Gruber's *Red Vienna* testifies to their great achievements and grave frailties in the Austrian capital where Europe's most sophisticated social democracy, embracing the Viennese working class in a cradle-to-grave subculture, fell to the onslaught of fascism.⁵ The Blum government, too, was a pioneer in the domain of popular leisure, in its capacity as impresario of the first mass holiday exodus in August 1936, even if, like the popular front government in Spain, it remained wary of the antiproductivist tendencies of "free time."⁶ In the end, however, modernist intellectuals grew indifferent to the issue of time or money, as if fearing that the longer periods of leisure would only lend themselves to being more intensely colonized by commercialism. By the 1950s, the workers were left to stew in their own bricolage, without fear they would spoil high culture. Reformers had also accepted what the prescient U.S. Progressive Simon N. Patten (*The Material Basis of Civilization*) had predicted at the outset of the century: that the leisure pastimes and consumer habits permitted by higher wages would have no discernibly negative effect on output or the work ethic. Indeed, consumption

would enforce a new social discipline and civic conformity. The labor movement thus lost its intellectual allies. Hoisted on the petard of its own productivism, the higher wages that the labor movement claimed for greater output delegitimized demands for shorter hours. Whenever organized labor pressed for shorter worktime, it claimed it was to promote consumption. On the issue of advancing worker culture, the labor movement became mute.

Cross's thought-provoking reconstruction of lost opportunities prompts me to ask two questions: first, whether the antimony "time vs. money" really does justice to the complexity of the issues under dispute; and second, whether there might not be other major trends during the interwar era that offer a better explanatory context in which to characterize these contests and their outcomes.

To me, the phrase time vs. money is like other keywords of capitalist market culture, such as "unemployment," "housework," the "family wage," or "leisure"; they were constructed, to recall Raymond Williams's work, in the process of complex clashes over signification involving state and market, capital and labor, not to mention men and women in conflict over proper roles and just social desserts. How they came to be adopted by policy-making elites, much less in common parlance, itself needs to be a subject of scrutiny.

In any case, work and consumption, hours on the job and leisure, money and time, never were as antithetical as Cross suggests. From the start, labor ideology combined a mish-mash of productivist and consumptionist themes, and labor movements often contained a strong consumerist component.⁷ The rise of a trade unionism focusing strictly on wage issues was a rather late development, all told, and labor leaders took it for granted that consumer interests were being specialized and represented in related associations. Moreover, by the late nineteenth century, if not earlier, the demand for wages embodied a strong interest in consumption. In significant new research, Lawrence Glickman shows that workers used consumption styles much like the craft skills they shared in common to form solidarities, as well as to differentiate themselves from others.⁸ Higher wages thus became pivotal to a new moral economy, mediated by money that translated prestige and skill on the job into recognition of status in the community.

The meaning of time also was multivalent. Leisure, to take one aspect of time use, is not just idle relaxation or self-improvement, but also the diverse unpaid activities that a viable society requires, whether deployed in civic participation or in caring for children and the elderly. Its use is deeply gendered and shaped by age, class, and employment, among other factors.⁹ Cross's equation may well reflect the calculations of the labor movement in the interwar era. If we conjure up the skilled male during his pastimes – a French artisan idly playing boules, the British tool-and-die worker stroking his pet pigeons, or the Turin machinist weeding zucchini in his garden plot – we can indeed visualize Cross's rendering of the virtues of the trade-off of time for money and vice versa. However, most pastimes were not so quaint and their protagonists were not skilled males. Recent studies suggest that working-class leisure was commercialized considerably earlier than was once thought, not only in the United States, but in Great Britain and on the European continent as well.¹⁰ Even if consumer durables were not yet widely available to most people, Western Europe was by and large a commercialized society. Its consumer culture may be more aptly characterized as "bourgeois" than "mass," it is true, and in rural areas barter was still common. Nonetheless, money

spoke, even if it was possessed in only minute quantities. Arguably, the greatly increased differentiation of pastimes by age and sex, which was bound up with the commercialization of leisure pastimes, enhanced money's worth to the young especially, for whom a cheap ticket to the cinema, the sports gazette, or the proverbial serialized novelette represented a purchase of autonomy with respect to adults and a reinforcing of peer-group cultures.

How the choice of money over time reflected and reinforced male–female roles is a central question, not at all near resolution. The American case suggests that workers sought higher wages to differentiate themselves from other working people they regarded as their inferiors – women as well as blacks and newer immigrant groups. Higher pay also identified men as the chief breadwinners and heads of households, superior in their performance toward dependent wives and family members. The demand for money, as opposed to time, may thus have furthered the differentiation of roles between men – designated as producers and breadwinners – and women – defined as consumers and homemakers. It hardly seems happenstance that in the very years that money won out over time, leisure was more and more identified as a sphere ruled by women: for their pleasure, when it took the form of moviegoing, shopping, or daydreaming, as well as to fulfill their duties as household managers. What all was embodied in the myth of the “feminization of consumption” needs to be dissected. Logically, it would seem that women, more than men, would have preferred time to money, given the demands of their family, their occupation in declining sectors, like textiles, with long workdays, and their minimal pay rates. Maybe so, but in view of family and other social constraints, women's time off work certainly did not mean leisure, in the sense calculated by and for men.

Finally, we question whether the choice of money over time meant buying into consumer society. All things being equal, sociability and political awareness go hand in hand. If nothing else, consumer goods are also information goods. This was especially true in the interwar period, when the most visible shift in lower-class consumption was associated with the advent of electronic media, and in the United States with the automobile and consumer durables. As Elizabeth Cohen's work on Chicago workers surely demonstrates,¹¹ the informational exchange and sense of commonality afforded by simultaneously acquiring consumer durables promoted a form of collective consciousness, sufficient to undercut all kinds of skill, ethnic, and neighborhood divisions among workers. The emerging mass consumption economy thus supported the rise of industrial unions, fostering worker participation in New Deal politics.

This takes me to my second point, which refers to the nature of the interwar context. The 1930s (and in England, the 1920s as well) were characterized by depression, insecurity, and unemployment, to be sure. But it was also a period in which popular cultural pastimes became more and more commercialized. This process was wholly bound up with the emergence in the 1920s of the United States as the world's premier mass-consumer society: it delivered the goods to the masses at home at the same time as it became the leading exporter of cultural artifacts abroad. In Europe, U.S. imports in the form of cinema, print advertising, rotary presses, and new consumer goods produced an extraordinary change in what Benedict Anderson calls the “imagined community” of the nation; not only did American imports introduce a whole new economy of desire, they also highlighted the difficulties government

faced in protecting cultural industries against foreign penetration, much less manipulating them in the interests of the dominant political order and to protect the social-cultural stratifications of bourgeois society.¹²

In reality, then, labor reformers were faced with not one, but two, models of consumerist modernity, not counting the prevailing bourgeois model. One of them, that which Cross decries, was associated with the United States, with its ideals of unceasing abundance, superproductivity, conformism, and accentuated individualism. The other, which might be identified with the labor movement organized under the aegis of European social democracy and the communist movement, was also productivist, but stressed socialized access to consumption and austere notions of needs. Both models of modernity were deeply unsettling in the context of the interwar era, for both were premised on economic redistribution and social and cultural leveling. However, the former was identified with the status leveling of a conservative democracy in which the state was embedded in the market: it promised acquisitive individualism on a mass scale, the erosion of high culture, and emancipatory life-styles, and it powerfully challenged the gender roles and social and cultural stratifications of a class-polarized bourgeois society. The danger posed by the left was more immediately threatening to the prevailing order, to be sure: it combined mobilizing politics and demands for redistribution with the defense of the subcultural way of life identified with the old craft-industrial working class.

With Cross's notion of a single "contested terrain" of consumerist modernity, we are basically forced back on the antimonies that he himself wants to leave behind: empowerment vs. disempowerment, the closed circle of capitalist modernization vs. the emancipatory power of the labor movement. Why should it not be that the paths to consumerist modernity are as diverse as, say, the differences of development that separated England from Germany under early industrialism? It matters deeply that in the United States the path to mass consumption was achieved behind tariff walls before the turn of the century, propelled by a war economy (1915–1920), though without war damage, and perceived as having brought about the assimilation of a myriad ethnic working class – to highlight only a few major features. Likewise, it matters that in continental Europe, it took the destruction of the politically encapsulated communities of the prewar left and the catastrophic defeat of totalitarian mass politics before the redistribution indispensable to mass consumption occurred. In Europe, too, we face the paradox that the parties of the old left, by spearheading the demand for economic redistribution, eventually contributed to their own unmaking, to the degree that economic well-being and mass consumption broke down the worker subcultures that undergirded the parties' political identities.

Greater precision about the legacy of the transition toward, not to mention the contemporary organization of, mass consumption matters in order to assess how people use goods in their social relations. The legacy of European statism is still visible in the strong regulatory practices in communications, especially television (though undercut recently), and in retailing, including closing hours (to protect middle-class shopkeepers and retail workers), the measures for vacation time, and shared notions of bourgeois provenance about the quality of life. These features are cherished not only by working people, but also as expressions of a

new European (as distinct from American) standard of living, promoted by consumer, ecology, and green movements, as well as by the welfare state.

Meanwhile, the once bountiful tree of U.S. consumerist modernity yields shriveled fruit. Nowhere is this more evident than in the fate of the so-called time–money option. In her recently published book, *The Overworked American*, economist Juliet B. Schor found that workers in the United States now work more and earn less than in the recent past and in comparison to their European counterparts. Moreover, they have never acquired what European workers regard as rights of citizenship under late capitalism, namely, several weeks annual vacation time, thirteenth- and fourteenth-month salaries and family allocations, and relatively easier access to cultural facilities. In the United States, hours of work started upward in the 1970s, increasing to the point where the average worker now puts in an estimated sixty-four extra hours of paid labor annually. Joblessness and overwork now go hand in hand, with stagnating productivity seeming to contribute to longer working time. Inflation induces the search for more pay, bringing back the family with two or more breadwinners, its life so joyless and its leisure skills so atrophied that further investment in goods seems the only way to maintain confidence in the future. Under these conditions, free time only seems to aggravate scarcity and stress, whereas higher wages are associated with indebtedness and overwork.

To sum up, like industrialization or the second industrialization, the mass-consumer phase of industrialization (and deindustrialization as well) has involved major contests of vision and power. But in the face of the “bad new,” why persist in looking for the “good old”? Why seek out autonomy, construct implausible alternatives, or make the working class responsible for the persistence or creation of a consumer counterculture? Why not forget the quest after the never-never land of “free time” to focus more sharply on explanations of the new demands for entitlement shaped by mass consumption and the disenfranchising political systems and styles of “weak” citizenship and “postpatriotic” sovereignty that seem to be bound up with their development? Forward, labor historians, throw off your workerist shackles!

NOTES

1. Gary Cross, “Productivity and French Labor, 1910–1931” (MA thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1973).
2. Cross’s books include *A Quest for Time: The Reduction of Work in Britain and France, 1840–1940* (1989); *A Social History of Leisure Since 1600* (1990); and *Worktowners at Blackpool: Mass Observation and Popular Culture in the 1930s* (1990).
3. *Time and Money: The Making of Consumer Culture* (London, 1993).
4. See, in particular, John Clarke, “Pessimism versus Populism: The Problematic Politics of Popular Culture,” in *For Fun and Profit: The Transformation of Leisure into Consumption*, ed. Richard Butsch (Philadelphia, 1990); and idem, *The Devil Makes Work. Leisure in Capitalist Britain* (Urbana, 1985).
5. Helmut Gruber, *Red Vienna* (New York, 1991).
6. Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy, 1934–1938* (New York, 1988); and Michael Seidman, *Workers Against Work* (Berkeley, 1990).
7. See, for example, Ellen Furlough, *Consumer Cooperation in France: The Politics of Consumption, 1834–1930* (Ithaca, 1991).

8. Lawrence Glickman, "A Living Wage: Political Economy, Consumerism, and Gender in American Culture, 1880–1924" (unpublished paper). My gratitude to the author for sharing with me his major arguments.
9. Cf. Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, 1986); also my *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley, 1992), esp. chap. 7.
10. Lynn Abrams, *Workers' Culture in Imperial Germany* (New York, 1992).
11. Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (New York, 1990).
12. See my "Mass Culture and Sovereignty: The American Challenge to European Cinemas," *Journal of Modern History* 61 (March 1989):53–87.