

Envisioning a Future by Paying Attention to the Past:

Rediscovering the Work-of-Leisure

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ABSTRACT

Populist movements are inherently reactionary, motivated by dissatisfaction with the *status quo* (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008). One source of dissatisfaction in the West over the last decade has been a decline in prosperity alongside an increase in demands for improved performance – a combination that does not sit well with the organisational mantra of achieving more for less. Whilst some political leaders choose to fuel these reactionary dynamics, the opportunity for a more radical leadership intervention in (re-)discovering a desired future is lost.

In this paper we will interrogate the acquisitive busy-ness that is endemic in modern society and consider the place of an ancient understanding of the work-of-leisure (Pieper, 1952). This contrasts with a desire for ‘free’ time, an alienated form of leisure that lacks philosophical insight (Allen, 1989). We ask, ‘How might leadership contribute to a populist movement that re-envisions a quality of life based on communal wisdom rather than materialistic acquisition?’

Key Words: leadership; leisure; organisational practice; philosophy; productivity; work

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Leisure is not the attitude of mind of those who actively intervene, but of those who are open to everything; not of those who grab and grab hold, but of those who leave the reins loose and who are free and easy themselves – almost like a man falling asleep, for one can only fall asleep by ‘letting oneself go’. (Pieper, 1952: 28).

Modern notions of organisational leadership are dominated by a work ethic that emphasises long hours of dedicated effort in the achievement of defined tasks. By introducing a consideration of leisure into a discussion of organisational and leadership practice we are not seeking to question the importance of hard work. However, we believe that the modern tendency to define leisure as the opposite of work is unhelpful and that it is *busy-ness*, not work *per se*, that is the more enlightening antonym. Current discourses tend to adopt a diminished understanding of leisure as *merely the absence* of productive work (Case *et al*, 2012: 354). By contrast, we argue that some traditional understandings of leisure clearly see it as a form of work, but one concerned not with productivity but with learning, inquiry and the search for meaning, purpose and connection in life.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the potential contribution of the work-of-leisure to organisational practice. This is important in the study of organisational leadership because of the tendency to value busy-ness and overwork as a virtue, not only in relation to leaders but in all aspects of employee behaviour (Ciulla, 2000). It is noteworthy that the etymological root of the word business is the Old English term *bisignis*, meaning anxiety, and the meanings of business as ‘being busy’ and ‘working on an appointed task’ developed from the twelfth century.

As a result of this over-valuing of busyness, the potential contribution of the work-of-leisure tends to remain unrecognised, ignored or actively excluded, ‘now almost forgotten’ (Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 2013: 9). This can lead to what has been argued to be a lack of ‘free time’ available for the pursuit of meaning through the work-of-leisure in contrast to the ‘devouring time’ (O’Loughlin, 1978: 99; see also Robert, 1980) of the work-of-production.

Illustration: eARThSus

Within Western society the wisdom of productivity and growth goes almost unquestioned: surely increased wealth, greater output, expanded capacity is always a good thing, isn’t it? This question is raised in the following illustration, which is a fictionalised account based on an action research intervention with a charitable organisation.

eARThSus has a vision for changing the way that society thinks about and looks after the environment. It has been supported financially through philanthropy and through its own endeavours, with major income streams from both sustainability consultancy and the sale of art and crafts. Following its creation in the early 1990s, the venture grew slowly, in line with the increasing interest and involvement of the local community.

As word of their philosophy and ethos became more widely known, new national and international markets for the retailing side of eARThSus began to open up, as well a steady increase in consultancy work. Over the last decade, eARThSus has begun to experience relatively rapid growth, to the point where five years ago there was a need to professionalise a number of its business operations: it reached a size where it was no longer possible for the lean management team to keep up with the growing level of activity. It was with great relief to existing managers that the senior team grew to include not merely the divisional heads with an Executive

Director, but also specialist managers occupying corporate roles: Directors of Operations, Finance, Marketing and Development.

This growth in the senior team made it possible to envision further plans for expansion, particularly identifying new income streams from a diversified product range. In addition, the sense of momentum encouraged the development and marketing of new commercial training and research services that built on their experience of sustainability consultancy.

Wealthy investors provided capital to develop these initiatives, recognising the income generating opportunities. However, after two years there was an increasing sense of dissatisfaction with the slow rate of growth in commercial revenue and some began to suggest that there was a need for a more business-like ethos within the organisation.

The management team were, again, being required to work harder and faster to try to keep up with growing expectations. The senior management team of eARThSus is now facing a major organisational development challenge in evaluating the strategic options available to it in order to successfully increase revenue streams that will serve organisational ambitions as well as to appease investors. They are facing a classic challenge encountered by most growing businesses.

As a consequence, there is a sense of concern and urgency within the organisation and the community and this is expressed in two ways. The first, and more prominent amongst the managers, relates to the challenge of generating additional income, made particularly difficult by the likelihood that several of the commercial ventures appear likely to fail to break-even in the coming year. There is a growing pressure not merely to address existing problems but also to identify new revenue streams. The second, predominant within certain sections of the staff body –

particularly the volunteers – as well as supporters within the local community, is a sense that eARThSus is not the organisation it used to be – that things feel different and not in a good sense. This is expressed in various ways but includes a concern that the original mission and vision is being lost.

Some of the senior management team have picked up on this second concern and are raising the possibility that eARThSus could address the current situation by considering alternatives to a push for revenue growth. For example, one strategic option being voiced is that a more sustainable business model might include the decision to stabilise the level of activity and even to reduce the number of initiatives and turnover, permitting eARThSus to return to being less complex in management and organisational structure. This is not unknown as an organisational strategy but not generally as a positive choice – more often than not it is adopted as a sign of defeat, only when it is considered necessary for survival.

It is extremely difficult to resist the imperative for growth and expansion. However, this short narrative illustrates the manner in which the pressure of expectation, the assumption that increase is inevitably good, has the potential to lead some organisations to become so busy that they risk losing touch with their original purpose and, in line with this, a more effective operational practice. It is the work-of-leisure to ask whether we are still in touch with meaning and purpose, individually and collectively. Sometimes it is the function of the work-of-leisure to question whether the work-of-production is beginning to dominate in an unhealthy way or to an unhelpful extent.

In a society whose institutions are typically dominated by a productive work ethic, priority tends to be given to values of activity and resourcefulness. In contrast, leisure is typically

conceived of as *in*-activity and a lack of productivity. In this context, the experience of leisure is almost bound to be impoverished, simply defined as everything that work is not: ‘time to kill’, an ‘escape’ from the ‘reality’ of everyday work, even laziness, which Allen (1989) describes as an alienated form of leisure that lacks philosophical insight.

By contrast, we are concerned with a work-of-leisure that contributes to a quality of attention to what is desired rather than compelled or expected: ‘time free for its own sake, time in another dimension from that of the busy world, free time not as escape but as fulfillment.’ (O’Loughlin, 1978: 5). We argue that such a practice is valuable in its own right and seek in this paper to redress the balance: to reclaim a rightful place for the work-of-leisure – and this not just in our personal lives but also in the workplace. This is based on an assumption that many organisational actors, at all levels of power and influence, are caught in a spinning hamster wheel of overwork, misguided personal and collective ambition, and unexamined, unrealistic expectations.

We suggest that the work-of-leisure can support the work-of-production, and vice versa, both making a distinctive contribution to the quality of organisational practice. It is possible to take a more extreme position and argue that the purpose of productive work is to make possible the work-of-leisure. This is not our argument here, which is for one of greater balance between the work-of-production and the work-of-leisure, but it is helpful, briefly, to consider this proposition.

Ancient Philosophy and the Place of Leisure

Aristotle suggested, ‘We are busy in order to have leisure [scholaxōmen]’ (1984: II, 1861 [1177b 4]). Indeed, the original Greek is even clearer in that the term translated ‘busy’ is

ascholoumetha, literally ‘without leisure’ or ‘unleisurely’. The latter translation reflects the ancients’ tendency to define being busy with the work-of-production as an absence of leisure. It is the same in Latin, where leisure is *otium* and work *negotium*, the negation of leisure – the opposite of our modern tendency to define leisure as the absence of the work-of-production.

This linguistic dimension to the discussion of leisure brings into focus the significance of leisure in relation to culture. The key ingredient in both the Greek and the Latin terms for the work-of-production (without leisure) is the negative element: ‘a-’ and ‘neg-’. Both suggest, therefore, that it is possible to conceive of the work-of-production as the removal or denial of something positive, and in both instances the positive experience to be negated was the same: leisure – *skolē*, *otium*. This is more than an immature resistance provoked by ‘having to work’, and is not just a game of words, ‘an etymological curiosity’ (O’Loughlin, 1978: 7). Rather it is a vivid reflection of the restrictions that ‘our culture’s poverty of imagination’ places on leisure’s potential (Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 2013: 9; see also Allen, 1989; Barrett, 1989; Pieper, 1952) and in this we are drawing attention to leisure’s potential relevance in the workplace as well as for personal development and fulfilment.

The way affirmation and negation overlap in the words *ascholoumetha* and *negotium* highlights a crucial question: to what attitudes and activities does any particular culture attribute positive value? What is taken away or negated to create an understanding of valuable work? This is the context in which Aristototele’s assertion that ‘we are unleisurely in order to have leisure’ is disorienting to the modern mind; it is precisely because it reverses our sense of reality – of what is right.

An appreciation of the work-of-leisure as of greater value than the work-of-production is particular to the practice of philosophy ‘in the traditional sense of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas... In [which] the philosophical act is a fundamental relation to reality, a full personal attitude which presupposes silence, a contemplative attention to things’ (Pieper, 1952: xx). Of course, it is leadership and organisational practice that is our concern here, and not the practice of philosophy. However, through this brief reflection on a philosophical tradition we seek to highlight the potential value of an enhanced quality of attention of our ‘fundamental relation to reality’ and the particular significance of this in the workplace. In this sense, our thesis is not irrelevant to the challenges of sustainability and responsible management and the impact of organisations in the modern global context. (Laasch and Conawaym, 2014).

Our argument, therefore, is concerned with the need for greater balance, recognising that the human condition demands the creation of wealth through the work-of-production, requiring a culture of achievement, *alongside* the work-of-leisure that comprises the search for meaning, purpose and connection. It is valuable to understand the central importance of leisure in some philosophical traditions, which highlights the nature of the contribution that the work-of-leisure might bring to the workplace. Its neglect runs the risk of creating a situation in which individuals, and collectively society as a whole, struggle to find meaning in existence. In such a context, the acquisition of wealth and materialism can become a substitute for finding a sense of purpose and meaning in life – but the satisfaction derived from this is invariably short-lived.

A Culture of Leisure

Writing in Germany soon after the end of the Second World War, Pieper (1952) started his essay, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*, with ‘an objection of the kind which the scholastic called a *Videtur quod non*.’ (p.21) The objection was to the idea of even considering the issue of leisure, when it seemed to be a case of all hands to the pump just to rebuild after the devastation: ‘Now of all times, in the post-war years is not the time to talk about leisure.’ (ibid.). However, he argued that beyond the immediate issues of survival, this was in fact the most important time to consider leisure because it is one of the foundations of Western culture. This moment of rebuilding could therefore be seen as demanding that the cultural assumptions upon which the basic decisions about rebuilding were being made should be identified and analysed, not just taken for granted. The very thing that might be hanging in the balance, he suggested, was whether or not the ‘new house’ was to be built in the Western tradition, in which leisure has had such a central significance.

Although we have drawn here on the tradition of leisure that evolved in the ancient world, it is important to recognise that this exploration of tradition is not just what T.S. Eliot called ‘some pleasing archæological reconstruction’ (Eliot, 1920/1997: 39). The essence of the tradition was ‘handed down’ in a way that enabled it for centuries still to be ‘kept alive’ (Coomaraswamy, 1977: 444). Illich has identified the work of Hugh of St Victor (c.1096-1141) as representing the last expression of a culture of leisure before it disappeared underground, as it were: ‘Hugh demands that the reader who desires to reach perfection engage himself in leisure (*otium*).’ (Illich, 1993: 63) The ‘reader’ addressed in Hugh’s ‘study of reading’ would have been a monk desiring to be engaged with monastic leisure, *otia monastica* (ibid., pp. 61-4). Leclerc puts the matter succinctly: ‘The whole organization of

monastic life is dominated by the solicitude for safeguarding a certain spiritual leisure’ (Leclerc, 1982: 19).

This ancient tradition of leisure has re-emerged at various points in the history of the West; particularly, for example, in the Renaissance of the 15th century, where Ficino’s engagement with and reworking of Plato and other classical writers led him to talk of ‘The usefulness of the leisured life’ (Ficino, 1975: 193), but also in the 19th century: ‘I am Retired Leisure. ... I walk about; not to and from.’ (Lamb, 1833/1922: 172); and in our own day: ‘true learning, according to Illich, can only be the leisured pursuit of free people’ (Cayley, 1992: 8). It appears that there is much evidence to support Pieper’s claim that leisure is ‘one of the foundations of Western culture’ (1952: 21).

A significant transition away from valuing a culture of leisure appears to have occurred at the time of the Enlightenment, exemplified in Kant’s denial of the role of the intuitive, receptive and contemplative mind in the development of knowledge, which he held to be discursive. In 1796, Kant explicitly contradicted the romantic and intuitive philosophers of the time, stating that in philosophy, ‘the law is that reason acquires its possessions through work’ (quoted in Pieper, 1952: 8). Further, utilitarianism pervades post-Enlightenment thinking, demanding effort that will result in a measurable outcome, and so accentuating the inclination to make an association between leisure and idleness. However, as a moral philosophy based on the belief that ‘value depends entirely on utility’ (Jevons in Kerr, 1962: 40), utilitarianism has been argued to sacrifice truth on the altar of efficiency (Fournier and Grey, 2000: 17), defining the good in terms of market share or profit as ‘the sole criterion of value’ (Block et al., 2016: 22). The challenge facing any attempt to reclaim greater balance between the work-of-production and the work-of-leisure will include countering these powerful societal forces. This context

offers an impoverished agenda in the human search for purpose and connection, limiting organisational practice to the pursuit of the 'useful' rather than knowledge and experience that is meaningful in its own right.

The Conscious Administration of Learning and Development

By contrast, the philosophy of ancient Greece understood leisure as an important feature of societal effectiveness, including but not limited to economic success. From this tradition leisure is primarily associated with learning - the Greek *skolē* is the etymological root of the word 'school' - the place of education being concerned with the work-of-leisure. This is a notion that still survives in the much debated idea of the 'liberal' or 'free' arts. (Pieper, 1952: 54-6, also Colby et al, 2011; Nussbaum, 1977; Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 2013)

Understood in this sense the work-of-leisure plays an important role in providing the opportunity to understand the complexities of human interaction and to appreciate the manner in which the pursuit of a multiplicity of values must combine together to create a healthy society. However, this goes beyond understanding the educative work-of-leisure as another form of work-of-production as it plays an important role in the pursuit of non-utilitarian ends. For example, Nightingale argues that,

Aristotle wants his educational system to produce the free men [*sic*] who will rule and act virtuously in civic affairs, but he also wants these men to experience the more radical freedom that accompanies activities that are "not for the sake of" anything or anyone. (2004: 247)

The grounding of post-Enlightenment thinking in utilitarianism, rationality and empiricism – Blake's 'single vision and Newton's sleep' (Davis and Pound, 1996: 148) – stands as a

concrete barrier, shutting out *a priori* other visions of reality. In opposition to the forces of Enlightenment, the thinkers and practitioners of the Romantic period drew on the ancient springs of Platonic, neo-Platonic and Renaissance models (Raine, 1985). This was not ‘philosophizing’ in the sense of constructing a system of ideas but was rooted in *theoria*, contemplation, a form of knowing beyond theory (Case et al, 2012; Nightingale 2004), a knowing which ‘is always experience, or rather it is an inner metamorphosis’ (Hadot, 1993: 48). Hadot (1995) refers to this as ‘philosophy as a way of life’, exemplified in Socrates who ‘had no system to teach. Throughout, his philosophy was a spiritual exercise, an invitation to a new way of life, active reflection, and living consciousness.’ (p. 157).

In an organisational context, philosophy – like leisure – is not a term that sits easily as having relevance to the practical demands of the workplace. However, just as we are clarifying the purpose of the work-of-leisure as contributing to the practices of learning and development and the search for purpose, meaning and connection – in the same way the ancient understanding of philosophy as a way of life is concerned with relevance to everyday practice, enabled through a certain quality of thinking and being. This applies to both the work-of-leisure and the work-of-production, and might be understood in a contemporary context not as an expression of the love of wisdom but as the *conscious administration* of ourselves in all aspects of our organisational practice.

Put simply, this involves taking ourselves, our thoughts, values and aspirations more seriously. It is to take up the authority to question the world around us, including the organisations in which we work, and to ask whether the situation is as it should be and what we want – to question our ‘fundamental relation to reality’ (Pieper, 1952: xx). A conscious process of ministering to ourselves in seeking to achieve the meaningful, purposeful life that

we desire requires the courage to ask and engage with challenging questions. For example, ‘do I take my personal values seriously in the workplace or am I merely a hired hand offering time/effort in exchange for pay?’

In both the work-of-leisure and the work-of-production, this involves gaining an understanding of the required cultural values (personal and organisational), clarity about our intentions (what is the focus of our aspiration?), the quality and focus of attention, and the aptitudes needed to perform effectively. Thinking deeply and critically about each of these aspects of our context and practice constitutes the conscious administration of ourselves.

Discussion

We will now discuss the practical implications of reclaiming a greater balance between the work-of-leisure and the work-of-production in modern organisations by means of a second illustration. In the example of eARThSus, above, we introduced the potential contribution of the work-of-leisure at the organisational level. We suggested that an over-valuing of the work-of-production can lead to a momentum for growth that is difficult to resist, even when it results in dysfunctional levels of busy-ness and losing touch with vision and mission. It was implied that the work-of-leisure is needed to balance the work-of-production in order to achieve a strategic-cultural fit in the leadership of organisations. We now illustrate the cultural significance of the work-of-leisure at the level of individual practice by considering the appraisal and development interview, demonstrating its potential relevance to self-leadership and the process of attending to personal and corporate values. This is, again, a fictionalised account based on an action research intervention.

The new HR manager of StraightMeadows Inc. identified a number of worrying metrics in the performance of several divisions in the organisation,

including high staff turnover and sickness absence, when compared to industry benchmarks. She initiated a cultural change programme seeking to bring a greater sense of ownership of and commitment throughout the organisation to corporate mission and purpose.

One aspect of this was a review and redesign of the appraisal and development interview process. What she had inherited was not atypical of approaches used at many organisations that each year require the staff member to complete a written review of their major activities and a self-evaluation of their performance against the objectives set at the previous appraisal. The subsequent thirty minute interview with their line manager involves working through this self-evaluation, and comparing this against the results of a 360 degree feedback and various performance metrics obtained from the management information system. The outcome of the interview is an agreed evaluation of performance and the setting of goals for the following year.

The new system required line managers to be re-educated to focus not merely upon performance against individual goals but to perform a more holistic review of each staff member's behaviour, attitudes and disposition, including their quality of attention to organisational vision, purpose and culture. In other words, the question that line managers were required to explore with their staff was not just 'have you met your goals?' but 'how are you performing as a vital part of this organisation?' This required more time than the previous approach – typically in the region of two hours – as well as a more exploratory, inquiring conversational style.

Alongside other initiatives, this shift in approach contributed to a significant decrease in staff turnover and sickness absence rates. Critical to the success of this initiative was that the

original approach, which focused on the essential work-of-production requiring each person to be clear on their individual goals, was not merely replaced by a more extensive array of performance measures. On the contrary, an entirely different way of thinking underpinned the new approach, which shares many similarities with what we have called the work-of-leisure. This was to encourage each staff member to engage in the conscious administration of themselves, with the support of their line manager, taking seriously their personal values and encouraging them to bring these into the workplace. The invitation to every staff member was to talk about who they are and what mattered to them, not merely to talk about what they do. More than this, the opportunity was offered to do this in a 'leisurely' manner – giving time and attention not primarily to functional activity but to a genuine exploration of what it might mean to have a sense of connection with work colleagues and to organisational purpose.

The task of the line manager became one of understanding what was meaningful to each individual and to engage in a goal setting process that took into account the whole picture. At its best, this involved the integration of personal and organisational values – not through the imposition of corporate priorities, but by surfacing genuine similarity and connection between the two. One significant outcome of this, reported by staff as well as line managers, was that as individuals gained a greater sense of where and how their own interests and values aligned with those of the organisation, many began to take a greater level of responsibility for their work and their potential contribution to corporate interests. This is one example of the way in which a more balanced approach can break down the boundaries between the work-of-production and the work-of-leisure.

Conclusion

In Table 1 we summarise the key elements of our discussion of the work-of-leisure in relation to the work-of-production. We have suggested the need to reclaim the balance between these two forms of work, which we have argued involves the conscious administration of ourselves in the workplace.

In particular, this requires a recognition that an organisational culture needs to value process-relational behaviours of learning, development and reflective inquiry alongside task-related activities of productive achievement. The conscious administration of the work-of-leisure gives the required space and quality of attention to the human need for encounter, meaning, purpose and a sense of connection with others. This supports and interacts with the equally necessary process of wealth generation and job creation, which is essential for the development and maintenance of a healthy societal infrastructure.

The Conscious Administration of Work	Work Culture: (Love of the deed)	Focus of Intention
Work-of-leisure	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Process and relationship oriented• Learning & development• Reflective Inquiry• Bringing the whole self to the workplace	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Human encounter• Search for meaning• Search for a sense of purpose• Search for connection
Work-of-production	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Achievement oriented• Cooperative approach to the task• Proactive engagement with appropriate tasks• Efficient and effective	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wealth Generation• Job creation• Development of societal infrastructure (food and agriculture, housing, education, health and social care, transportation)

Table 1: The Conscious Administration of Work

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