3. Work hard, play hard: on the reciprocity of work conditions and leisure lifestyles

Koen van Eijck

INTRODUCTION

The term *work–life balance* suggests a potential conflict, or imbalance, between work and 'life'. Too much work would seem to imply too little 'life' – the latter term representing everything we do when we are not engaged in paid work. In this chapter, I will argue that the notion of 'balance' in this context of paid work versus leisure and unpaid work is more complex than a straightforward metaphor of communicating vessels suggests. Drawing on the work of Gary Becker and Juliet Schor, I will explore how we can conceive of both work and leisure as products of households that make more or less predictable decisions regarding how to use the time and money required by both areas of life. This approach will be complemented by sociological work on the achievement of social status through consumption and how this causes people to live lives that are busier and more consumption-focused than scholars envisioned around 50 years ago. By addressing the issue of work–life balance from a more historical and sociological angle, I hope to show how the choices people make in this area are always socially embedded. This chapter thus seeks to clarify that apparently irrational decisions can be explained in large part by a combination of labor market dynamics, people's notions of social hierarchy, and an awareness of the fact that we tend to evaluate our own quality of life by comparing it to that of others, often in materialist terms.

THE CO-PRODUCTION OF WORK AND LEISURE

According to economist Gary Becker, what work and leisure have in common is that time and money are the crucial resources on which the realization of each rests. In his seminal 1965 article 'A theory of the allocation of time', Becker argued that households can be conceived of as small enterprises that

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produce both work and leisure through the input of time and money. What we call work–life balance today must be understood as the result of economic decisions based on considering the direct and indirect costs of leisure, which are determined, in turn, by the amounts of time and money people have at their disposal. This can be expressed in Becker's formula: $\Sigma p_i x_i + \Sigma T_c w = V + Tw$.

$\Sigma p_i x_i$ represents the sum of all 'leisure commodities' produced (x_i) multiplied by the cost of each of those commodies (p_i), where leisure commodities refer not so much to goods that might be used for leisure but to the benefits or enjoyment that those commodities bring. Thus, $\Sigma p_i x_i$ are the direct costs of leisure. The indirect costs are the earnings forgone, which is the sum of the time spent on consumption (T_c) multiplied by the (forgone) hourly wage (w). The sum of these direct and indirect costs of leisure should not exceed the maximum wage that could be earned if all available time was spent on work (Tw) plus money that comes from sources other than paid work (V). Both Tw and $T_c w$ are notional sums of money, but they do play a role in decision-making when it comes to work–life balance.

Becker's work helps us make sense of what happens when hourly wages or working hours change. If people earn more, Tw grows, which increases the financial resources available to spend on leisure activities. But if we also take the indirect costs of leisure into account, we can see that free time ($T_c w$) also becomes more costly in the sense that an extra hour of work will bring in more money and so each extra hour of leisure will therefore cost more in foregone earnings. According to Becker, this shifts the balance of the different inputs that people employ to create leisure commodities, or leisure activities.

A few decades ago, social scientists envisioned the advent of a leisure society in which growing incomes and the automization of production processes would allow people to work fewer hours and still lead comfortable lives (e.g., Dumazedier, 1974; Keynes, 1972 [1932]; Veal, 2019). However, Becker argued that increasing wages would actually make each leisure hour more expensive, due to rising indirect costs. This would alter the optimal ratio of the investment of money versus time in the pursuit of leisure commodities, because an increase in disposable income implies that leisure time becomes more costly, as both Tw and $T_c w$ increase along with w. As a result, leisure would have to yield more pleasure through the input of more money or goods per unit of leisure time in order to compete with the benefits of working.

The economic logic of Becker which underlies the choice between work or leisure may explain why dreams of the 'leisure society of the future' have not materialized, even though the underlying processes of growing productivity and increasing wealth have occurred as anticipated. Also, the rise of post-materialism (Inglehart, 2008) is limited largely to political values, while private materialism is actually on the rise (Strenze, 2021). Strenze has operationalized private materialism as 'work values', seeing

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that workers increasingly value income and job security over aspects such as free time or opportunities for self-development. The rise in political – or public – post-materialism has not led to a widespread shift towards meaningful experiences rather than material consumption. Keynes (1972 [1932], p. 365) more or less foresaw this almost a century ago. In 'Economic possibilities for our grandchildren', he drew a distinction between absolute and relative needs, arguing that the 'Needs of the second class, those which satisfy the desire for superiority, may indeed be insatiable; for the higher the general level, the higher still are they'.

THE WORK-AND-SPEND CYCLE

Juliet Schor (1991) came up with the concept of the work-and-spend cycle to explain why working hours have not declined. The cycle has two main drivers. The first is the fact that it is more efficient for organizations that need to increase their output to have their current workers work longer hours than to hire new ones. This means that workers, even if they would prefer more leisure time, are far more likely to work longer hours or do overtime – which in effect equals less leisure time and more money. Second, while they may originally have hoped otherwise, consumerism and the desire to 'keep up with the Joneses' make people spend that extra money and they quickly grow used to the more opulent lifestyle that it affords them, making it harder to go back to living on less money. Consumer expectations rise with income, making consumers insatiable, as Keynes also argued (1972 [1932]). A few decades before Keynes, sociologist Thorstein Veblen (1970 [1899]) had already identified this insatiability and attributed it to a phenomenon he labeled 'invidious comparison'. People's social standing is based on positional goods, meaning that if everyone increases their level of material consumption by earning and spending more, 'keeping up' simply means moving up along with everybody else in what is essentially a rat race or, in Schor's terms, a work-and-spend cycle that is difficult to escape.

According to Schor, the work-and-spend cycle is so powerful because corporate interests enable higher levels of consumption among employees and both parties ultimately believe that they benefit from the situation. While Keynes' distinction between absolute or primary needs versus relative or secondary needs is highly contentious (e.g., Baudrillard, 1969), it is true that insatiable consumer 'needs' are, in part, responsible for the fact that our work–life balance has not shifted to a more leisurely mode. For Baudrillard (1970), the object of consumption is a sign object, which means that it functions according to the logics of difference and status. He believes Veblen understood this better

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than any other consumption scholar at that time, quoting him approvingly as saying:

> The end of acquisition is conveniently held to be the consumption of the goods accumulated … but it is only in a sense far removed from its native meaning that consumption of goods can be said to afford the incentive from which accumulation proceeds … Possession of wealth confers honors: it is an invidious distinction. (Veblen, cited in Baudrillard, 1969, p. 68)

Reflecting both people's tastes and resources, we can argue with Bourdieu (1984) that consumption is a weapon in the battle for social status. And since status is always defined relative to certain reference groups, it turns out that the amount of money that people with comparable working conditions manage to save is negatively affected by the size of the gap between their own financial status and that of their reference group more than by any other factor (Schor, 1998, pp. 76–77). Another indication of the huge role played by the pursuit of status is the finding, in the same analysis, that higher education levels also lead to reduced saving and higher spending. People with a higher level of education tend to be more status-oriented and thus more eager to keep up with the relatively affluent groups to which they (aspire to) belong. This makes them less likely to achieve a satisfying work–life balance than those with fewer material ambitions, since more of their time will be devoted to making money or working hard to enhance their chance of promotion. At the same time, however, we should not forget that the less well-educated are increasingly at risk of having to work long hours or hold multiple jobs just to make ends meet.

Education is the main route to occupational success these days, and the link between class or status on the one hand and leisure time on the other has changed dramatically. Veblen wrote about the very wealthy as a 'leisure class' of people who typically owed their status to inherited assets that were largely maintained by their subordinates. Today however, an abundance of leisure time is no longer associated with the upper classes. Instead, it makes more sense to 'accord a similar degree of prestige to the relatively long hours of work which are, in the contemporary developed economies, a characteristic of the best-placed individuals in the society. Busyness becomes a symbolic marker of status' (Sullivan & Gershuny, 2018, p. 25). Clearly, Veblen has been turned upside down. In our information society, material success is more often determined by one's education (embodied cultural capital) than by inherited economic capital. This cultural capital (e.g., knowledge and expertise) does not work *for* you like farm laborers did for Veblen's leisure class. Rather, high-status people need to engage in intellectual or creative work themselves as it relies on knowledge and skills that only they can convert into economic

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capital by engaging in work. The more rare or remarkable one's expertise is, the more demand there will be for it and hence the busier one will be.

CONSUMERISM LEGITIMATED BY NEW ASPIRATIONS

It is not just that today's biggest spenders are likely to be very busy, as explained by both Becker and Schor; we can see that the nature of what is considered *prestigious* consumption has changed, too. Now that education has become a more typical route to success than inheriting economic capital, consumption should not only reflect wealth, but also a sense of sophistication and a certain set of typically cosmopolitan, liberal values (DellaPosta et al., 2015). The lifestyles of today's elites should not suggest that life is all about making lots of money, as this does not sit well with the cultural capital and refined tastes that today's upper classes wish to emanate. This does not detract from the importance of consumption, but just changes the types of goods and motivations that are deemed appropriate to the consumer lifestyle that one wishes to emulate. In the words of David Brooks (2000, p. 49): 'In the 1950s the best kind of money to have was inherited money. Today in the Bobo establishment the best kind of money is incidental money. It's the kind of money you just happen to earn while you are pursuing your creative vision.'

Brooks introduced the term 'Bobo' as an abbreviation for bourgeois-bohemian; a historically unlikely combination of a level of material well-being traditionally associated with bourgeois conservatism with a bohemian inclination for creativity and individuality that fits well with the higher educational levels typically achieved by today's liberal upper-middle classes. While for scholars such as Bourdieu the economic and the cultural elites were two separate class fractions with opposing tastes and worldviews, Brooks' 'Bobos' manage to reconcile those competing values by creating 'a way of living that lets you be an affluent success and at the same time a free-spirit rebel' (Brooks, 2000, p. 42). They are the educated class that make plenty of money due to their higher education and turn their consumption habits into an expression of creativity combined with living comfortably. To make that work, the comforts they afford themselves are not overly ostentatious – not multiple luxury cars or giant flatscreen televisions, but rather expensive kitchen appliances that support their elaborate yet healthy cooking, professional hiking gear for their adventurous holidays in nature, or just expensive, sustainable, or exotic versions of everyday consumer goods to demonstrate their moral righteousness.

Even if today's elite consumers have less gaudy tastes than in Veblen's days, the invidious comparison is still very much out there. However, the logic of distinction necessitates the ongoing adaptation of consumption norms, which in today's information society tend towards increasing subtlety and attempts

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to reconcile consumerism with the moral and intellectual ideals of the liberal educated class. While Brooks shows how this reconciliation is possible and appealing to many, Currid-Halkett (2017) has further updated his insights by introducing the terms ‘aspirational class’, ‘inconspicuous consumption’, and ‘conspicuous production’. She shows how the contemporary values of the educated – or aspirational – classes, such as sustainability, authenticity, and support for fairtrade practices, push them towards products that are vegan, organic, artisanal, locally and sustainably produced, or hand-made (for example). But their aspirations extend into the next generation as well, as they are also very likely to invest in a university education for their children, insurance, and so on. By coining the term ‘inconspicuous consumption’, Currid-Halkett (2017) indicates that the aspirational class does not flaunt flashy and expensive goods, but rather the ‘right’ (and typically more expensive) versions of the things that everybody consumes, such as coffee (fairtrade), beer (craft), children’s clothing (organically produced fabrics), and make-up (no animal-testing). No conspicuous brand labels are involved; rather, the signals are subtle and only picked up by those familiar with such products. Often these products are valued for the sustainable or artisanal way in which they were *produced*, hence the term ‘conspicuous production’. This type of consumption is perhaps no less materialist than the type that Veblen wrote about, but it definitely requires more thinking and stylistic nuance, which probably makes ‘keeping up with the Joneses’ more of a challenge than ever. Taking the moral high road in consumer society is very expensive. Spending power therefore remains important even in the latest, subtler variants of the status game which incorporate post-materialist values such as sustainability and fair trade. It is therefore hard to believe that the desire to earn more money, and the consequent need to work long hours rather than investing time in one’s leisure aspirations, will diminish any time soon. The promised ‘leisure society’ remains elusive and, at least for the upper classes that have led the way towards what many have come to consider ‘the good life’, what we have instead is: work hard, play hard.

This does not seem to bode well for finding an agreeable work–life balance. Rather than being communicating vessels, in a sense work and leisure, including family life, are both putting people increasingly under pressure, particularly among the upper-middle classes On the one hand, one needs to work hard to be able to live the life that one aspires to. On the other hand, it is becoming increasingly important to spend the money earned on the ‘right’ objects, outfits, services, and tuition fees in order to keep up with one’s reference group. There is a lot of pressure to ‘do the right thing’, especially among those who, in principle, could comfortably take a step back financially and enjoy a more relaxing work–life balance. The less well-educated will have a more practical, functional approach to consumption, but they are of course more likely to struggle to make ends meet, and this is not conducive to a comfort-

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able work–life balance either. With income inequality rising and a shrinking middle class in most Western countries (Vaughan-Whitehead, 2016), we are likely to see the work–life balance remain under pressure at both ends of the socio-economic spectrum.

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