



1. *On Labor and Leisure in America*
2. *The Poison Apple*

## On Labor and Leisure in America

By FEDERICO ALEJANDRO ROMERO  
STAFF WRITER

America's obsession with dull, post-industrial labor remains a mystery to my sensibilities. I spent ages five through fifteen in the tiny town of San Marcos, Nicaragua, where most residents make a living through agriculture or small-scale, local businesses. I later moved to Miami, the city where I was born, and experienced great culture shock due to its fast pace and adherence to the American work ethic. My classmates at the small parochial school I had attended in Nicaragua perceived careers as a means to an end: work is the pillar that secures

*... I came to the opinion that the service economy's atomization of work creates a negative environment for children and badly weakens their sense of social responsibility as adults.*

the stability of the family and thus of the community. By contrast, my new classmates in suburban Miami thought of careers as an end in themselves: labor itself generates fulfillment and inner harmony.

After a few years of observing such a theory in practice, I came to the opinion that the service economy's atomization of work creates a negative environment for children and badly weakens their sense of social responsibility as adults. Such an environment pressures children to over-specialize early in order to maximize capital in the future, often neglecting important concepts like the good life or the good of the community. When new generations are deprived of an ideal environment in which to pursue human excellence,

young people, whether successful or unsuccessful as adults, have a poor understanding of personal fulfillment that goes beyond an empty cycle of production and consumption.

Unquestionably, both standards of living and capital generation in my Nicaraguan home town are much lower than almost anywhere in the United States. And varying degrees of poverty and hard ceilings for progress exist throughout the region. Although they live in a state of poverty, the people of San Marcos, or *sanmarqueños*, do not lament it, but relish the simple pleasure of socializing, talking, and sharing views with friends and neighbors. Work is secondary in their lives, understood to be *unfortunately* necessary, an attitude perhaps more common in Catholic societies. Leisure is ultimately considered more important than labor: it is the sacred time when people socialize in ways that promote the excellence of the body, mind, and soul.

Among the many memories I have that exemplify the importance of leisure are ones of children playing soccer on the streets, adults bringing out rocking chairs and talking about politics and genealogy, and families participating

*Given the nature of careers in the age of the service economy, it is unsurprising that American leisure, although manifested in diverse ways, is so consumerist.*

in almost-daily processions of the Catholic Church. In contrast, I find that Americans have a disordered sense of what leisure truly entails. Rather than being a matter of simple daily life and communitarian, American leisure

*continued on back*

## The Poison Apple

By SOPHIE CHRISTENSEN  
STAFF WRITER

*Ding.*

You resist the urge to check your phone, but your train of thought is already broken.

*Ding.*

You hear it again, exactly two minutes later. Before you can stop yourself, the phone is suddenly in your hand, flooding your brain with new information and trivializing your previous activity.

On an iPhone, a notification is signaled when it comes in, and again two minutes later in case you managed to resist the compulsion to check the first time. Unfortunately, most people cannot fight the need to check. As soon as they hear the notification, their heart rates spike, anxiety levels peak, excitement increases, and their eyes dart automatically to their phones.

This modern phenomenon, the "push notification," brought a number of advantages. You never have to worry about missing out; if someone sends a message, you'll know right away. App developers and companies have also used push notifications to increase revenue by boosting user engagement. But every new technology comes with downsides, and notifications are no different. First and foremost, people's obsession with checking and clearing notifications hurts their productivity. If a notification sounds, many mindlessly abandon their previous activity to see what they've been sent. Unfortunately, when people succumb to the perpetual temptation to look at their phones, it takes roughly 23 minutes to refocus, according to a study from the University of California-Irvine.

Even when people can defy this urge, working with a phone in sight still hampers productivity. This is because part of the brain constantly, subconsciously, struggles to ignore the phone. Even if we're not deliberately looking at

*continued on back*

is a brief luxury to be enjoyed in private.

Given the nature of careers in the age of the service economy, it is unsurprising that American leisure, although manifested in diverse ways, is so consumerist. The individual who watches television or plays video games consumes entertainment that rarely nourishes the mind or soul, never mind the body.

There is also a type of leisure in which potentially rich experiences are consumed in a shallow way: the vacation. I believe the vacation to be

the greatest perversion of leisure. In modern commodified travel, there is little meaningful experience to be had. Instead, travelers tend to separate themselves from the places they visit, failing to do more than follow a sightseeing script. In addition, the concept of a vacation restricts leisure to a specified number of days and occasions, rather than letting it happen spontaneously and frequently.

Work is important too, partly because it satiates humanity's innate desire to create. In disavowing work,

I would be disavowing its own ability (not just leisure's) to express beauty and the wonder of life. Nevertheless, I am unsure as to how employment in the increasingly fragmented service and "gig" economy reflects a passion for creation. For this reason, I believe we shouldn't view careers as the ultimate end, but as necessary building blocks for healthy societies. These societies themselves must be fostered through the inseparable bonds between leisure, the communal pursuit of virtue, and a shared appreciation of beauty.

THE POISON APPLE . . . cont.

something, our brains perceive all available visual information. They are constantly tempted by the phone at the edge of our desks. Thus, full brain power can never be completely devoted to the task at hand.

Furthermore, studies have shown that constantly receiving notifications rewires people's minds, and bodies. Hearing your phone ring spurs physiological arousal, sweating, and an emotional response, which then releases stress hormones; these effects are synonymous with those of more serious anxiety-inducing situations. The long term ramifications of being

disadvantaged. But those effects, I'd say, are on balance profoundly negative.

Take reduced productivity, for example. That may not sound too bad at first, but consider this: the majority of the "breakthrough," life-changing technological advancements were created before the invention of smartphones. In fact, most people in the workforce today did not face the same pervasive distractions while growing up. Today's generation of young people has, sadly, become accustomed to living with constant interruptions.

What does this mean for society?

Reduced productivity translates into lost hours at school and work, leading

adolescents fall short of the grit required to overcome their short attention spans and easily distractible natures. They've already bitten into the poison apple, and it may be too late to siphon out the toxins.

Later, Postman poses a crucial question: "What type of person will be favored" by the new technology? The answer points to the goals of the software developers: the ideal person is someone whose mind can be shifted effortlessly from one trivial notification to the next, which maximizes device usage and capitalizes on the highly addictive nature of most apps. The favored people are today's adolescents, our lives inundated by technology, yet at the mercy of the

*Our generation did not ask to be blindly thrust, like lab rats, into a potentially life-altering situation. It's not our fault that we were born during such a revolutionary experiment. Even though the long-term effects of extended cell phone usage remain unclear, they still occupy almost every part of our unduly digital lives.*

in a near-constant state of anticipation remain unclear, but psychologists predict everything from mental health issues (duh) to physical ailments.

Neil Postman's presentation "Five Things We Need To Know About Technological Change" discusses how the "advantages and disadvantages of new technologies are never distributed evenly among the population." In our society it is adolescents and young adults, having grown up surrounded by high technology, who feel most heavily both its advantages and its

to lower work quality and less creation of new ideas: fewer breakthrough inventions, fewer cures for diseases—less of all the advancements that modern society has come to expect.

This is not to say that our generation will invent nothing useful, solve no world problems, or do nothing good for society. The point is that many of us might not overcome the challenges such ubiquitous distractions present. Does this mean people will have to work harder in order to make up for that? Yes. Are there people who will? Of course. But the vast majority of

excessively wealthy in Silicon Valley.

Our generation did not ask to be blindly thrust, like lab rats, into a potentially life-altering situation. It's not our fault that we were born during such a revolutionary experiment. Even though the long-term effects of extended cell phone usage remain unclear, they still occupy almost every part of our unduly digital lives. The future of society itself is at stake. Our brains, our bodies, and our achievements must overcome the challenges of the relentless smartph—

*Ding.*

# ENQUIRY

vol. VIII

Casimir Zablotzki  
Editor-in-Chief

Philip Chivily  
Walker Cummins  
Associate Editors

## STAFF WRITERS

Carter Briglia  
Sophie Christensen  
Tiffany Lopes  
John Madigan  
Nikki Matsuoka  
Federico Alejandro Romero  
Edward Shvets

*The opinions expressed in these articles are the views of their authors and do not represent the views of Enquiry or the Alexander Hamilton Institute.*

Enquiry accepts articles of 500 to 800 words at czablotz@hamilton.edu. Please be aware that we do not accept anonymous submissions.

## CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

1. *On Labor and Leisure in America*  
**#OnLaborAndLeisure**

2. *The Poison Apple*  
**#ThePoisonApple**