



## Is It Time For A Four Day Working Week ?

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Tags: [buckminster fuller](#), [four day week](#), [idleness](#), [laziness](#), [sloth](#) [[list all tags](#)]

The Sydney Morning Herald recently had an editorial calling for [consideration of a 4 day working week](#) as a response to economic contraction and alternative to making employees redundant.

The idea of a 4 day working week isn't an entirely abstract one for me, as my current employer has been significantly cutting back on staff levels over the past 6 months. The manager of my team took the approach of offering us all reduced work hours rather than having to let anyone go, which we've all accepted, so I'm now seeing what a 4 day week is like (and having just come back from a 4 day weekend hiking in the Snowy Mountains I can't say I have any complaints so far).

In this post I'll look at various proposals to reduce the amount of time we spend at work, as a way of addressing energy, environmental and other issues facing us.

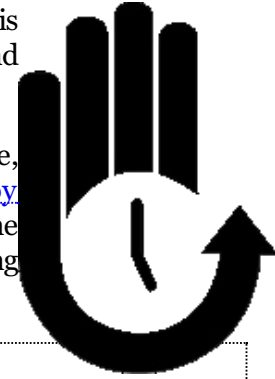
DECIMATE. This word used to have a highly specific meaning: the killing of every 10th person, chosen by lot, as punishment by the Roman army for mutinous legions. The same concept comes to mind in the present economic contraction, as one in every 10 people employed by the private sector could lose their jobs as companies cut costs to survive in a credit freeze. Private enterprises are the lifeblood of the Australian economy but are also the least insulated from the rolling shocks of the highest single-year decline ever recorded on the Australian sharemarket, and the sharpest downturn in Australian wealth ever recorded. The number of job ads is in free-fall. Anecdotal evidence is pouring in that job ads are generally being swamped by job applicants. ...

So how to ease the pain and share the burden? In order to minimise the trauma of involuntary redundancies, we believe inadequate consideration is being given to the non-voluntary four-day week as an alternative to redundancy. This may be administratively difficult. We are under no illusions about the workplace legislation imposed on employers by federal and state governments, which is ridiculously complex and burdensome. This idea may also be opposed by unions paranoid about a Trojan horse of lower pay and more onerous conditions. But surely a four-day week, either voluntary or imposed, is preferable to involuntary redundancies.

Australia isn't the only country considering reducing standard working hours - The Independent recently had an article titled "[Britain is facing return of three-day week](#)", quoting government sources as saying "Shorter hours would be preferable to mass unemployment". Car manufacturer [Jaguar](#) is currently considering a 4 day week to reduce costs.

Japan is also adopting the approach of reducing employee working hours in preference to firing people as they deal with their slump in [exports](#) and [consumption](#), with the practice known locally as "[work-sharing](#)".

While the usual reason for adopting a shorter work week is economic, there is also an argument that working less hours [reduces consumption and waste](#) and can thus be justified on environmental and health grounds.



One country that shifted to a shorter work week some time ago was France, with their 35 hour week. In recent years this has been [rolled back by President Sarkozy](#), sparking a lot of resentment by affected workers. The New York Times had an article on this, pointing out that relaxed working hours have long been part of French culture:

President Sarkozy's 19th-century predecessors would have been amazed that such comparatively small adjustments are treated as matters of economic life and death. They, too, were worried by the snail-like progress of the French economy, and wondered how to compete with the industrial powerhouse of Britain. But they were faced with something far more ruinous than unemployment.

Economists and bureaucrats who ventured out into the countryside after the Revolution were horrified to find that the work force disappeared between fall and spring. The fields were deserted from Flanders to Provence. Villages and even small towns were silent, with barely a column of smoke to reveal a human presence. As soon as the weather turned cold, people all over France shut themselves away and practiced the forgotten art of doing nothing at all for months on end.

In the mountains, the tradition of seasonal sloth was ancient and pervasive. "Seven months of winter, five months of hell," they said in the Alps. When the "hell" of unremitting toil was over, the human beings settled in with their cows and pigs. They lowered their metabolic rate to prevent hunger from exhausting supplies. If someone died during the seven months of winter, the corpse was stored on the roof under a blanket of snow until spring thawed the ground, allowing a grave to be dug and a priest to reach the village.

The same mass dormancy was practiced in other chilly parts. In 1900, The British Medical Journal reported that peasants of the Pskov region in northwestern Russia "adopt the economical expedient" of spending one-half of the year in sleep: "At the first fall of snow the whole family gathers round the stove, lies down, ceases to wrestle with the problems of human existence, and quietly goes to sleep. Once a day every one wakes up to eat a piece of hard bread. ... The members of the family take it in turn to watch and keep the fire alight. After six months of this reposeful existence the family wakes up, shakes itself" and "goes out to see if the grass is growing." ...

In September, at the General Assembly of the United Nations, President Sarkozy proposed "un New Deal écologique et économique," but without explaining how economic growth can be reconciled with conservation. If he is serious about saving the planet, and if he wants to reassure the unions that workers will still have time with their families, he should consider introducing tax incentives for hibernation. The long-term benefits of reduced energy consumption would counterbalance the economic loss. There has never been a better time to stay in bed.

## Reducing Energy Use Through A Shorter Working Week

One institution that has recently adopted a shorter week for all workers is the [Utah state government](#) in the US, which switched to a four-day week last year primarily to save money on

Similar schemes seem to be under consideration throughout the US, with Google News throwing up examples in [Florida](#), [North Carolina](#) and [Minnesota](#).

Reducing the working week is an approach for reducing energy consumption recommended by a number of peak oil observers - both recent ones like [Aaron Newton](#) and older ones like [Bucky Fuller](#), who argued that many people worked in jobs that did not produce sufficient value to justify the expense of energy required to do them.



The computer will also have verified both of the important findings of the brilliant Denver, Colorado oil geologist, Francois de Chardenedes ... regarding the amount of energy employed as heat and pressure, for the length of time initially that it took nature to photosynthetically process Sun radiation into the myriad of hydrocarbon molecules that comprise all the vegetation and algae ... a large percentage of which Sun-energy-nurtured-and-multiplied molecules are ultimately processed into petroleum.

The script of de Chardenedes' "Scenario of petroleum Production" makes it clear that, with all the cosmic energy processing (as rain, wind and gravitational pressure) and processing time (paid for at the rates you and I pay for household electricity), it costs nature well over a million dollars to produce each gallon of petroleum. To say "I didn't know that" doesn't alter the inexorable energy accounting of eternally-regenerative, 100-per-cent efficient - ergo, 100-pr-cent concerned - physical energy Universe.

We find all the no-life-support-wealth-producing people going to their 1980 jobs in their cars or buses, spending trillions of dollars' worth of petroleum daily to get to their no-wealth producing jobs. It doesn't take a computer to tell you that it will save both Universe and humanity trillions of dollars a day to pay them handsomely to stay at home. - Buckminster Fuller - [Critical Path](#)

## The Society Of Sloth

One figure who should be familiar to most peak observers that has considered working less as a solution of sorts to peak oil is Jay Hanson. One of Jay's "thought experiments" that is less Malthusian than usual for him (albeit quite coercive) is one he dubbed "[The Society Of Sloth](#)".

The society of sloth adopts a [technocrat](#) style energy based currency is is distributed equally amongst all by a global government with a mandate to protect the global commons. Jay (echoing Hubbert and Fuller) says that:

With modern technology, probably less than 5% of the population could produce all the goods we really "need". A certain number of "producers" could be drafted and trained by society to produce for two years. The rest can stay home and sleep, sing, dance, paint, read, write, pray, play, do minor repairs, work in the garden, and practice birth control.

## In Praise Of Idleness

There is a large body of work justifying working less not on energy or environmental grounds, but purely on the basis that long working hours are simply not necessary, and that idleness is a virtue in and of itself.

One classic example of this is Bertrand Ruseell's 1932 essay, "[In Praise Of Idleness](#)", in which he describes the work ethic (be it the feudal variety manifested in the Protestant work ethic or the modern - at the time of writing - worship of manual work by the Marxists) as a relic of a bygone age and shorter working hours as the natural way for dealing with increased industrial productivity.

This theme continues to appear with some regularity, with some examples that caught my eye in recent years including Jason Godesky's "[In praise of laziness](#) (looking at the issue from a primitivist point of view), Gene Longsdon's "[The lovely, life-saving virtue of laziness](#)" (small scale farming) and Mark Slouka's "[Quitting the paint factory: On the virtues of idleness](#)" (idleness as the foundation of democracy). One writer even went so far as to recommend "[idle parenting](#)", declaring it results in "happy children" who have learnt how to fend for themselves.

Sometimes the idolisation of idleness is more a product of cynicism and disengagement from seemingly meaningless work, as in this French example celebrating the "[sloth ethic](#)", as documented in Corinne Maier's book "[Hello Laziness!: Why Hard Work Doesn't Pay](#)".

The Onion once summed up this line of thinking (perhaps not entirely seriously) in "[180 Trillion Leisure Hours Lost To Work Last Year](#)":

According to a report released Monday by Boston University's School of Lifestyle Management, more than 180 trillion leisure hours were lost to work in 2004.

"The majority of American adults find work cutting into the middle of their days —exactly when leisure is most effective," said Adam Bernhardt, the Boston University sociology professor who headed the study. "The hours between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m. are ideally suited to browsing stores, dozing in front of the television, and finishing the morning paper. Daytime hours are also the warmest and sunniest of the day, making them perfect for outdoor activities. Unfortunately, most Americans can't enjoy leisure during this time, for the simple reason that they're 'at work.'"

There is a dormant site called "[Why Work: Creating Livable Alternatives To Wage Slavery](#)" which has collected essays, book excerpts and articles by Bob Black (such as [The Abolition of Work](#)), Robert Anton Wilson, Bertrand Russell, Buckminster Fuller, Jean Liedloff and others on the theme of virtuous laziness.

While most advocates of laziness seem to come from the left (Karl Marx's son-in-law Paul Lafarge, for example, wrote a tract called "[The Right To Be Lazy](#)" during a period of enforced semi-idleness at Saint Pélégie Prison, though apparently he couldn't help but put his time to a form of productive endeavour), the more anarchically inclined denizens tend to regard the socialists and communists as being just as work obsessed as the capitalists.

This essay on "[Bob Black: Abolitionist and Archestrator of the Slack Revolution](#)" sums up the view of the anti-marxists:

After all these years, and after reading Bob Black's *The Abolition of Work*, I have finally realized just what was wrong with Marxism. Oh, the Marxists talked a good game - working in the morning, fishing in the afternoon, lounging around to watch the sunset; 20-hour workweeks; month-long vacations; etc. But when you get down to it, they are still drawing from the same poisoned well that has parched Western civilization for the last 500 years: the Protestant Ethic, which freed Europe from Catholic voodoo only to feed its heads with doo-doo, such as "work is the outward sign of moral perfection." While Luther was telling people that what counted was faith and the Holy Spirit, not work and deeds, Calvin helped spread silly ideas, like the one that people had to be at constant physical labor or idleness would tempt them to sin. Deep down, this is the root of the Puritan Ethic: why even today the neo-Puritans hate Hollywood with such passion: they feel that if we are not kept busy with mindless, rote work, then we will be seized by the carnal passions and led to sin.

Marxists claim that workers are overexploited. So what is their solution? Have the workers take over the factory to "restore the dignity of work." Make everybody do manual labor, like the Pol Pot regime did in Cambodia and the Incas did in Peru - as Mao said, "let there be no separation between the work of the hands and the work of the mind." Our goal should be to increase production. Deep down Marxists, while despising capitalism, only want to hijack what they see as its main notable achievement, accomplished through the Industrial Revolution: mass production. They do not want to abolish the assembly line, only bring more of us to its trough. Let the elite fat cats sweat with the so-called "working class." Rather than wanting us to all enjoy the life of leisure led by the fat cats, the Marxists' main goal is motivated by envy - they want to force the fat cats to suffer as the "working class" has suffered. ...

Bakunin, Kropotkin, Proudhon, and other anarcho-syndicalists, libertarian-socialists, and anti-technocrats at the International realized that this was the fatal flaw of Marxism. "Work" as we know it should be abolished - that is, the requirement that all of us "mass produce" things that other people need - and taken over by robot labor. This is the promise of post-industrial society, and yet some Marxists greet it with horror. After all, even capitalist industrialism raised the standard of living of the working class to an incredible degree. Yet, things like nanotechnology and the miniaturization revolution have abolished the fundamental assumptions of Marxism and of economics in general. There will be no more scarcity. More and more can be produced with less and less - of energy, capital, resources, and, yes, human labor as well. People can and always will produce the things they or those they know want with their own hands, or, if they are skilled artisans, the things that others want, but with time, precision, and care. But there will be no more mass production. If you understand Black, Bookchin, Fuller, Henderson, or others, then you know that the industrial revolution is at an end. ...

The truly humane, post-Marxist society will be one in which no one needs to have a "job." The idea is an obsolete concept. For the so-called "middle class" the idea is an especial absurdity. These people get in their polluting cars, wait in traffic jams, and search frenetically for parking, all so they can go to an "office" where they do things that could just as easily be done at home with a computer and a modem. But we seem fixated on this idea, that we must go somewhere else, "work" for eight hours, and then come home again. The "work" of the middle class may not be as physically exhausting as that of the "working class," but it is as equally rote, boring, repetitive, and unoriginal, focusing on the copying and recopying of information. That is something that could be done much better by artificially intelligent computers. As one writer once put it, 95% of people move matter from one place on earth to another, and 5% keep track of where they put it. In our post-industrial society, there is no need for either "labor" or "management." Both have become equally obsolete.

## The Economics Of Abundance

The idea of a post-scarcity society, where industrial processes are so well automated that little human labour is required to produce all our material needs, isn't a particularly well studied one, though obviously both Bucky Fuller and the technocracy people have promoted it versions of it in the past.

The primary exception is information production, where the rise of the internet and the ability to copy and distribute information at negligible cost has made it a topic of interest for thinkers like [Chris Anderson](#) and his theory of "[The Long Tail](#)", who suggest the "[Tragically Neglected Economics of Abundance](#)" are worthy of greater attention.

The economics of abundance do get quite a bit of attention amongst [science fiction](#) authors however (mainstream economists preferring to dwell in the present, and perhaps the past, as much as possible).

There are some signs that even in the world of material goods some parts of the world are approaching a post scarcity-economy with most people in the developed world have few material wants that they cannot satisfy (and you could make the case that the reason that this could be true for everyone, if not for the way society and the economy is currently structured) - countries like Japan have long needed to export unwanted second hand cars to places like New Zealand, for example.

One person who has made an attempt to try and describe what abundance looks like is Walt Frazier, in his essay "[A World Based On Abundance](#)", though this seems overly-utopian in many ways and I'm not sure human nature is such that all the characteristics specified could ever be met (conflict isn't always based on economics / survival and some things will always remain "scarce" - large houses facing onto Palm Beach, for example).

Whether or not we ever reach a global, post scarcity economy is a matter for debate, though I'd like to think that it is possible or at the very least a useful "target" of sorts.

I'll close with a quote from Robert Anton Wilson's paper "[The RICH economy](#)":

If there is one proposition which currently wins the assent of nearly everybody, it is that we need more jobs. "A cure for unemployment" is promised, or earnestly sought, by every Heavy Thinker from Jimmy Carter to the Communist Party USA, from Ronald Reagan to the head of the economics department at the local university, from the Birchers to the New Left.

I would like to challenge that idea. I don't think there is, or ever again can be, a cure for unemployment. I propose that unemployment is not a disease, but the natural, healthy functioning of an advanced technological society.

The inevitable direction of any technology, and of any rational species such as Homo sap., is toward what Buckminster Fuller calls ephemeralization, or doing-more-with-less. For instance, a modern computer does more (handles more bits of information) with less hardware than the proto-computers of the late '40's and '50's. One worker with a modern teletype machine does more in an hour than a thousand medieval monks painstakingly copying scrolls for a century. ...

Unemployment is not a disease; so it has no "cure." ...

Unemployment is directly caused by this technological capacity to do more-with-less.

Thousands of monks were technologically unemployed by Gutenberg. Thousands of blacksmiths were technologically unemployed by Ford's Model T. Each device that does-more-with-less makes human labor that much less necessary.

Aristotle said that slavery could only be abolished when machines were built that could operate themselves. Working for wages, the modern equivalent of slavery -- very accurately called "wage slavery" by social critics -- is in the process of being abolished by just such self-programming machines. In fact, Norbert Wiener, one of the creators of cybernetics, foresaw this as early as 1947 and warned that we would have massive unemployment once the computer revolution really got moving.

It is arguable, and I for one would argue, that the only reason Wiener's prediction has not totally been realized yet -- although we do have ever-increasing unemployment -- is that big unions, the corporations, and government have all tacitly agreed to slow down the pace of cybernation, to drag their feet and run the economy with the brakes on. This is because they all, still, regard unemployment as a "disease" and cannot imagine a "cure" for the nearly total unemployment that full cybernation will create.

Suppose, for a moment, we challenge this Calvinistic mind-set. Let us regard wage-work -- as most people do, in fact, regard it -- as a curse, a drag, a nuisance, a barrier that stands between us and what we really want to do. In that case, your job is the disease, and unemployment is the cure.

"But without working for wages we'll all starve to death!?! Won't we?"

Not at all. Many farseeing social thinkers have suggested intelligent and plausible plans for adapting to a society of rising unemployment. Here are some examples.

1. The National Dividend. This was invented by engineer C. H. Douglas and has been revived with some modifications by poet Ezra Pound and designer Buckminster Fuller. The basic idea (although Douglas, Pound, and Fuller differ on the details) is that every citizen should be declared a shareholder in the nation, and should receive dividends on the Gross National Product for the year. ...

2. The Guaranteed Annual Income. This has been urged by economist Robert Theobald and others. The government would simply establish an income level above the poverty line and guarantee that no citizen would receive less; if your wages fall below that level, or you have no wages, the government makes up the difference. ...

3. The Negative Income Tax. This was first devised by Nobel economist Milton Friedman and is a less radical variation on the above ideas. The Negative Income Tax would establish a minimum income for every citizen; anyone whose income fell below that level would receive the amount necessary to bring them up to that standard. ...

What I am proposing, in brief, is that the Work Ethic (find a Master to employ you for wages, or live in squalid poverty) is obsolete. Delivered from the role of things and robots, people will learn to become fully developed persons, in the sense of the Human Potential movement. They will not seek work out of economic necessity, but out of psychological necessity—as an outlet for their creative potential.

As Bucky Fuller says, the first thought of people, once they are delivered from wage slavery, will be, "What was it that I was so interested in as a youth, before I was told I had to earn a living?"

The answer to that question, coming from millions and then billions of persons liberated from mechanical toil, will make the Renaissance look like a high school science fair or a

## Next

This post is the second in a 4 part series that began with my review of Bucky Fuller's book "[Critical Path](#)".

Next up I'll look at at how Bucky's ideas influenced modern day techie culture, via the cold war technocrats and the hippie "back to the landers" of the 60s and 70s, with a review of Fred Turner's book "[From Counterculture To Cyberculture](#)".

I'll conclude with an in-depth look at progress towards the global energy grid Bucky advocated, and why its become an increasingly good idea.

*Cross-posted from [Peak Energy](#).*



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