

What the 15-Hour Work Week Prophets Failed to Account for

There is a utopian vision shared by hard workers everywhere: One day we will look back on all our accomplishments and say “at last, the age of respite and luxury has finally arrived!” But as the forecasted luxury manifests all around us, the respite is nowhere in sight.

John Maynard Keynes, one of history’s most influential economists, [predicted](#) in 1930 that the grandchildren of his generation would enjoy 15-hour work weeks. The rest of the labor would be done by machines. This was a popular idea. In 1965, a Senate subcommittee [projected](#) that we would only work 14 hours per week by the year 2000. So, what did the prophets fail to account for?

The Utopian Vision

A 2014 Gallup [report](#) indicates that the average American works around 47 hours per week (and the international trends aren’t much different, according to a 2007 International Labour Office [study](#)). But despite the complete inaccuracy of past predictions, the notion of radically downsizing our work week has not gone away. In fact, it’s more popular now than ever before.

In 2014, the New Economics Foundation [advocated](#) for a 21-hour workweek. Sociologist Peter Fleming suggested a three-day workweek in his 2015 book [The Mythology of Work](#). Historian Rutger Bregman argues in his bestselling 2017 book [Utopia for Realists](#) that a 15-hour workweek is achievable and desirable.

In 2018, *Business Insider* published a [piece](#) arguing in favor

of a 15-hour workweek. These are just a few of countless prominent examples.

How do people account for the discrepancy between projections and actual working hours? There are some popular explanations, all of which share one commonality: they blame the phenomenon on the shortcomings of individuals.

For example, Eric Goldschein at *Business Insider* [argues](#) that consumerism is to blame: We continue working so many hours due to “our propensity for wanting more stuff.” Harvard economist Richard Freeman [blames](#) “the human desire to compete,” comparing workers to basketball players who want to score more points than their competitors. These insights undoubtedly have some truth to them, but they are mere facets of a far deeper and less escapable paradigm.

The Genesis of Growth

When you create a time-saving innovation, you have two options: You can fritter away the newfound time on leisure and relaxation, or you can spend your extra time increasing your productivity. This dilemma of time expenditure is identical to the more frequently articulated dilemma of money expenditure. If you spend your extra time or money on leisure, you’re economically stagnant. If you invest it in increased productivity, you’re a capitalist.

Whatever Stone Age hunter first invented the spear either spent less time hunting or brought extra food home to his kin. This decision may sound difficult in principle, but in the presence of competitors, it becomes very easy. Are you just going to sit around while neighboring tribes are out killing the extra mammoths and increasing their procreation rates? Darwin teaches us that you won’t. At least, not for long.

The cultivation of domestic crops and livestock over 10,000 years ago may have been the greatest innovation for economic

growth in human history. For the first time, there was such a food surplus that only a small proportion of the people had to focus on food production, leaving everyone else free to invent and produce other forms of value. Yuval Noah Harari, professor of history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, explains in his international bestselling book [*Sapiens*](#) that “with the move to permanent villages and the increase in food supply, the population began to grow. But the extra mouths quickly wiped out the food surpluses, so even more fields had to be planted.”

People theoretically could have chosen leisure over investment in new children and more crops. If everyone had chosen leisure, the population would not have boomed. If some people chose leisure, they were out-populated and outcompeted by those who went with option number two. Thus, Harari calls the agricultural revolution “history’s biggest fraud” because the early agriculturalists intended to increase their leisure and instead increased their productivity.

The Leisure Vortex

We face this choice between leisure and productivity every day of our lives. As Harari points out, an email is a lot faster and cheaper to send than a snail-mail letter. When email was invented, we could have made our lives more leisurely by writing to people just as infrequently as we ever did—and more efficiently than before. Instead, we invested our saved time in writing to more people and doing so more frequently. As a result, we are more productive through our email and just as stressed as we used to be.

The inescapable productivity paradigm is enforced by the Darwinian phenomenon of market competition. If you choose to fritter away a fraction of your time that you could have invested in the production of new value, and I choose to fritter away a smaller fraction of my time or none at all, I

will outcompete you. Eventually, the world will be full of people like me and empty of people like you. This is true in all walks of life, from business to health to romance. Evolutionary biologist Bret Weinstein [delineates](#) this logic in his responsibility vortex hypothesis.

Humans have been subjected to the selective pressures of this productivity paradigm for tens of thousands of years. In a world of genetic and memetic proliferation with differential success, investments will always outcompete leisure. Individuals who engage in nonproductive norms will be outpopulated by more efficient actors, and the same dynamic will exist between societies. There will be no substantial decline in the number of hours in a workweek in the foreseeable future. That is, unless something goes horribly wrong.

Given the amount of time and technological progress since the agricultural revolution, Keynes should have noticed that if the workweek were going to diminish, it would have happened already. As scholars such as Marshall Sahlins (professor of anthropology at the University of Chicago) have often [noted](#), even hunter-gatherers probably worked less than 21st-century Americans. But Keynes supposed that after more than 10,000 years of technological innovation and material progress with no reduction in weekly hours worked, between his generation and that of his grandchildren, the workweek would suddenly be cut in half. And, as noted above, people still think that way to this day. They are delusional.

The early agriculturalists, John Maynard Keynes, and others who have falsely predicted a post-labor society considered it an optimistic premonition. In truth, such ideas have always been viciously pessimistic compared to the capitalist alternative. To squander precious growth opportunities for the sake of momentary leisure is to sacrifice the well-being and security of our future selves and generations to come. We should always spend our excess time and capital to create as much value as possible before our time runs out.

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