Ever since moving to the Bahamas in 1984, I have been intrigued by the idea of leisure—shedding the workaholic rat race to be “free and easy” and “letting oneself go,” to quote the German philosopher Josef Pieper. To Pieper, leisure is more than merely getting off work at the end of the day or taking a vacation; rather “the soul of leisure lies in celebration” of nature, life, and the divine in perfect calm and relaxation.

During my two-year sojourn in the “island of June,” I picked up a copy of Bertrand Russell’s celebrated book *In Praise of Idleness*. Russell, author of more than 60 books, was never idle—what he really meant was leisure time to pursue one’s own loves and goals rather than working for someone else’s objectives. In typical contemptuous style, Russell lambasted the Western penchant for hard labor: “The morality of work is the morality of slaves, and the modern world has no need of slavery.” Furthermore, “The wise use of leisure...is a product of civilization and education. A man who has worked long hours all his life will be bored if he becomes suddenly idle. But without a considerable amount of leisure a man is cut off from many of the best things...We attach too little importance to enjoyment and simple happiness.” Russell believed that ideally man should work only four hours and spend the rest of the time engaged in playful activities, not passive activities like watching sports or television, but intellectual and scientific pursuits.

Work Ethics: The East Versus the West

The Judeo-Christian West has always emphasized a strong work ethic, but what about the East? Lin Yutang, the celebrated Chinese libertarian philosopher, insisted that the American virtues of efficiency, punctuality, and goal-setting are actually “vices.” “From the Chinese point of view,” declared Lin, “the man who is wisely idle is the most cultured man...Those who are wise won't be busy, and those who are too busy can't be wise.” Referring to Western business practices, Lin ruminated, “Americans have now come to such a sad state that they are booked up not only for the following day, or the following week, but even for the following month. An appointment three weeks ahead of time is a thing unknown in China.”

Lin wrote his essay on loafing in 1937. Today Lin would be aghast at the degree in
which the East has adopted the West’s working patterns, and even surpassed them. Anyone who has been to Hong Kong, Japan, or Korea would laugh at any suggestion that Americans are overworked.

Is Overwork an Inherent Defect in Capitalism?

Yet that is precisely what Harvard economist Juliet Schor claims in her bestseller, *The Overworked American*, first written in the early 1990s. Critics of the market complain that the capitalist system inherently promotes overwork and discourages leisure. According to Schor, the constant demands of the consumer society and global competition are mandating more work hours and exploding consumer debt. Leisure time is on the decline, she says. Eight million Americans are holding two or more jobs, the highest figure since data were first collected 25 years ago. Schor writes that U.S. manufacturing employees work 320 more hours per year than their German or French counterparts. She proposes, among other things, a government-mandated three-week paid vacation for all U.S. employees.6

I question Schor’s statistics. If Americans are working more and more, how does she explain the explosion in money spent on sports and recreational activities in the United States?

How Capitalism Liberates Man

The critics of capitalism misunderstand the role of the market. Only through capitalism can savings and surplus wealth—the foundation of leisure time—be achieved. Capitalism provides very powerful incentives to produce an abundance of material goods in less and less time (and thus at lower costs), hence freeing up time to pursue other interests. Greater leisure time is an inherent feature of an advancing capitalist system. What people do with their leisure time is another issue—some may choose to work another job, others may play. “In our opportunity economy,” write W. Michael Cox and Richard Alm, “some professionals, managers and entrepreneurs are putting in killer hours. But that’s the choice they make, in return for higher pay and faster career advancement than they might otherwise have. For the rank and file, the work week has continued to shrink in recent decades. Average weekly hours of production workers declined from 39.8 in 1950 to 34.5 in 2000.”7 The following graph demonstrates the gradual decline in average work hours.

Of course, America hasn’t reach Bertrand Russell’s goal of 20 work hours a week. In fact, average weekly hours have stagnated around 35 work hours over the past 20 years. Why? One reason ignored by Schor: Higher tax rates may be encouraging employees to work harder. A sharp cut in payroll taxes might reignite the downward trend in work hours. Schor should put that recommendation in her second edition.

5. Lin Yutang, pp. 162-64.