

# A nation of broad-buttocked viewers?

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By MARTIN E. MARTY  
Nothing works.  
My television set does not work because it was casually assembled. My payments on it are messed up because the billing system is automated and something went wrong with it.  
The person in the retailer's complaint department did not listen to me because she was bored, waiting only for coffee break. When the TV repairman finally came to my home, he left behind some cigarette ashes on my floor, an outrageous bill and a still malfunctioning set.  
So goes the typical citizen complaint.

"NOTHING WORKS" often really means, "No one works." Many people work as few hours as possible, as carelessly as possible, finding little meaning in what they do.

Meaninglessness also carries over into the world of those who do work, who overwork; the managers and the competitive executives. They have become workaholics, compulsive and ulcerous types. They can hardly serve as models for a moral or healthy approach to work.

Work represents only half our waking lives. The other half includes leisure, play and sport. Here there are just as many complaints. A person hears that "no one plays." Everyone watches. We are becoming a nation of broad-buttocked viewers, numbed by spectatoritis.

We seem to be joining the corrupt Romans in late stages of their civilization. And the gladiators or athletes we watch today also do not play. They are "things," "meat"; they are only working for money in commercialized and grim sports.

When people do play, it is said, they are compulsive about it. They jam highways on weekends in order to be able later to speed across lakes or drink themselves into stupors at lakesides. The word of British visitor Lord Ryce in 1850 seems confirmed: "Life is very tense in America. . . a tension which appears to be increasing."

BECAUSE WORK and play come so close to the heart of the meaning of life itself, they have usually been associated with religious ideas.

Thus the Hebrew Scriptures say that in the beginning, work was a curse, God's punishment for man's having sinned. But the same God later endowed work with meaning.

The Greeks thought less of work. They tried to get slaves to do it, and then measured life by what people were when they were at leisure.

Attitudes about work and play came to America via Europe. The northern Protestant people gave us our "work ethics" because they did find meaning in all kinds of work. People served God not especially in the monastery or priesthood but in all vocations or callings. Following a divine order, they worked to please God. But they were less good at play.

IN THIS admittedly mystic picture, the southern European Catholic people came to the rescue.

Less gifted at finding meaning in work, they knew how to punctuate the day with the siesta and the year with the fiesta. So long as work and play thus fit together, all was well.

Today they no longer fit together and thus pose a major problem for our society.

These pictures may all be overdrawn. Some things do work, many people enjoy their work and play, and few of us would give up the mixed blessings of our present technical and industrial order.

ON CLOSER examination, many of the complaints have less to do with ethics than with esthetics, less with morals than with tastes.

Fastidious upper-class people simply do not appreciate the style of those who while away the leisure hours at the pool hall and frequent bingo games at the Legion Hall. In turn, the bingo players have no use for the country club set and its pat-

tern of what appears to be decadent leisure.

So also with work. The workaholics and steadfastly employed people complain about welfare cheaters and idlers, while the elites, in turn, are re-sented because they are overpaid.  
AFTER ALL the talk of tastes and prejudices is past, it remains clear that we do have a problem with work and play. At its root may very well be the loss of the old religious sense of vocation, the values that made it possible for people to see life as a harmonious whole, lived out under the eye of eternity.

But even where religious values survive, as they do in the lives of millions, many people feel alienated in their work—divorced from nature and their own essential nature, deprived of power and meaning and standards, interchangeable, isolated from each other, used as objects.

It would appear that many people, lacking a sense of vocation, work tediously only in order to have leisure. But such leisure offers new fulfillments. Not a few pleasure-seekers have agreed with the poet Charles Baudelaire:

"One must work, if not from taste then at least from despair. For, to reduce everything to a single truth: work is less boring than pleasure."

ATTEMPTS TO recover value and meaning, whether for those who remain religious or for those who do not, will have to begin with efforts to see work and play again as complementary and intersecting parts of life.

Moral recovery will begin with consistent resistance against the processes that make persons into things, whether in their roles as alienated workers or as bemused consumers or spectators.

The German social ethicist Dietrich von Oppen, in his book "The Age of the Person," found possibilities for the recovery of what it means to be a person and to care for other persons in the very midst of technological society. But the "Age of the Person" will emerge only if people make rather thoughtful and serious efforts to help it along.

As leisure time increases, the question "What do you do?" will mean less than it did when work was the encompassing feature of life. The new test will have to do more with the kind of care and concern people can show each other, for example in retirement homes and leisure centers.

IF WORK IS not—and cannot be—very satisfying, then personal fulfillment must come in part by diminishing the portion of life which people give over to work and by investing leisure life with better alternatives.

George Orwell sneered that such efforts meant that reformers were "saving their souls by fretwork," by hobbies and crafts. But "fretwork" can also symbolize a way in which people can again achieve excellence and pride in the making of their hands and minds.

If, on the other hand, work and play contribute to moral confusion when they cause persons to become like things or when they lead to the misuse of persons by others, they also can begin to present moral opportunities when personal values are restored.

Such a reversal is more likely to happen when the spheres of both work and leisure become less "tense" and more complementary.

No single strategy will satisfy everyone in a culture in which a register of vocations lists more than 20,000 different kinds of jobs and in which a catalogue of vocations would list even more hobbies, crafts and styles of games.

But we must all concentrate single-mindedly on the root problem of how work and play interact and what they should mean; this can be a first step toward realizing "The Age of the Person."



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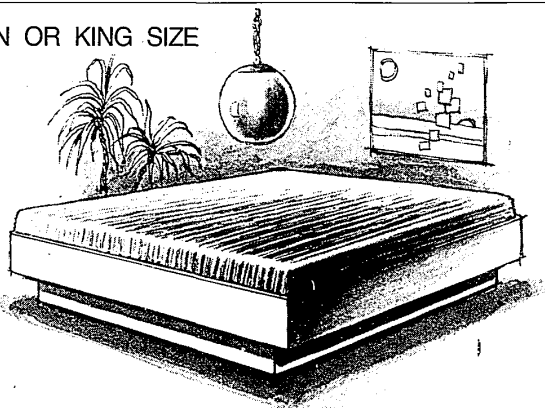
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Monday night in Downey, Calif., on Nov. 11, 1971, and across the nation, found the major after-work pastime for many workers to be watching Monday night football on ABC. Here, the Dallas Cowboys and Buffalo Bills work at sport.