

PLAYING FOR TIME

JAY GRIFFITHS SAYS THAT WESTERN SOCIETY'S FEAR OF IDLENESS IS PART OF OUR MODERN MALAISE.

LET US PLAY. Against the grey backdrop of a jobbing sky, play is the rainbow. Play is freedom, is creation, is energy, is wicked flirtatiousness, is the helplessly laughing, the leglessly laddered, the god of Things Which Brimmeth Over, the pint down the pub, the resplendently unnecessary and the one-too-many which make the whole damn thing worthwhile.

Play is harvest, is abundance, is generosity; the harvest of pleasure after work, the excess and the gusto, the more-than-enough, the gifts, the spirit of exchange. To play a game is, in German 'ein Spiel spielen,' and the spilling-over abundance of play is mirrored in that brimming-over phrase; spill it, spiel it twice just for fun.

Take some examples. In a huge harvest-ready field in Oxfordshire the world's biggest maze was made in a maize field. The pun was intentional; a play on words for a play on earth; a happy *jeu d'esprit* and a play on the spirit of harvest. Take the word 'giggling.' A one-word harvest of play's superfluity, its liquid, lovely over-indulgence, it has g's to spare, (g: the funniest consonant. You want proof? Gnu. Gneed I say more?) and it fills the gaps with 'l' – the quickest, wittiest, trippiest and lightest-hearted of all the vowels. Sheer play.

A sense of play – serious play – in Indian mythology, is the deepest energy in creation. As Vandana Shiva describes it: 'All existence arises from the play of creation and destruction. The manifestation of this energy is called Nature – Prakriti... Prakriti is also called Lalitha, the Player, because 'lila' or play, as free spontaneous activity, is her nature.' Aristotle said 'Nature requires us not only to be able to work well but also to idle well'. Jung remarked: 'Civilisations at their most complete moments always brought out in man his instinct to play and made it more inventive.' Johan Huizinga, author of *Homo Ludens – Mankind at Play*, argues that culture itself 'arises in the form of play'.

Traditionally, many indigenous peoples do not have a designated word for work, and do not work for more than four hours a day: the length of time Bertrand Russell suggested in *In Praise of Idleness*, reducing both overemployment and underemployment. He also argues that 'there is far too much work done in the world, that immense harm is caused by the belief that work is virtuous'. Leisure, by contrast, 'is essential to civilisation'. The play ethic is far more, well, ethical than the work ethic.

Westernised society, (urbanised, denatured and ferociously work-orientated) is scared of this pan-playism, frightened of its subversive, anarchic, liberated nature. Play is considered to be a puerility to be passed ('playtime' is not for grownups), a subject to be studied (there is a Professor of Leisure Studies at Pennsylvania



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State University) or a religious problem to be solved (idle hands making work for the devil). 'Leisure' is promoted, but only as commodity, from that paradoxical beast the 'leisure industry'. Free leisure, free play, is ignored, since it doesn't contribute to any GNP. (In Bhutan, in the late 70s, the king coined the phrase 'Gross National Happiness' to emphasise that Bhutan would not be bullied into measuring wealth in purely materialist terms.)

The battle between the work ethic and the play ethic is a vivid example of the 'politics of time'. It was Britain which started it; Britain which first decreed that 'British' time, GMT, be made a single, universal time and Britain which made this mono-time the first global export, one time imposed on all the diversity of Times across the world. And it was Britain which first pounded out the Time-values of Punctuality, Efficiency and Hard Labour.

Britain once had its days of cakes and ale, and a week which began with a day off: honouring 'St Monday' – effectively the patron saint of hangovers. And Britain once had a year decked with carnival; days of unbridled play but with serious purpose, for carnival is a political animal, reversing the established status quo; in medieval and Tudor times,

the directors of carnival were the 'Lords of Misrule' whose buffoonery levelled the usual lords of rule. Festival time, traditionally, bound communities together and were rites of commonality, in three senses; customs of the common people, customs sited on common land, and customs marking common time.

But these customs disappeared, up and down the country, as a result of one thing: enclosures. The rites of commoners disappeared when the rights to the commons were taken away. Before enclosures, festivals were vigorously convivial; they were 'off-licence' times, drunken, licentious and rude, from midsummer ales to apple-tree wassailing, to May Day's liaisons.

And the Victorian middle classes hated it. Just as land had been literally fenced off and enclosed, so the playful spirit of carnival-time was metaphorically enclosed, repressed and fenced in by Victorian morality; no drinking, no bawdiness, no sex. The common – very vulgar – character of festival was increasingly outlawed so the mean spirit of enclosure suppressed the broad, unenclosed, unfettered, unbounded exuberance of the vulgar at large; the spirit of serious play was crushed.

The whole machinery of the Industrial Revolution was a massive attack on the spirit of play, altering the experience of time more dramatically than any other. Work, work, work, was the whip word, and though the middle classes pretended that productive time-use was about morality, it was actually about class

politics and class power. For the middle classes spouted that vicious little lie 'Time is Money', without ever answering the question: whose money was being made out of whose time? As landowners made their wealth by stealing the common people's land in the enclosures, so new capitalist timeowners made their wealth by stealing the common people's hours in the factory-enclosures of time. Time was changed forever. The economics of capitalism combined with the Protestant work ethic, class politics, Puritan 'morality', new urbanisation, Christianity's hell-now, heaven-later accountancy of time, and the rise of synchronised mechanical time in factories.

Newton (a misanthropic alchemist from Grantham), offered the intellectual justification for mechanical time which so despised human time, saying that Time was absolute and uniform; factory time in overalls. Time was Granthamised. The Victorians loved him, inaugurating, at Saint Peter's Hill, Grantham, in 1858, a statue of him; two tons of Granthamite misery for two centuries of hard time. To maintain the time of factory machines, many workers' holidays were outlawed by the Victorian middle classes.

It was of course under Margaret Thatcher (a misanthropic chemist from Grantham), very much heir to Newton's factory time, and a banger-on about middle-class Victorian values, that May Day, the traditional workers' holiday, was threatened with abolition.

What was lost? Time varied, curly, elastic and coloured. Time seasonal, mischievous, haphazard, red-lettered and unpredictable was gone. Time was colonised. Mapped. Levelled. Privatised. Enclosed. Counted in and accounted out. Factored in and factored out. Working people were cut off from nature's time, for in factory time each hour was the same as any other. Days of equal width, hours of equal length replaced the variable hours and stretchy seasons of times gone by. Also, crucially, people ceased to own their 'own' time; the workforce had to demarcate time which 'belonged' to an employer.

There were protests. With eloquent violence, workers in Britain smashed the clocks above the factory gates, the loathed symbol of a new world order which had stolen their time, that quintessence of true individual freedom. Trade Unions took on first the abuse of time. Karl Marx highlighted time's role in capitalism, warning of the 'overconsumption' of workers' time. And Charles Dickens wrote his blistering portrait of such a world, with its Gradgrinds and Bounderbys, in *Hard Times* in 1854.

Across the world, the colonisation of time happened as surely and as devastatingly as the colonisation of land. Traditional indigenous carnival-times were banned from Burma to Brazil; Christian calendars were imposed and the spirit of play was crushed. Columbus, on first meeting the Tainos people, in the place that we now call San Salvador, was convinced the people should be 'made to work, sow and do all that is necessary and to adopt our ways...' Colonists enslaved people in the 'work camps' of the rubber barons – concentration camps by any other name – making their money out of the very life times of indigenous peoples. Few ever survived. Potosi, the 'mountain of silver' in Bolivia, was 'discovered' by the Spanish in 1545. In total, 8 million people laboured and died for the leisure and wealth of white people and to literally finance the capitalism under which they would suffer for the next 500 years.

The majority of work done today, even more so than when Bertrand Russell wrote, is destructive, profiting big business and harming both nature and social justice. Arguably, it benefits few enough people even in the north, as the cycle of overwork, overspend, overmortgage, overconsume and overwork all over again is acknowledged to be destructive. The protestant work ethic has been countered in part by a protesters' play ethic; from the hippy 'drop-outs' of the 1960s onwards to today's downshifters who, in the US, comprise between 5 and 10 per cent of the workforce. The politics of carnival, meanwhile, has been richly dramatised by the May Days of recent years; confronting the industrial with a ludic revolution.

Nature is 'the Player', Shiva commented. Today, though, nature must be put to work: the free, wild and self-willed inter-play of nature is managed at best, exploited at worst. The effervescent shimmer of the rainforest gives way to the dull thud of logging as the Amazon must pay its way to finance South America's external debt and money from the south goes to countries of the north whose sons and daughters, enleisured by neoliberalism, wreak cultural and environmental havoc going out to play 'global tourism'. Having stolen the real childhood of real children in sweatshops of the world, grownups now try to recreate for themselves the fake confectionery-childhood of tourism, fatuous adults playing in the artificial playgrounds of the world.

At the heart of play are ideas of autonomy, spontaneity and freedom above all. At the heart of modern work are ideas of subjection, clockwork time-discipline and unfreedom – to the point of slavery. The psychology of work is that by enslaving someone's time, you enslave their minds, for free-thinking demands unfettered time, it demands the integrity of hour on hour untouched by the hands of someone else's clock. Play, lively, light-hearted and free, has been colonised all over the world, which is, if you don't mind my saying, a deadly serious business.

Play's freedom is connected to ineffable diversity. The worst of work is connected to ineluctable monoism, the assembly line, factories, sweatshops, work camps and concentration camps. But the dominant political systems of today reverse these truths, offering instead the lie that through work – not play – is liberation. The liberation of working to buy vacations; the liberation of labouring to buy labour-saving devices. These systems silently define all time as work time, so people are encouraged to work to 'buy' back some of their own 'free' time (and to work to buy the commodities that will fill that free time).

And then the lie is exported, through TV, tourism and consumerism, to persuade people of the 'Third World' that they too can earn a similar (vacant) liberation if they will only work hard enough. That they can liberate themselves from the yoke of the 'Third World debt' – if they only work hard enough. The liberating power of work has been written, metaphorically, over the gates of Downing Street, at the White House, at every G8 meeting, it is on the letterheads of the World Bank and the IMF; an idea testament to the inherently fascistic tendencies of big business and neoliberalism: Work Makes You Free – 'Arbeit macht frei' – as the gates of Auschwitz proclaimed.

Jay Griffiths is the author of Pip Pip: A Sideways Look at Time, published by Flamingo.

THE WHOLE MACHINERY OF THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION WAS A MASSIVE ATTACK ON THE SPIRIT OF PLAY

AT THE HEART OF PLAY ARE IDEAS OF AUTONOMY, SPONTANEITY AND FREEDOM ABOVE ALL