

The Character of Leisure Time in Capitalism and Socialism (1961)

Abstract

In the face of economic difficulties, official propaganda in East Germany sought to emphasize the theoretical advantages of Socialism. That applied to the area of leisure as well. According to East German propaganda, leisure time in West Germany served merely to allow the exhausted worker to recover so that he could return to work; moreover, under capitalism, leisure time was apparently spent on undemanding, nonpolitical activities. In contrast, the worker in the GDR had access a broad array of cultural institutions in which he could continue to educate himself personally, politically, and vocationally.

Source

Friendship and conviviality are closely linked to the extent and content of leisure time. In this regard, it is interesting to compare and contrast the character of leisure time in capitalism and Socialism.

Four main characteristics distinguish the leisure time of workers in the German Democratic Republic from the leisure time in capitalism:

First, in Socialism, through the conquest of political power by the working class and the socialization of the important means of production, relationships of mutual, comradely assistance arise for the first time for all workers; emanating from the work process, these relationships also extend into leisure time.

Under capitalism, the entire organization of leisure time is overshadowed by existential fears, at times this occurs more strongly than at others, but it is invariably so. It flattens and isolates, especially culturally, not least through the effects of class conflict, about which Engels says: "Today, the possibility of pure human emotion in relations with other people is already sufficiently atrophied through a society based on class conflict and class rule in which we are forced to operate."

Second, in Socialism there is no longer an existential struggle over secure leisure time. Leisure time will naturally expand as labor productivity rises. Under capitalism, by contrast, the worker either has a lot of involuntary "leisure time" in periods of part-time work and unemployment, or too little leisure time in periods of economic boom, because of the greed of capital to transform the last remnant of leisure time into profit-generating work time. As it is, leisure time that is secure and appropriate to the work is won only in an energy-sapping class struggle. It usually results in an exhausted worker. In this context, the report in an issue of the *Neue Rheinzeitung* [New Rhine Newspaper] under the title "The worker largely foregoes the book" is revealing. It notes that the West German worker is not among either the buyers or readers of books. And the reason? Let us recapitulate two answers by West German workers.

A fifty-two year-old metal worker from Cologne: "Well, I used to be quite happy when I could read a book in the evening. Today I want my peace and quiet. The stress at work wears me out so much that the most I do in the evening is look at the paper. My wife sometimes gets something from the library. But I only look at it on Sundays. Mostly it is some kind of kitsch."

A thirty-seven year-old construction worker from the Sieg district: "When I come home from work, I am exhausted. My wife then usually turns on the television. She often has to wake me up when the show is over."

Under Socialism, by contrast, the worker, on the basis of social security and regulated work hours, can still muster enough reserves of energy for leisure time.

Third, under Socialism there exists for the first time a generous network of cultural and scientific institutions that can be used by all workers without restrictions. There is a law for the qualification of workers and for the Socialist development of job training. “It used to be that people rushed to the nearest bar at the end of the work day,” reported Dieter Locha, Youth Brigadeer at the VEB Machine Building Görlitz, “and then it would always get to be one or two o’clock in the morning. That doesn’t work anymore. One person is going to a master’s training course; the others are attending night classes to learn a second profession as welders. And then we also meet quite often to talk something through.”

Fourth, leisure time in Socialism, because it increases naturally as labor productivity rises and because Socialist work leaves sufficient reserves of energy, offers the possibility not only of relaxation and entertainment, but also of personal self-realization through diverse cultural and scientific contacts. “No educational fanaticism, please,” recommends, by contrast, the semiofficial West German *Welt der Arbeit* [*World of Work*]. “Leisure time means freedom to do what one likes. [...] And if someone stands on a bridge for hours and spits into a barge to see whether the spit can travel by barge – he should be allowed to do so.” What is unmistakably recommended here is individualistic leisure time entertainment aimed at political abstemiousness. It is in line with the defamatory remark by Ministerial Director Osterloh from the Federal Ministry for Nutrition [*Bundesernährungsministerium*]: “In the Russian sphere of power, leisure time is destroyed through planning and the state-guided organization of leisure time.” Realistic art and literature, partisan science, all-around training and ongoing training of workers as the greatest humanistic task of a society is indeed a “destruction of leisure time,” of a leisure time of fearful stupor, of jealous gossip, of a crude beer-table atmosphere, in which, under the influence of alcohol, first the arguments and then the beer mugs are tossed about. Under capitalism, the worker is supposed to amuse himself in order to work well; but he is not supposed to think, to learn to act in a class-conscious way. Cultural relaxation is therefore desired only with political indifference. Under Socialism, by contrast, leisure time serves, in addition to physically and psychologically necessary relaxation, above all the speedy victory of the cultural revolution, the development of a highly educated, cultured person. For the first time, culture is serving the people without restriction, and for the first time the people are creating their own culture, the Socialist national people’s culture.

Source: Herbert Zerle: “Freundschaft und Geselligkeit im Sozialismus”, *Pädagogik* 16 (1961), p. 581 ff; reprinted in Christoph Kleßmann and Georg Wagner, eds. *Das gespaltene Land. Leben in Deutschland 1945–1990. Texte und Dokumente zur Sozialgeschichte*. Munich: C.H. Beck, 1993, pp. 510–12.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

Recommended Citation: The Character of Leisure Time in Capitalism and Socialism (1961), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/occupation-and-the-emergence-of-two-states-1945-1961/ghdi:document-4595>> [May 17, 2024].