

# WALT WHITMAN'S "HIGHER PROGRESS" AND SHORTER WORK HOURS

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WITH MANY OF HIS COUNTRYMEN AND WOMEN, and the European philosophers he admired, Walt Whitman believed that progress meant the advance of freedom. With *Democratic Vistas* he attempted to explain more fully than he had before how one liberation encouraged the next and how civilizations advanced in stages, each stage founding the next higher and freer level. Whitman hoped that the United States might still lead the world to a democratic ideal after the Civil War, spreading basic political rights to disenfranchised and exploited groups. However, progress was not simply the expansion of human rights, vital though such expansion might be. Freedom's progress also entailed a qualitative change, an advance beyond fundamental political rights and basic economic freedoms and opportunities to higher physical, mental and spiritual possibilities, an advance Whitman called "higher progress":

The world evidently supposes, and we have evidently supposed so too, that the States are merely to achieve the equal franchise, an elective government—to inaugurate the respectability of labor, and become a nation of practical operatives, law-abiding, orderly and well-off. Yes, those are indeed parts of the task of America; but they not only do not exhaust the progressive conception, but rather arise, teeming with it, as the mediums of deeper, higher progress. Daughter of a physical revolution—mother of the true revolutions, which are of the interior life, and of the arts. For so long as the spirit is not changed, any change of appearance is of no avail.<sup>1</sup>

Whereas Lincoln and the war extended the Declaration of Independence's guarantees of human rights to begin to include African Americans, re-affirming freedom's promise of similar liberations to come and reiterating the necessity of continued belief, commitment, and struggle, Whitman hoped to champion freedom's final frontier with *Democratic Vistas*. Similar to the nation's attempts to spread human rights, Whitman's "higher progress" was less a naively optimistic, uncritical meta-narrative than a project—a vision that might be realized, the consummation of which, however, would be contingent on the belief, passion and commitment of future generations. Belief, will, and affection were essential for liberty's advance but were also free human qualities that might be forgotten or abandoned.

Now usually dismissed as an anachronism or simply forgotten, Whitman's hope for "higher progress" is as old as the Republic. In his history of the early years of the nation, Henry Brooks Adams, writing just before Whitman's death, described the republican vision of "higher progress" and hope for an "America of thought and art":

[L]eaders like Jefferson, Gallatin, and Barlow might without extravagance count upon a coming time when diffused ease and education should bring the masses into familiar contact with higher forms of human achievement, and their vast creative power, turned toward a nobler culture, might rise to the level of that democratic genius which found expression in the Parthenon . . . might create for five hundred million people the America of thought and art which alone could satisfy their omnivorous ambition.<sup>2</sup>

Whitman, steeped throughout his life in this vision, embraced the pursuit of "higher forms of human achievement."<sup>3</sup> Walking well-worn rhetorical pathways, he offered unique insights, dilating and democratizing the old republican dream as no one had before, compiling lists of specific free activities that might actually constitute "a nobler culture."

In *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman reaffirmed the "under-lying principles of the States." The "American Republic" would flower in freedom through the particular forms of song, poetry, play, festival, celebration, and comradeship, as it built on "two grand stages of preparation-strata":

For the New World, indeed, after two grand stages of preparation-strata, I perceive that now a third stage, being ready for, (and without which the other two were useless,) with unmistakable signs appears. The First stage was the planning and putting on record the political foundation rights of immense masses of people—indeed all people . . . . This is the American programme, not for classes, but for universal man . . . . The Second stage relates to material prosperity, wealth, produce, labor-saving machines, iron, cotton, local, State and continental railways.<sup>4</sup>

Arguably, "democratic vistas" is a metaphor for his vision of "higher progress" seen from a vantage point built on previous political and economic stages of national progress. Struggling to give specific form to the old republican, nebulous dream of freedom beyond the economy and politics, he looked ahead to new kinds of activities his countrymen might find in the new freedom, chief among which was the autotelic experience of language that is poetry:

I too hail those achievements [of political liberty and 'worldly prosperity'] with pride and joy: then answer that the soul of man will not with such only—nay, not with such at all—be finally satisfied; but needs what, (standing on these and on all things, as the feet stand on the ground,) is address'd to the loftiest, to itself alone. Out of such considerations, such truths, arises for treatment in these Vistas the important question

of character, of an American stock-personality, with literatures and arts for outlets and return-expressions. (*PW*, 369)

Whitman believed as strongly in the coming of material abundance (“material success”) as he did in the advance of political freedoms. When he wrote *Democratic Vistas* his fears were mainly about the fate of “higher progress.” As John Maynard Keynes would continue to do sixty years later, and with many of Whitman’s generation who shared his hope for economic progress, Whitman fully expected that America would soon solve its “economic problem.”<sup>5</sup> For him economic liberty was hardly confined to contracts or exhausted by the free market. A “triumphant future,” when “all life’s material comforts” will be at last vouchsafed for everyone, “is certain”:<sup>6</sup> “Not the least doubtful am I on any prospects of their material success. The triumphant future of their business, geographic and productive departments, on larger scales and in more varieties than ever, is certain” (*PW*, 363). Just as certain, progress toward “material success,” like the advance of political rights, would be gradual and uneven. No one expected that the need to work and to be concerned about economic matters would end suddenly, only that humans might be increasingly able to do other things as the economy improved. Some would go ahead of others, but the destination was democratic, open to all. The “American programme” was “not for classes but for universal man.”<sup>7</sup>

The widespread belief in “abundance,” in the possibility of eventually acquiring “enough” to satisfy “real needs,” what scores of Americans beginning with Benjamin Franklin called “necessaries,” animated mid-nineteenth through early twentieth-century expectations about “higher progress.” The satisfaction of reasonable human material needs, what Franklin Delano Roosevelt would call “freedom from want,” was long understood to be inevitable or at least a realistic possibility because of the advance of technology. America’s competing beliefs about perpetual scarcity and the absolute need for eternal economic expansion were not formulated and spread universally until well into the twentieth century. Even though such beliefs are arguably more fantastic than Whitman’s dreams, they now inform critics who label Whitman’s *Democratic Vistas* “an exercise in nostalgia.”<sup>8</sup>

Whitman feared that the third, culminating, and defining stage toward “higher progress,” without which the first two stages were unfulfilled and eventually barren, even absurd, was being sidetracked by a people overly enamored of their initial successes. The nation, like Nathaniel Hawthorne’s traveler on the “Celestial Railroad,” was being tempted after the war to settle for humanity’s penultimate destination and make its dwelling in Vanity Fair.

Just as Whitman changed his mind over time about many issues, he seems to have become more pessimistic about the prospects of “higher progress,” even while he remained uncharacteristically constant in his commitment to an enlarging arena of human freedom. In the 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, his democratic vision was clear, bold and optimistic, not yet clouded by the mid-century’s cataclysmic events and democracy’s rude growths. But by 1871, with the publication of *Democratic Vistas*, he had become painfully aware of freedom’s failures: rampant “hypocrisy” in literature, political corruption and business frauds, social posturings and overreachings. Most troubling was the widespread failure of belief.

In the postbellum years, the widespread loss of faith had resulted in a disappointing lack of progress toward democracy’s “higher,” better promises, which originally animated *Leaves of Grass*. Instead of experiencing a rebirth of its multiform freedoms, democracy had been side-tracked after the war. The nation had become overly concerned with national power and empire, “materialistic development” and “popular intellectuality.” The certainty of human progress was in question, Whitman’s hope now “desperate.”<sup>9</sup> Substituting the idols of comfort and convenience, reputation and position, wealth, power, and “security” for its belief in the future, the American public might forget that life offered infinitely more. Such an abandonment of aspirations caused alienation, diverting individuals from their destiny and leading to a spiritual famine in the midst of material abundance—to unnecessary deprivations of the soul that invited what Whitman once called “a secret silent loathing and despair.”<sup>10</sup>

But a true poet might yet lead the way beyond the allures and despair of Vanity Fair, offering himself as a foretaste, a specimen of what might be in store. Over and again Whitman presented his vision of “higher progress” to spur us on toward our destiny. For Whitman “higher progress” presented an open road on which individuals might come fully into their own. Less and less encumbered by political oppression, social custom, the demands of the job and marketplace, all people would have their chance to more fully engage their humanity, delighting in nature, the body, the company of their fellows, and struggling with the challenges of the human spirit. Only in this refined freedom was true equality to be found.

Writing of comradeship, manly love, and intercourse of all kinds, Whitman gives some of his best answers to freedom’s autotelic challenge. Celebration, song, touch, and play are each modes of “adhesiveness,” of free human inter-relations that transcend the marketplace and courthouse. Individuals are valuable in and for themselves, the epitome of the autotelic. Their joining together in free *activities* would be the acme of progress and liberty’s final achievement.

Beyond want and “necessaries,” ordinary purposes and convention, obligation and reward, “higher progress” presented liberty’s ultimate challenge to citizens to fill the purest of freedoms with activities that were complete in themselves. Containing their own meaning, these activities would be their own reward and would be “address’d to the loftiest, to itself alone.” Whitman was among the first to recognize the modern challenges of the autotelic, questioning and exploring what a fullness of free-being might look like and proposing a variety of metaphors and practical possibilities in his writings that might answer freedom’s final test in the “greater struggle” to come.

### *Higher Progress and Shorter Work Hours*

Accused of being an idle dreamer, Whitman has been routinely taken to task for his democratic vision. Betsy Erkkila agrees with Sean Wilentz that Whitman’s political views were influenced from an early age by the republicanism of New York’s artisan community. Whitman came to share both its suspicion of government and dislike of the growing power of industry. Thus Erkkila argues that Whitman’s position was increasingly untenable. His self-reliant individualism prohibited him from supporting governmental measures necessary to regulate the burgeoning forces of capitalism that were choking out the very agrarian values and artisanal cultures he hoped to save. Hence his work, along with the world of artisanal republican virtue, became increasingly ironic.<sup>11</sup>

Thomas Haddox argues that at first Whitman reasonably saw economic growth and capitalism “expanding the basis of material life and making possible the preconditions for freedom.” But after the war he retreated to an “idealized Jeffersonian republic” rather than confront “the industrial capitalist present and future.” Thus his work “becomes little more than an exercise in nostalgia” as he took “refuge from the distortions of the present in a mythic past.” His “refusal to engage with the complexities of the present moment,” his steadfast ignoring of “the forces associated with industrial capitalism that were already transforming American society; mechanization, urbanization, and bureaucratization” finally made his work irrelevant (Haddox, 1-22). Arthur Wrobel, summarizing the criticism of a variety of Whitman scholars, concluded that Whitman was “a bit short on practical suggestions.”<sup>12</sup>

However, such critics ignore a vital part of Whitman’s experience that grounded, and arguably gave rise to, his continuing hopes for the “higher progress” that he expressed after the war in *Democratic Vistas*. Whitman along with many of his contemporaries recognized a practical opportunity emerging with the nation’s economic successes and technological development. The reduction of working hours was then, as

now, the obvious practical link between increasing material wealth and “higher progress.” Common sense and republican virtue agreed that if people earned and saved enough to take care of “necessaries,” they could reasonably expect to take time off to do other, more enjoyable, perhaps even more virtuous things. Reductions in the demands of work and the marketplace on the individual were at the core of Whitman’s belief that economic “success” would make “higher progress” possible.

Rhetoric making the explicit connection between shorter work hours and “higher progress” swirled about Whitman throughout his life: in the speeches of Edward Everett and Charles Dudley Warner, the blueprints of Brook Farm, the bombast of Horace Greely, the sermons of millennialists, the writings of Henry Ward Beecher, the Transcendentalist tracts of William Ellery Channing and others, and in the mouths of dear friends such as Horace Traubel.<sup>13</sup> More importantly, the reduction of working hours was arguably the primary concern of the artisanal republicanism that influenced Whitman during his early years. An excellent case has been made that workers’ desire for shorter hours initiated the labor movement in the United States and remained centrally important to its cause well into the twentieth century. David Roediger and Philip Foner conclude: “Shorter hours were the focal point of the Jacksonian labor movement. . . . The commitment of so many egalitarian, working artisans to educational reforms . . . best makes sense in terms of the . . . connection made by journeymen between education, self-improvement, republicanism, and the right of labor to limit hours and to exercise intelligent control over its own time.”<sup>14</sup> Shorter hours was the core issue around which worker identity formed in places such as Worcester, Massachusetts, and New York City—workers in New York won the “eight-hour system” long before the rest of the nation (Trachtenberg, 73; Hunnicutt, 12). Whitman experienced directly the growing importance of leisure for the workers he mingled with on Broadway and in the Bowery Theatres. Hearing their complaints about “wage slavery,” he embraced their hopes and expectations as his own. While he celebrated the variety of its forms, he never idealized work as the site of freedom or romanticized the job as the place for individuals to realize their full humanity—such fantasies spread widely only in the twentieth century. Work, like economic progress, was ennobling primarily because it led to better things. With the majority of workers in the nineteenth century for whom work had lost most of its intrinsic virtue, Whitman recognized that the job was a means to an end rather than an end in itself, a sentiment captured by the doggerel repeated by generations of workers: “work to live, don’t live to work.”

Whitman would have been aware of the importance of work reduction as the primary issue of the working classes in New York and the significance of increasing leisure as the way to preserve artisanal



republican virtues once attached to work. His apprenticeship for the *Long Island Patriot*, his work as a compositor on the *Long Island Star*, and his editorship of the *Long Islander* put him in newsrooms that regularly covered workers' demands for limiting working hours to ten each day—the “ten-hour system.” His support of and campaigning for Martin Van Buren put him in the middle of the political debates about the “ten-hour system,” which was centrally important to Van Buren's election and political success (Roediger and Foner, 40–41). When U.S. Grant's eight-hour executive order of 1877 established the eight-hour day for manual workers under government contract, fueling the “eight-hour agitation” that, as Karl Marx famously observed, was “the first real fruit of the Civil War . . . that ran with the seven-leagued boots of the locomotive from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from New England to California,”<sup>15</sup> it provoked national debates that would have been hard to ignore. Such transitional moments would have been a constant reminder to Whitman that economic developments and political struggles were steadily reducing work hours and laying a practical foundation for “higher progress.”

During Whitman's editorship from March 5, 1846, to January 18, 1848, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* carried editorials that came close to endorsing ten-hour legislation and published reports and letters that made explicit rhetorical links between shorter hours and elements of what would come to constitute Whitman's “higher progress.”<sup>16</sup> For example, on April 6, 1847, the *Daily Eagle* reported that journeymen house carpenters in Nashville were striking for a “ten-hour system” to replace the traditional “sun to sun” workday. Reporting that “they have families and household affairs which claim a portion of their attention,” the paper quoted the Nashville carpenters:

We are flesh and blood; we need hours of recreation. It is estimated by political economists that five hours per day by each individual would be sufficient to support the human race. Surely then we do our share when we labor ten. We have social feeling which must be satisfied. We have minds and they must be improved. We are lovers of our country and must have time and opportunity to study its interests. Shall we live and die knowing nothing but the rudiments of our trades? Is knowledge useless to us that we should be debarred of the means of obtaining it? Would we be less adept as workmen . . . less respectable or useful . . . because we were enlightened?

Such rhetoric had been an integral part of labor's ten-hour campaign since the 1820s. In 1827, in what John R. Commons called “the earliest evidence of [labor] unrest” in the United States, Philadelphia journeymen carpenters, striking for ten hours, resolved that “all men have a just right, derived from their Creator, to have sufficient time each day for the cultivation of their mind and for self-improvement.” Giving

voice to the carpenters' sentiment, William Heighton in "An Address to the Members of Trade Societies and to the Working Class Generally," defined American progress as the reduction of working hours from "12 to 10, to 8, to 6, and so on" until "the development and progress of science have reduced human labor to its lowest terms."<sup>17</sup>

Natural rights rhetoric—echoing the Declaration of Independence, identifying shorter hours with the liberty to pursue republican virtue, envisioning a practical political agenda and predicting that technological progress would eventually reduce work to a subordinate role in every citizen's daily life—was widespread in the streets of New York and remained a fundamental part of labor's struggles throughout Whitman's life. On September 22, 1847, Whitman editorialized that, "although we belong to that school which thinks that the less government or law interferes with labor, or with the contracts to do it, the better, we are fain to confess that if we should make any exception at all, it would be in favor of such law as the one lately passed in New Hampshire, called the 'ten hour law.'"

However, after his career as a newspaper editor, Whitman made no explicit claims about the reduction of the hours of labor in the body of his main work. As Leadie M. Clark once observed: "for no major problem of his age can one go to Whitman for a proposed solution. He stated and discussed the problem, yes, but he left all solutions to time" (33). Nevertheless, his several enigmatic references to labor-saving machines, leisure, and the importance of putting aside work to accomplish finer, freer things are revealing. Read in the light of his early interest in the "ten-hour system" such references may offer an insight into Whitman's thinking about how increased material wealth provides the work-a-day world with a practical means, an open road to "higher progress." Shorter work hours as an ongoing, continuous historical process may then be revealed as the "solution" Whitman left "to time." This solution, appearing as hints and metaphors in his work, was later made explicit by his disciples and critics, confirmed by historical developments, and remains a realistic possibility for those who may yet come to share his vision.

Signs of Whitman's attitudes toward excessive work hours began to appear in his fiction writing from the 1840s. One of Whitman's early short stories, "The Child and the Profligate," tells of a boy, Charles, who is forced to work brutally long hours by a farmer, Elias, "whose god was gain and a prime article of his creed was to get as much work as possible from every one around him." The boy finally has a chance to visit his mother but is unable to talk with her because he is exhausted. His mother is concerned that the boy has no life, no friends, and no chance to learn because of his job. Langton, the profligate, sees the



boy at an inn and learns of his plight. Langton, who is independently wealthy, is so moved by the boy's story that he buys out the farmer's claims to the boy's labor and frees the lad from a life of total work to one of relative ease. With this act of charity, Langton saves himself from drink as well.<sup>18</sup> The point of the story, aside from the obvious temperance message, is that freedom from work liberates, offering the "wage slave" the chance to have a life.

In the main body of his mature poetry and prose, Whitman hinted that "labor-saving machines" would be history's agents liberating humans from "wage slavery" and for "higher progress." In his description in *Democratic Vistas* of the "two grand stages of preparation-strata" founding progress' final, "third stage," Whitman included "labor-saving machines" as part of the nation's material infrastructure (*PW*, 409-410). In his poem "No Labor-Saving Machine," he also listed "labor-saving machines" as part of the wealth building up in the nation, together with the founding of hospitals and libraries and deeds of courage. He put "the better weapons," the "labor-saving implement," in the hands of soldiers returning from the war. For Whitman, these soldiers were beginning to fight "saner wars, sweet wars, life-giving wars" in the "true arenas of my race, or first or last, Man's innocent and strong arenas":

Well-pleas'd America thou beholdest,  
Over the fields of the West those crawling monsters,  
The human-divine inventions, the labor-saving implements;  
Beholdest moving in every direction imbued as with life. (*LG*, 131, 138)

His description of a utopian community, read in the light of his confidence in the advance of technology and "material success" becomes much more than the nostalgic caricature that scholars such as Haddox draw:<sup>19</sup>

I can conceive a community, to-day and here, in which, on a sufficient scale, the perfect personalities, without noise meet; say in some pleasant western settlement or town, where a couple of hundred best men and women, of ordinary worldly status, have by luck been drawn together, with nothing extra of genius or wealth, but virtuous, chaste, industrious, cheerful, resolute, friendly and devout. I can conceive such a community organized in running order, powers judiciously delegated—farming, building, trade, courts, mails, schools, elections, all attended to; *and then the rest of life, the main thing*, freely branching and blossoming in each individual, and bearing golden fruit. I can see there, in every young and old man, after his kind, and in every woman after hers, a true personality, develop'd, exercised proportionately in body, mind, and spirit. I can imagine this case as one not necessarily rare or difficult, but in buoyant accordance with the municipal and general requirements of our times. And I can realize in it the culmination of something better than any stereotyped *éclat* of history or poems. (*PW*, 402 [Italics added.])

Nearly as enigmatic as his “labor-saving machines,” Whitman’s “leisure” is just as evocative. Not yet trivialized as it is today, “leisure” was through most of the nineteenth century an ordinary-enough word that meant simple opportunity, often the privilege of the wealthy. However, Whitman, influenced perhaps by the classical Greeks, pointed to leisure’s democratic potential, adding layers of new meaning to the word, new usages that he revealed in specific lists of what is possible in that refined freedom. In the process he continued to clothe the old republican dream of moral and humane freedom with very real kinds of human experiences. His “wife of a mechanic” who is “physiologically sweet and sound, loving work, practical” nevertheless “knows that there are intervals, however few, devoted to recreation, music, leisure, hospitality—and affords such intervals.”<sup>20</sup> His “complete lover . . . the greatest poet . . . in . . . the presence of children playing or with his arm round the neck of a man or woman” and whose “love above all love has leisure and expanse . . . leaves room ahead of himself” (*PW*, 441).

In his famous 1856 letter to Emerson the poet cautioned his “Master”:

[W]e have not come through centuries, caste, heroisms, fables, to halt in this land today. Or I think it is to collect a ten-fold impetus that any halt is made. As nature, inexorable, onward, resistless, impassive amid the threats and screams of disputants, so America. Let all defer. Let all attend respectfully the leisure of These States, their politics, poems, literature, manners, and their free-handed modes of training their own offspring. Their own comes, just matured, certain, numerous and capable enough, with egotistical tongues, with sinewed wrists, seizing openly what belongs to them. They resume Personality, too long left out of mind.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, his clear calls to redeem time, to understand the urgency of leaving work, shops, schools, the courthouse, and marketplace behind as soon as possible for the freedom of the open road, are hints of his hope for a leisured future.

Allons! the road is before us!

It is safe—I have tried it—my own feet have tried it well—be not detain’d!

Let the paper remain on the desk unwritten, and the book on the shelf unopen’d!

Let the tools remain in the workshop! *let the money remain unearn’d!*

Let the school stand! mind not the cry of the teacher!

Let the preacher preach in his pulpit! let the lawyer plead in the court, and the judge expound the law. (*LG*, 159 [Italics added.])

Whitman would have agreed with Emerson’s punning lament, “Works and days were offer’d us, and we took works.”<sup>22</sup> Thus he urged us—poets all if we were but to choose—to reconsider how we spend our time:

This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others. . . . *The poet shall not spend his time in unneeded work.* He shall know that the ground is always ready plowed and manured . . . others may not know it but he shall. He shall go directly to the creation. His trust shall master the trust of everything he touches . . . and shall master all attachment. (*PW*, 440. [Italics added.]

Where Whitman was vague and enigmatic, his followers and critics have been explicit about the way that “higher progress” would be available to all. In 1919 David Karsner reported that Horace Traubel “contended for the larger aspects of the labor movement.” Traubel thought:

If the struggle of the working class hinged entirely upon the bread and butter question it might not be so furiously combatted by those who hold the keys to the social storehouses. . . . But the granting of more wages and the lessening of the hours of labor presents an opportunity to the workman to read and to think and increase his social vision. That is more dangerous to the ruling class than increased wages. . . . [T]he spiritual aspect of the labor movement is the desire, not for more wages only, but for opportunity in which to reach out in quest for finer possessions and richer truths. The terrific industrial struggle may account for the materialistic doctrine, but does not allow for the equally intense ethical and intellectual discontent.”<sup>23</sup>

Embracing labor’s struggles as his own, Traubel wrote:

Our fight is a fight for leisure. . . . We want to do things. We need time and space to do them. We’re fighting for that time and space. That time and space is what we call leisure. We need room to move around in. That’s what we are fighting for. Not for meals and clothes and houses. That’s only the incident. We’re after life and more life. We’re after expansion. . . . That’s our fight. We don’t fight to possess goods. We fight to stop goods from possessing us. . . .”<sup>24</sup>

Traubel wrote supporting the “fight for leisure” during the time that the eight-hour work day was sweeping the nation. During the 1910s organized labor became increasingly confident that workers were winning their century-long fight for shorter hours. Throughout the 1920s observers noted that working hours had been cut nearly in half from what they were during Whitman’s youth. Nevertheless, the American Federation of Labor recommitted itself to “the progressive shortening of the hours of labor,” using the same sorts of rhetoric that the unions and their supporters had been using since the early nineteenth century to call for reductions below forty hours a week. Still demanding “our own time” “to do with what we will,” union leaders repeated rank and file calls for ever more time for family, learning, community/fellowship, political participation, hobbies, rest and recreation, religious duties,

the practice and conservation of ethnic cultures, and for enjoying the natural world. Viewing what appeared to be still widening democratic vistas, Whitman, the labor movement, and American workers were rising to meet leisure's autotelic challenge.<sup>25</sup>

Such a vision of labor's subordination to leisure continued to be widespread during the first half of the twentieth century, particularly so in the 1920s and 1930s, and was shared by people across the political spectrum. Rising from the bottom up, from the ranks of workers and their organizations, from grassroots concerns about ordinary time to do the ordinary things that make life worth living, the chorus was taken up by others—middle-of-the-road politicians, visionaries and intellectuals, educators and professionals, scientists and naturalists, artists and poets, utopians writers and environmentalists, radicals and inventors, businessmen and industrialists—who all sang praises for the expansion of leisure, warning against the voluntary slavery of consumerism and endless work, and offering distinctive answers to liberty's last challenge.

"Liberation capitalists" such as Lord Leverhulme and W. K. Kellogg (who instituted a six-hour day in his company in 1930 that lasted to the mid-1980s) argued that the free marketplace and enlightened businessmen made shorter hours possible whereas state intervention and regulations were counterproductive. Walter Gifford, president of AT&T, the largest corporation in the United States in the 1920s, recognized that "industry . . . has gained a new and astonishing vision." The final, best achievement of business and the free market need not be perpetual economic growth, eternal "job creation," and everlasting consumerism, but "a new type of civilization," in which "how to make a living becomes less important than how to live." Gifford predicted:

Machinery will increasingly take the load off men's shoulders. . . . Every one of us will have more chance to do what he wills, which means greater opportunity, both materially and spiritually. . . . [Steadily decreasing work hours] will give us time to cultivate the art of living, give us a better opportunity for . . . the arts, enlarge the comforts and satisfaction of the mind and spirit, as material well-being feeds the comforts of the body.<sup>26</sup>

Using similar language, economists such as John Maynard Keynes predicted that soon after the First World War the industrial nations, having "solved" "the economic problem," would enter an era of "plenty" in which all people, guaranteed basic necessities, could proceed to the "nobler exercise of their faculties." He concluded: "when we reach the point when the world produces all the goods that it needs in two days, as it inevitably will . . . we must turn our attention to the great problem of what to do with our leisure."<sup>27</sup>

However, the transition to abundance would not be easy. Keynes reasoned that “we have been expressly evolved by nature with all our impulses and deepest instincts for the purpose of solving our economic problem. If the economic problem is solved, mankind will be deprived of its traditional purpose.” Inspired leaders and visionaries would be needed to ward off a national “nervous breakdown.” Most people assumed that, like heaven, an age of “plenty” would be a time to “do nothing for ever and ever” and listen to “eternal psalms.” But Keynes observed that only those who did the singing would be able to tolerate such an idle condition, cautioning, “How few of us can sing”:

The economic problem is not . . . *the permanent problem of the human race*. [When his grandchildren came of age] for the first time since his creation man will be faced with his real, his permanent problem—how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares, how to occupy the leisure, which science and compound interest have won for him, to live wisely and agreeably and well.<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps Keynes had Whitman in mind when he concluded:

The strenuous purposeful money-makers may carry all of us along with them into the lap of economic abundance. But it will be those peoples, who can keep alive, and cultivate into a fuller perfection, the art of life itself and do not sell themselves for the means of life, who will be able to enjoy the abundance when it comes. (368)

Looking back over the century of shorter hours in the 1920s and 1930s, most observers agreed that the process would continue. Julian Huxley thought that the two-day work-week was “inevitable” since “the human being can consume so much and no more.” The day would soon come when we would have to “turn our attention to the great problem of what to do with our new leisure.”<sup>29</sup> Keynes predicted that before the twentieth century was over “three hours [work] a day [will be] quite enough to satisfy the old Adam in most of us!”<sup>30</sup> The shorter hour process was one of the longest and broadest (involving more people) social/economic movements in the history of the United States. Before mid-century, few predicted that it would end and that the “higher progress” Whitman expected would nearly disappear as the hoped-for destination of modern economies and nations.<sup>31</sup>

Whitman’s vision persisted even after World War II, together with the expectation that working hours would continue to decline. Responding during a radio broadcast over CBS in 1948 to Lyman Bryson’s questions—“What is the essence of [Whitman’s] revolutionism? . . . [W]e say he believed in a vision of greatness, that the people were not realizing it nor living up to his vision. . . . What kind of revolution?”—Mark Van Doren said: “Well, Whitman says in *Democratic Vistas* that there

are stages in the development of America. First, there is the political, without which you cannot guarantee any other form of freedom. And second, there is the economic, the conquest of nature, the pioneer's dream, the epoch of the American idea, and that, if successful, would give us leisure enough for cultural freedom" (Untermeyer, 1228). For illustration, Van Doren then quoted the passage from *Democratic Vistas* with which I opened this essay, the one in which Whitman reiterated his vision of "higher progress."

Over the last forty or so years Whitman's vision and its grounding in solid historical events and economic developments have all but disappeared. We have had virtually no further increase in leisure since the Second World War. Indeed, some economists have argued that working hours have gotten longer since the 1970s. Juliet Schor points out that the average person works five weeks longer a year than he or she did in the mid-1970s.<sup>32</sup> While such claims about longer hours are controversial, there is no doubt that the multitude of confident predictions that leisure would sooner or later overtake work as life's center have almost vanished.<sup>33</sup>

Recently economists and historians have been trying to understand why the shorter hours process ended, offering as explanations the rise of consumerism (that people are choosing luxuries rather than leisure) and the increase of governmental support of perpetual economic growth, insuring that new work will replace the work continually being taken by "labor-saving implements" so that everyone will always have a "full-time" job.<sup>34</sup> But perhaps the best explanation for the advent of work without end is the failure of belief and loss of vision that so distressed Whitman when he wrote *Democratic Vistas*. In our scramble for more—more jobs and "security," more products and services, more reputation and greater influence, ever larger *vitae*, houses and autos—we no longer hear Whitman's voice, passionately calling us to the open road, urging us to live out our humanity to its fullest, to search out and experience "the thing for itself" and to realize "only the soul is of itself . . . all else has reference to what ensues." We dismiss as bourgeois or "unrealistic" his injunction: "This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals."

We are perilously close to forgetting entirely what used to be the other, better half of the American Dream. In our rushing about for more, we are losing sight of "higher progress." We ignore the specific suggestions of such visionaries as Whitman, which might fill expanding leisure, "the rest of life," with "the main thing, *freely* branching and blossoming in each individual, and bearing golden fruit." Only over the last few decades have we decided that eternal economic growth and perpetually higher standards of living are the only "practical"



goals and ends-in-themselves. Only recently have we commodified and thoroughly trivialized leisure that once promised to be liberty's ultimate achievement. We have answered the modern autotelic challenge with work-for-more-work, chasing after jobs that are their own reward and making our governments, institutions, scholarship, and culture servants to these latter day wills-o'-the-wisp. Unlike Whitman and Keynes, we find it nearly impossible to imagine possibilities beyond economic necessity and the boundaries of professions and work.

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## NOTES

1 Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, in *Prose Works 1892*, ed., Floyd Stovall (New York: New York University Press, 1964), 410. Subsequent references abbreviated *PW*.

2 Henry Adams, *History of the United States of America During the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson* (1890; rpt. New York: Library of America, 1986), 125.

3 David D. Anderson, "Walt Whitman: Nineteenth-Century Man," *Walt Whitman Birthplace Bulletin* 3 (April 1960), 3-5. Anderson argues that Whitman's poems and prose reflect the beliefs in progress and in the advances in freedom characteristic of his age. He concludes: "the greatest significance of . . . advances in technology was, for Whitman, the fact . . . that out of these advances, a new world would emerge, based upon his principles of comradeship."

4 *PW*, 409-410. Additional Whitman references to progress's stages can be found in *PW*, 371, 380-81; "Poetry To-day in America—Shakespeare—The Future," *PW*, 475.

5 See for example Robert T. Rhode, "Culture Followed the Plow, However Slowly," *Kentucky Philological Review* 15 (2000), 49-56.

6 *PW*, 362, 369, 382. Leadie Clark observed: "The 'someday after many days' would arrive for Whitman when no man would be rich nor any man poor, but all would be financially secure." Leadie M. Clark, *Walt Whitman's Concept of the American Common Man* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955), 32. See also Alan Trachtenberg, *Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 73; Granville Hicks, *The Great Tradition: An Interpretation of American Literature since the Civil War*, revised ed. (New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1967), 24.

7 M. Wynn Thomas, "Whitman and the Dreams of Labor," in Ed Folsom, ed., *Walt Whitman: The Centennial Essays* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994), 144. Thomas observes that "the old republican dream of labor getting its just rewards and of *everyone* enjoying modest comforts" was "a dream which Trachtenberg specifically associates with Whitman."

8 Thomas F. Haddox, "Whitman's End of History: 'As I sat Alone by Blue Ontario's Shore,' *Democratic Vistas*, and the Postbellum Politics of Nostalgia," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 22 (Summer 2004), 1-22. Well into the twentieth century, economists continued to divide goods and services into two classes, necessities and luxuries, as-

suming that there was a more or less unchanging set of economic goods that everyone needed and another group of optional things people purchased in response to changing social pressures. John Maynard Keynes pointed out that “the needs of human beings . . . fall into two classes—those needs which are absolute in the sense that we feel them whatever the situation of our fellow human beings may be, and those which are relative in the sense that we feel them only if their satisfaction lifts us above, makes us feel superior to, our fellows. Needs of the second class . . . may indeed be insatiable; for the higher the general level, the higher still are they. But this is not so true of the absolute needs—a point may soon be reached, much sooner perhaps than we are all of us aware of, when these needs are satisfied in the sense that we prefer to devote our further energies to non-economic purposes.” Based on this reasoning, Keynes predicted that before the twentieth century was over, humans would be working less than three hours a day. See J. M. Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion* (New York: Norton, 1931), 365-373. In the nineteenth century economists such as John Stuart Mill and his follower in America, Simon Patten, made similar arguments. See Benjamin Hunnicutt, *Work Without End* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 31-39.

9 Louis Untermeyer, ed., *The Inner Sanctum Edition of the Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1949), 805. Untermeyer described *Democratic Vistas* as “a mixture of savage bitterness and desperate hope.”

10 George Kateb, “Whitman and the Culture of Democracy,” *Political Theory* 18 (November, 1990), 545-571; Whitman, “Song of the Open Road,” in *Leaves of Grass, Comprehensive Reader’s Edition*, ed. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: New York University Press, 1965), 157. Hereafter *LG*.

11 Betsy Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 252; Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 256-263.

12 Arthur Wrobel, “Democratic Vistas (1871),” in J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland, 1998), 178.

13 Rhode, in “Culture Followed the Plow, However Slowly,” makes the case that Whitman, together with Abraham Lincoln and Henry Ward Beecher, saw labor-saving machines, such as the steam plow, “increasing personal freedom and, thereby, encouraging artistic accomplishment” (50).

14 David Roediger and Philip Foner, *Our Own Time: A History of American Labor and the Work Day* (New York: Verso, 1989), 41.

15 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, translated from the 1883 edition by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (New York: Modern Library, 1906), 329.

16 For other examples of the *Eagle’s* reporting and editorializing about shorter hours see March 27, 1826; October 26, 1846; April 23, 1947; November 30, 1849. A letter published in the *Eagle*, signed “A Democrat” on September 9, 1846, reflected the rhetoric that accompanied the ten-hour fight. The letter quoted a Van Buren supporter: “The administration of Mr. Van Buren introduced the ten hour system upon the public works of the Government, and many a laborer has blessed him, morning and evening, for this contributing to the comfort of himself and family. *This reform so necessary to the moral, physical and religious culture of the people*, should be introduced into every manufactory in the land – but I know of no power in the Constitution that can compel its adoption. You must enforce it by the omnipotent influences of public opinion.” [Italics added.] All *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* papers from 1840 to 1902 are avail-

able at the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle Online*, a website maintained by the Brooklyn Public Library. See also Thomas Brasher, "Organized Labor Versus Whitman's 'Immutable Truth,'" *Walt Whitman Review* 6 (December 1960), 63-66.

17 Quoted in John Rogers Commons, *History of Labour in the United States*, (New York: A.M. Kelley, 1966), 1:185-186.

18 *Brooklyn Eagle*, January 29, 1847.

19 The premise of much of the utopian literature published during Whitman's lifetime, such as Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, was that science and technology would gradually liberate humans from labor, freeing them to live full lives. Utopian authors repeatedly used Henry More's original utopian device of the four-hour work-day, or, as in Bellamy's case, retirement at an early age. Whitman "at least" took a "look" at Bellamy's book and was noncommittal about his reaction to it, noting that he was glad to know "what it is—what particular point—the public finds of moment in such a volume." See Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), 5:393, 427.

20 *PW*, 401. Whitman's "pleasant western settlement" continues one of his long expositions that begins just before he introduces "the wife of a mechanic." Trying to imagine a place in society for "feminine excellence" that "knew that there are intervals," he proceeds to outline his western utopia where time was available for "the rest of life, the main thing."

21 Whitman to Emerson, August, 1856, in Untermeyer, 522.

22 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Society and Solitude* (Boston: Fields and Osgood, 1870), 149.

23 David Karsner, *Horace Traubel, His Life and Work* (New York: E. Arens, 1919), 57-58.

24 *The Conservator* 24, no. 6. See also William English Walling, *Whitman and Traubel* (New York: A. C. Boni, 1916), 120.

25 See Hunnicutt, Chapter Three.

26 Sherman Gwinn, "Days of Drudgery Will Soon Be Over; An Interview with Walter S. Gifford," *American Magazine* (November 1928), 25.

27 J. M. Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920), 21.

28 J. M. Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1932), 365-373. Quotes on 366 and 367. Italics are in the original.

29 "Professor Huxley Predicts 2-Day Working-Week," *New York Times* (November 17, 1930).

30 Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion*, 369.

31 See Hunnicutt, Introduction.

32 Juliet Schor, "The (Even More) Overworked American," in John De Graaf, ed., *Take Back Your Time: Fighting Overwork and Time Poverty in America* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2003), Chapter Two.

33 Juliet Shor, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

34 “Full time job,” defined as forty hours or better a week, was a creature of Franklin Roosevelt’s Brain Trust. During the depression, FDR employed this new term as part of his strategy to block work sharing in the form of the Black-Connery Bill limiting work hours to thirty a week, which nearly became law in 1933. Hunnicutt, 174, 248.