

**Stephen D. Rosenberg, *Time for Things: Labor, Leisure, and the Rise of Mass Consumption* (Harvard University Press, 2021) 268 pp. \$51.00.**

In *Time for Things: Labor, Leisure, and the Rise of Mass Consumption*, sociologist Stephen D. Rosenberg tackles a central contradiction of modern capitalism. Using a 1930 prediction by John Maynard Keynes as a launching point, he wonders why the prediction that increased economic growth would, over time result in less work and the expansion of leisure time did not come to pass. Keynes looked back on the development of the economy in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and saw a pattern of decreased working hours. He thought that trend would continue, and human civilization would thrive in an era where productivity gains enabled people to work for a few hours a day, freeing up their time to pursue other interests. We now know that this halcyon era of universal work-life balance never came into existence: by the late-1940s, Rosenberg argues, work hours stabilized at around forty hours across the industrial capitalist world, seemingly impervious to changes in productivity. “Indeed,” he argues, not only did work hours fail to continue shrinking but “work time in some parts of the industrial world increased, even as productivity gains marched relentlessly onward.”(3)

Rosenberg argues that the answer to this dilemma lies in the rise of mass consumption, which allowed workers to envision their time as a trade-off for things. Wage labour, he argues, was not always viewed as legitimate: in the early-nineteenth century, worries about worker dependence on their employers and rhetorical comparisons of wage labour to slavery made many critics suspicious of this form of exchange. It was only when workers could see work as plausibly commensurable to its wage, Rosenberg argues, that individuals could accept wage labour as valid, and in turn, accept commodities or things as reasonable compensation. He notes, “When commodities are construed as hypothetical durations of free activity, a fair trade-off between time and commodities becomes thinkable, because commodities become, in essence, stores of potential free time.” (83) The timing of this shift was not accidental. People began to accept this idea of things as commensurate with the labour exchanged for it when these goods became standardized. Mass industrial production helped to create more predictable, durable and higher quality commodities, making it easier for consumers to envision things as reliable compensation for work.

Rosenberg trots out the usual suspects to explore changes in consumption in mid-twentieth century America—here are the Lynds and *Middletown*, Vance Packard and Henry Ford’s five-dollar day. More intriguing are the digressions where Rosenberg anticipates possible objections to his theory, often in creative and sur-

prising ways. Why, for example, do people throw away so much stuff if stuff is how we measure value in a capitalist society? An exploration of the rise of disposable products touches on changes in design, the increase of hoarding, and the availability of storage. A chapter tracing the mid-century debate over planned obsolescence takes us from the General Motors marketing strategy into a meditation on norms about use and exchange and consumer expectations of just how long something “should” last.

This is an ambitious book which contains sweeping statements based mainly on data from the United States. The writing is quite dense and geared towards specialists, making it unsuitable for the undergraduate classroom but perhaps useful at the graduate level. Rosenberg aims to construct “a quite general explanation for the relationship between mass production and mass consumption under industrial capitalism” (264) and in this he largely succeeds. As with any broad theory, there are exceptions which come to mind and possible avenues for future scholars to take up this explanation and apply it to different scenarios. In an exploration of why consumers tend to prefer owning rather than renting durables, Rosenberg concludes that this makes sense if one views goods as permanent stores of potential free activity to be undertaken in the future. A one-time outlay of cash is more satisfying and easier to justify than renting, where the potential use of a product is constrained to a limited time, and the longer one keeps renting, the more one might have to grapple with the sense that they are not actually getting good use out of the exchange. One immediately wonders how to compare European attitudes towards renting to American, and the “puzzling” preference of Americans for home buying (74).

In a world where working from home is now more common and technology allows us to be available and potentially working 24 hours a day, Rosenberg’s theory helps us to step back and ask just why higher wages seem to be the main focus for both organized labour and individual workers, rather than a dramatic increase in free time. One wonders how class plays into these calculations: does being paid a salary, rather than an hourly wage, make a difference in terms of a worker’s ability to envision their time as things? It seems reasonable to imagine workers at a factory who are paid by the hour envisioning just how a 50-cent-per-hour increase can result in the purchase of a new radio. But what about the lawyer who struggles to make partner and routinely puts in 60-hour weeks, not because the increased amount of time spent in the office results in additional wages, but because expectations about what work looks like means that going home “early” might result in a lost promotion? And while consumers generally under capitalism have displayed this propensity towards materialism, European and Canadian attitudes towards vacation time, parental leave, and “time off” seem markedly different from the American context. Rosenberg argues that, in theory, wage earners have a choice between hours of work and reducing hours for the same income. Still, cultural notions of productivity and utility seem locally specific. One looks forward to scholars of

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