

The Economic Imperative: Leisure and Imagination in the 21st Century

It is rare for someone to discuss economics and leisure concurrently. Economics is about analysis of spending patterns, making money, doing business, high finance, allocating resources and achieving world dominance



Leisure is what you do when there is nothing else to do.

Author John Zerilli disagrees.

In his book “The Economic Imperative (Imprint-Academic, price £8.95) Zerilli argues that today, while we have become more proficient at the work we do, we are less comprehending of the use we are making of our leisure time and how important this is to the development of ideas and projects.

In essence, money is useless unless it can be converted into human satisfaction, and there is no point in working for the point of it.

Economics is meant to map out for us the shortest route to where we want to go, he explains. It was never to decide for us the destination.

Considering for a minute what our ‘destination’ is, can lead to some confused minds. This may especially be so in these difficult times when simply keeping a job seems a challenge in itself.

But would a greater understanding of the benefits of leisure be useful to us as individuals and would this understanding help us tailor loyalty schemes and marketing material to more effectively connect with our customer base?

Economic freedom, or the power of acquisition, has been allowed to stand as proxy for all types of freedom. As Wordsworth said: “Selling and spending, we lay waste our powers.”

Zerilli does more than simply argue that we are so busy spending we forget to enjoy ourselves or even rest. What he maintains is that we are in fact too busy to achieve anything meaningful at all!

He quotes Bertrand Russell’s famous essay “In praise of Idleness (1932) “Without the leisure class, mankind would never have emerged from barbarism” because it is only when there is no imperative to labour that man can settle down to contemplate, deduce, invent and create.

“All genuine and lasting insights of the type which change whole societies or give rise to signal transformations in the relationship between individuals and their environment – are often enough born in sanctuaries of quiet contemplation and forethought,” Zerilli writes.

Which leads one to consider Google and its policy of giving employees 20 per cent of their

working week in which to enjoy the freedom to think up new ideas. Also worth considering are the thought zones in Microsoft offices where people can lounge about and ponder.

An increasing number of retailers are creating relaxation zones in which people can be quiet; trains are adopting quiet carriage policies and airports have contemplation and meditation zones.

Some companies are putting aside places for a power nap; many others are encouraging home working which in itself acts as a welcome break from the relentless treadmill of commuting.

The prodigious and inventive dabbler Leonardo da Vinci (Zerilli's description) wrote in one of his notebooks 'The minds of man of lofty genius are most active in invention when they are doing the least external work.'

So give your staff some creative thinking time, provide your customers with quiet chill out places to meditate, and make time for your own inspirational thinking.

It could make the world a much more satisfying and interesting place.