The Classical Idea of Leisure: Cultural Ideal or Class Prejudice?

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The field of leisure studies routinely has adopted the conventional account that ancient Greek citizens embraced leisure as a cultural ideal while despising work as slavish and degrading. Described in the works of such aristocrats as Plato and Aristotle, this ideal is most typically attributed to the democratic city-state of Athens during its classical period (fourth and fifth centuries BC). Evidence challenging this explanation has prompted a reassessment of attitudes toward work and leisure in ancient Athens. Perusing documents that shed light on the perspectives of leisureed aristocrats and working-class citizens, this study investigates the classical conception of leisure in its sociopolitical context. Ideal and ideology were blended in Athenian views toward work and leisure. In particular, theories of work and leisure were politicized by aristocrats in an effort to exclude ordinary citizens from membership in the city-state. Working citizens were not passive recipients of the aristocratic view, however, but instead responded with a perspective of their own that both challenged and accepted the aristocratic ideal. In correcting the record, this study points to the need to place leisure theory in historical context.

Keywords ancient Athens, history of work and leisure, ideology, labor, social class, work

The common account is that Greeks of the classical period (fourth and fifth centuries BC) considered leisure a cultural ideal, “the only life fit for a Greek” (de Grazia, 1962, p. 20). Contained in this ideal was the belief that work was “a curse and nothing else” (Tilgher, 1930, p. 3; also see Mossé, 1969). The field of leisure studies routinely has adopted the view that Greek citizens, prizing leisure and despising work, had slaves and women perform their labor for them. For instance, Kraus (1990) explains that “for the Athenians particularly, leisure was the highest value of life, and work the lowest” (p. 49). Sessoms (1984) states that “to the Greeks, work was a curse, an obligation from which free men should escape” (p. 35). He reiterates a page later that “labor . . . was seen as an enemy and was to be performed by slaves” (p. 36). Thus, the store of knowledge in leisure studies has Greek citizens eschewing work and esteeming leisure.

It is correct that a cultural ideal existed in Greece during the fourth and fifth centuries BC that devalued work and praised leisure. Historical research has reappraised this ideal, however, examining the conditions of its development and questioning how completely it was accepted by all segments of society (Bryant, 1996; Wood, 1988). This effort has been but one part of a larger program by the “new social history” to incorporate diverse sources rather than rely on historical literature produced by a small group of intellectuals (see Daniels, 1991). It has also sought to include “people without history,” those ordinary human beings whose role in the past has been greatly ignored (Wolfe, 1982). Furthermore, although leisure studies has investigated the “classical idea of leisure,” it has not substantially studied the “classical idea of leisure in ancient Greece.” Instead, it has relied almost exclusively
on intellectual history, sometimes drawing on the primary texts of philosophers prominent in the Western tradition, more often depending on secondary sources, such as de Grazia (1962). Of course, intellectual history has a central place in historical inquiry. Nonetheless, a complete and accurate understanding of leisure, in the present as well as in the past, requires studying it in social, cultural, economic, and political contexts, bringing to light such factors as work, gender, power, slavery, and religion (cf. Rojek, 1995, pp. 1–2). Accordingly, this study situates the ideas of work and leisure in the key sociopolitical developments of classical Athens. Although it does not address all of the residents of classical Athens, ignoring slaves,metics, and women, this study does try to account for the working masses who comprised the greater part of the citizenry.

**Background**

The Greek city-state of Athens is recognized for having developed a set of beliefs and attitudes regarding work and leisure that has left a lasting impression on modern Western society (de Grazia, 1962). Renowned as a political democracy that produced an exceptionally high level of culture, the literature on Athens is vast. As such, space permits only a brief look at those features that are relevant to Athenian concepts of work and leisure.

Athens was one of a number of polei in ancient Greece. There is no definition of polis that holds for all periods and places. According to Manville (1990), the term polis is “usually translated as ‘city’ or ‘city-state,’ implying a discrete but small political unit that comprised a central town and its adjacent territory” (p. 36). Although the polis was multidimensional, its essence was its citizens, indicated by Nikias’s reminder to his troops in 413 that “men make the city [polis] and not walls or ships without men in them” (Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 7.77). Constitutionally defined, citizenship was all-important, for only citizens had the right to participate in the cultural, deliberative, and judicial functions of the community (Manville, 1990).

Along with its social, geographic, economic, and political aspects, the polis was deeply moral and spiritual, providing a set of values and ideals that citizens shared. As such, the polis was the source of a good and meaningful life for Athenians. Recognizing its moral necessity and supremacy, Aristotle comments in the *Politics* that “the state comes into existence, originating in the bare needs of life, and continuing in existence for the sake of the good life” (1252b29-30). The good life was expressed in the idea of arete (excellence). In terms of how one learned to become arete, the lyric poet Simonides concluded that “the Polis teaches man” (quoted in Bryant, 1996, p. 159). The socialization of Athenians occurred in a civic culture that was collectivist and extended through all of its institutions, resulting in a deeply shared and reinforced network of ideals and values. Every aspect of the polis—its courts, buildings, marketplace, athletic contests, and religious festivals—was pervaded with moral significance. Living a life regarded as good and worthy, therefore, required participation in the polis, which depended on membership.

Prior to democracy, however, Athens had been a long-standing aristocracy, limiting membership to people of wealth and noble birth. Democracy originated as a response of liberation from despotic oppression (Cartledge, 1993). On the verge of civil war brought about by conflict between small farmers and their creditors, the leader Solon instituted critical reforms in 594 and 593, establishing the foundations for a democracy that evolved over a substantial period. Among Solon’s moral and political contributions to the polis, his greatest legacy was the “expectation of justice by all Athenians” (Manville, 1990, p. 150). Cleisthenes’s key reforms of the Athenian constitution in 508 provided for election by lot and pay for office, which allowed all male citizens, including the poor, to participate in office. The
fundamental criterion for citizenship was birth to a citizen father. An expanding citizenry, however, threatened to undermine the sense of exclusiveness created by the distinction between citizen and noncitizen, prompting Pericles’s reform in 450 and 451 that required citizenship of both parents (Manville, 1990).

Citizens comprised two general classes. Wealthy aristocrats (aristoi) principally lived as rentiers, freeing them for politics, learning, and various cultural pursuits. The common people (demos) were chiefly occupied with the daily rigors of making a living, mainly tending the land, working as independent craftsmen, or, if necessary, laboring for others. As long as they met the criteria for citizenship, however, the wealthiest and the poorest citizens could enjoy all aspects of polis life, making the idea of fulfillment a reasonable proposition for rich and poor alike (Finley, 1977).

Conflict between the wealthy and the poor was a regular feature of life in democratic Athens (Vernant, 1980). According to Aristotle, there was “contention for a long time between the upper classes and the populace,” because, prior to democracy, “the poorer classes . . . were the serfs of the rich, [having] no share in anything” (Constitution of Athens, 2). Writing about democratic Athens, Plato observes that “there are two at least at enmity with one another, the city of the rich and the city of the poor . . . ” (Republic, 423a). The common people desired freedom and a share of the wealth and power. Aristocrats wished to assert their traditional authority, leaving the lower order externally free perhaps but, in the eyes of aristocrats, inferior, unequal, and incapable of leading a truly free and civilized life. On this basis, former masters and servants, now fellow citizens, conflicted in democratic Athens (cf. Bryant, 1996, pp. 238–239). Despite fractionalism, however, class differences were effectively managed on the whole, producing a contentious but successful democracy (Frost, 1969).

Because citizenship determined who was allowed to participate in the polis, democracy was critical to the native, male masses, giving them access to the life recognized as most desirable. Conversely, many of the aristoi opposed democracy, wishing to maintain their traditional power and privileges. As the sociopolitical struggle over all-important polis membership developed, key concepts were contested by the classes, and words were used as weaponry in the quest for dominance. For instance, justice (dike) was interpreted differently by the classes. Democrats fundamentally favored political equality, expressed in equal political participation (isonomia) and equality of speech (isegoria). In Euripides’s tragedy Suppliant Women, Theseus exclaims, “Our poor have equal voting power with the rich” (401). He adds that “the poor and the rich have equal rights. Then, when a wealthy citizen does wrong, a weaker one can criticize, and prevail, with justice on his side” (426–429). Aristocrats, on the other hand, preferred a hierarchical theory of justice. Elaborated by Plato in the Republic (433–448), justice was based on a hierarchy of freedom and excellence, with aristocrats at the top and workers at the bottom. Argued on the basis of what was best for the state, justice demanded leadership by those most qualified. Those unfit for politics should follow and support the superior class for the welfare of the community, doing the labor for which they were naturally suited. Accustomed to their traditional rights and privileges, aristocrats considered the democratic notion of equality ill conceived, evident in Plato’s observation that democracy “would, it seems, be a delightful form of government, anarchic and motley, assigning a kind of equality indiscriminately to equals and unequal alike!” (Republic, 558c).

The ideas of excellence (arete) and freedom (eleutheria) were also politicized as ordinary citizens pushed the claims of democracy. Donlan (1980) demonstrates that aristocrats used the idea of excellence defensively to assert their superiority in the face of democratic challenges. Aristocrats employed their social vocabulary as a means to persuade the citizenry that because of their superior personal qualities—noble birth, education, lifestyle—
they were best suited to govern the \textit{polis} and thus deserved the submission of the \textit{demos}. They also used it to demean and discredit their political competitors. For example, the word \textit{demos} originally referred to the people in general. By the fifth century during Athens’ radical democracy it was being used by aristocrats as a pejorative “equivalent to ‘the mob,’ ‘the commons,’ as opposed to the ‘better’ class of people” (Donlan, 1980, p. 129). Aristocrats also introduced the term \textit{kaloskagathos} (beautiful, good, worthy) in reference to themselves during the fifth century, sharpening the contrast between them and the \textit{demos} (Donlan, 1978).

Perhaps most disputed, however, was the complex idea of freedom (\textit{eleutheria}), which, despite the ubiquitous association of freedom and leisure, has been largely ignored by leisure studies. Found in Homer, \textit{eleutheria} probably had aristocratic roots, containing elements of privilege and exclusiveness. Beringer (1985) contends that the Greek adjective \textit{eleutherios} (free) is only understandable in relation to its opposition, “unfree.” “To be free” meant to belong to a community and to enjoy all of the exclusive protections and entitlements membership guaranteed. “To be unfree,” on the other hand, connoted outsider status, depriving one of the sociopolitical benefits of freedom. As long as aristocrats possessed absolute control, they could take their freedom for granted (Wood, 1988). As reforms occurred, however, democracy made substantial gains against the aristocratic monopoly on freedom. Making the difference between \textit{polis} membership and participation, freedom became absolutely vital to democrats and aristocrats alike. Yet, despite their mutual interest in freedom, they interpreted it quite differently.

The basis of Athenian democracy and the goal of the \textit{demos} (de Ste. Croix, 1981), the democratic ideal of freedom included political, social, and economic liberty, opening to common citizens opportunities for development in all areas of life (Raaflaub, 1983). Expressions of democratic freedom are evident in several sources. Political freedom appears in Euripides’ \textit{Suppliant Women}, where the democratic leader Theseus says, “For I have set them up as monarchs of themselves and freed the city, giving them equal votes” (348). Social freedom is featured in General Nikias’s reminder to his Athenian troops “of their country, the freest of the free, and of the unfettered discretion allowed in it to all to live as they pleased” (Thucydides, \textit{The Peloponnesian War}, 7.69). Wood (1988) emphasizes the economic aspect in her provocative analysis, arguing that the democratic view of \textit{eleutheria} emerged out of the peasant experience of dependence and independence. Formerly dependent on their aristocratic lords, peasants gained independence through democratic reforms. Central to their sense of liberation was the opportunity to labor for themselves rather than work under an aristocratic yoke. The freedom to labor, therefore, was a central component of the democratic understanding of freedom.

Reacting to the new freedom and expanding power of people who were once their subjects, the idea of freedom was reformulated by aristocrats. The terms \textit{eleutheros} (typical for a free man, noble), \textit{eleutherios paideia} (education of a free and noble person), and \textit{eletheria technai} (free and noble occupations) were aristocratically inspired variations on the general theme of freedom (Raaflaub, 1983). In particular, \textit{eleutherios paideia} was “an aristocratic concept, intimately connected with leisure, dignified and intellectual pursuits, and devotion to friends and public service. It was opposed to ‘non-free’ training of the technites and banausos [workers] who were neither educated nor capable” (Raaflaub, 1983, p. 530). In opposition to the democratic conception of political freedom, whereby all citizens were free to participate in government, aristocrats stressed the personal qualities of individuals, notably their noble birth and liberal education, which made them, in their eyes, “truly free.” By applying higher and more rigorous standards to the concept of freedom, aristocrats were able to underscore their superiority while defining the \textit{demos} as unfree, licentious, and unworthy. Furthermore, aristocrats identified freedom \textit{from} labor, a condition synonymous
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with leisure, as a vital form of freedom. Of course, this implied that people who found it necessary to work for a living were not free.

Therefore, then as now, words were more than mere descriptors. They were embedded in class interests, resulting in significant stakes for the participants. Infused with the themes of freedom and excellence, theories of work and leisure became principal arenas in the struggle to define the terms of polis life. The purpose of the following section is not to trace the etymology of work and leisure. Rather, it is to demonstrate that aristocrats used these concepts as ideological tools in their attempt to control polis life.

The Aristocratic View of Work and Leisure

In Oeconomicus, Xenophon, Athenian general, historian, and aristocrat, reports the following comments by Socrates:

For indeed those that are called mechanical [laborers] are spoken against everywhere and have quite plausibly come by a very bad reputation in the cities. For they utterly ruin the bodies of those who work at them and those who are concerned with them, compelling them to sit still and remain indoors, or in some cases even to spend the whole day by a fire. And when the bodies are made effeminate, the souls too become much more diseased. Lack of leisure to join in the concerns of friends and of the city is another condition of those that are called mechanical; those who practice them are reputed to be bad friends as well as bad defenders of their fatherlands. Indeed in some of the cities, especially those reputed to be good at war, no citizen is allowed to work at the mechanical arts. (IV 2, 3)

The authenticity of this statement and the exact nature of Socrates’s attitude toward work and leisure are controversial (see Brickhouse & Smith, 1994; Wood & Wood, 1978). Nonetheless, Xenophon’s comments accurately reflect an aristocratic view that received powerful expression from Plato and Aristotle, Athens’ most prominent gentlemen-philosophers.

Plato (427–347 BC) and Aristotle (384–322 BC) lived during the radical democracy of Athens. Plato witnessed the trial, conviction, and death of his revered teacher Socrates in 399 BC. Aristotle, a noncitizen resident of Athens, was forced to flee democratic Athens fearing for his life. Both philosophers were writing for their contemporaries about how to achieve personal and political excellence during a period of strife (stasis) and, in their view, moral disorder. Plato was definitely antidemocratic. Aristotle was more ambivalent, recognizing advantages of democracy. Still, as an aristocrat, he distrusted democracy. The following is not intended as a detailed description of their views on work and leisure (see de Grazia, 1962; Hemingway, 1988; Hunnicutt, 1990; Owens, 1981; Solmsen, 1964; Stocks, 1936a,b). Against the backdrop of democratic Athens, it features aspects of their philosophies that, though often treated as neutral theorizing, were likely part of aristocratic ideology that aimed to define and control the polis (cf. Wood & Wood, 1978).

According to Plato the goal of humanity was to discover truth and to live according to its principles. Truth, however, was only accessible to intellectuals of superior breeding. Possessing genuine knowledge, this select group of philosophers should also govern, organizing society by true moral principles. Labeled “gold” by Plato, “philosopher-kings” constituted the best class of citizens. The remainder of citizens were hierarchically ordered by a division of social labor corresponding to the goodness of their souls (Plato’s social and political organization corresponds to his division of the soul into three parts: reason, spirit, and appetite, with reason being the finest [Republic, 435–442]). The “auxiliaries” (silver
class) assisted and supported the philosopher-kings. The third and lowest class (brass or bronze) consisted of citizens who performed the labor that supplied the goods and services needed by society (*Republic*, 415a). Plato’s ideal state thus operated by an organic structure of specialists performing the function for which they were suited by nature and training. Although all citizens contributed in their special capacity to the welfare and excellence of the state, only philosophers were capable of achieving the virtues of knowledge and civic leadership. As such, Plato argues in the *Laws* that the best citizens must not practice arts or crafts, because

A citizen has already a calling which will make full demands on him, in view of the constant practice and wide study it involves, in the preservation and enjoyment of the public social order—a task which permits of no relegation to the second place. (846d)

Leisure was required to respond to this paramount calling, relieving the individual from the necessity to labor for a livelihood. Therefore, common labor had a positive role in Plato’s theory, making it possible for a minority of citizens to avoid the necessity of laboring, which in turn permitted them the leisure to engage in philosophy and politics. Thus, although Plato valued labor, it was by no means on the same moral plane as the proper activities of leisure.

Moreover, although workers were instrumental in the good life, they could not live it, having neither the capacity nor the leisure required for the morally superior life. In *Theaetetus* Plato writes of two “characters” or types of people. The inferior type is prepared for a life of work. Conversely, the superior type, who are the philosophers, are “nursed in freedom and leisure,” allowing them to live “the true life of happiness for gods and men” (175.e–176). Plato castigates those who would imagine themselves capable of doing philosophy and achieving the truth, calling them “that multitude of pretenders unfit by nature, whose souls are bowed and mutilated by their vulgar occupations even as their bodies are marred by their arts and crafts” (*Republic*, 495.d). Persons who work with their hands are thus incapable of achieving moral excellence because they are naturally inferior to begin with and their work further damages their souls. The difference between leisure and physical work correlates perfectly with Plato’s body-soul dichotomy (Solmsen, 1964). With the body representing imperfection and inferiority and the soul symbolizing perfection and superiority, Plato argues:

So long as we keep to the body and our soul is contaminated with this imperfection, there is no chance of our ever attaining satisfactorily to our object, which we assert to be truth . . . . Worst of all, if we do not obtain any leisure from the body’s claim and turn to some line of inquiry, the body intrudes once more into our investigations, interrupting, disturbing, and preventing us from getting a glimpse of truth. (*Phaedo*, 66.b–d)

Thus, manual labor, which principally involves the body, precludes the leisure needed for doing what is best. It also harms the soul, the seat of excellence, which is already naturally weak in workers. Plato directs in the *Laws* that “if a native stray from the pursuit of goodness into some trade or craft, they [the urban commissioners] shall correct him by reproach and degradation until he be brought back into the straight course” (847.a). Although Plato does recommend in the *Laws* that the greatest amount of leisure be distributed in the state, this does not alter his stance toward manual work and laborers. Plato explains that only philosophers can reach the gods, for “no soul which has not practiced philosophy, and is not absolutely pure when it leaves the body, may attain to the divine nature; that is
only for the lover of wisdom” (*Phaedo*, 82.b–c). Leisure, theoretical learning, and political leadership are thus reserved for the best, while the rest—slaves and workers—support their “betters” (cf. de Ste. Croix, 1981, pp. 411–412).

Aristotle’s theory of work and leisure was also a central component of his moral and political philosophy. Underscoring the moral imperative of leisure in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle declares that “happiness is thought to depend on leisure” (1177b4). For that reason, “we are busy that we may have leisure” (1177b5). Actually, it was others who had to be busy, for labor, according to Aristotle, is inimical to happiness because “no man can practice excellence who is living the life of a mechanic or labourer” (*Politics*, 1278a20). With its focus on survival and its operation in the hands rather than in the mind, labor precludes the finest virtues of contemplation and civic participation. As such, Aristotle contends that “citizens must not lead the life of artisans or tradesmen” because, lacking sufficient leisure, “such a life is ignoble to excellence” (*Politics*, 1328b39). In another passage Aristotle discusses who should be considered a citizen in the ideal state, asking, “Is the mechanic to be included?” (*Politics*, 1277b34). He answers:

> The best form of state will not admit them to citizenship; but if they are admitted, then our definition of the excellence of a citizen will not apply to every citizen, nor to every free man as such, but only to those who are freed from necessary services. The necessary people are either slaves who minister to the wants of individuals, or mechanics and labourers who are the servants of the community. (*Politics*, 1278a7–1278a13, emphasis added)

Indeed, Aristotle appears to accept the possibility of slavery, the lowest of conditions, for artisans. Qualifying Phaleas’s proposal that “artisans are to be public slaves and not to form a supplementary part of the body of citizens,” Aristotle suggests, “If there is a law that artisans are to be public slaves, it should only apply to those engaged on public works” (*Politics*, 1267b14–16).

Aristotle concludes that

> the citizens must not lead the life of artisans or tradesmen, for such a life is ignoble and inimical to excellence. Neither must they be farmers, since leisure is necessary for the development of excellence and the performance of political duties. (*Politics*, 1328b36–1329a1)

Even in the design of the city, Aristotle argues that separate space be set aside in the *agora* for the working class and the leisure class. He proposes a “freeman’s agora,” where “all trade should be excluded, and no artisan, farmer, or any such person allowed to enter, unless he be summoned by the magistrates” (*Politics*, 1331a34–1331a35). There should be two *agoras*, then, a lower one where business and trade are conducted and an upper one devoted “to the life of leisure” (*Politics*, 1331b13).

Aristotle also assumes an organic hierarchy of excellence in which everything in nature has a place according to its degree of reason and freedom. God stands at the pinnacle, completely independent and perpetually engaged in pure thought. Human beings are located below god and above plants and animals. Possessing the divine elements of reason and freedom, human beings are capable of experiencing in a limited way the unrestricted excellence of god. Human beings also differ among themselves in their levels of excellence, evident in Aristotle’s comment that “one excellence or action is nobler than another if it is that of a naturally finer being: thus a man’s will be nobler than a woman’s” (*Rhetoric*, 1367a16). As it turns out, leisure and labor are also factors differentiating the excellence of human
beings. Accordingly, it is a sign of excellence “not to practice any sordid craft, since it is the mark of a free man not to live at another’s beck and call” (Rhetoric, 1367a31). Freedom from the necessity to labor at “another’s beck and call” describes the condition of leisure. Therefore, just as nature has produced plants, animals, slaves, and laborers in the hierarchy of being for specific functions, it too has created a genus of noble men distinguished from others by their capacity for reason and their condition of leisure.

In the eyes of Plato and Aristotle, work and leisure form a tandem barrier for the working demos. First is the sheer lack of free time. As the tide of work sweeps over the masses, leisure wanes, depriving them of the time needed for achieving the good life. A citizen cannot participate in the polis if he has to take time to harvest crops, tend his shop, or submit to the “beck and call” of an employer or customer. Actually, it was not work generally that was considered deplorable, but rather the dependency it created. Self-sufficiency was a long-standing Greek value. Indeed, Plato and Aristotle speak well of yeoman farmers, who were prominent in the Athenian tradition. Nonetheless, Aristotle excludes farmers from citizenship in his ideal state. In his incarnation of souls, Plato ranks farmers seventh, just beneath sophists and tyrants (Phaedrus, 248d-e). Their regard is reserved for independent gentlemen-farmers who could lay down their tools whenever they wished, having slaves and hired hands to continue the farmwork. Dependent workers, on the other hand, were similar to slaves. Considering slaves unfree by nature, Aristotle categorically concludes that “there is no leisure for slaves” (Politics, 1334a20). Leisure and slavery form a clear dichotomy, then, with leisure representing full freedom and slavery the complete absence of freedom. Dependent on others for their livelihood, workers were intermittent slaves, lacking the leisure for autonomous activity characteristic of excellence (Stocks, 1936a).

Yet the problem is not simply the lack of leisure. If the scarcity of leisure were the only factor preventing the laboring masses from achieving excellence, the obvious remedy would be a more equitable distribution of work and leisure. Consonant with their aristocratic contemporaries, Plato and Aristotle contend that what the multitude lacks, besides time, are the gentlemanly qualities to use free time in noble ways. Hunnicutt (1990) explains that Greeks used the word schola (leisure) in two ways. One was the ordinary sense of having free time. The word was further used “in a comparative or superlative sense as ‘freedom from a less important activity for a more (or the most) important activity’” (Hunnicutt, 1990, p. 213). Hunnicutt states:

Plato did believe that only a few could handle freedom from necessity [leisure] and that the majority, the uneducated and imprudent, would have to keep working. Because he lived in a relatively poor economy, he had little hope that the majority could be educated or lifted up out of poverty into leisure. (p. 213)

Only “truly free” aristocrats were prepared for the more important activities of leisure, because they had received eleutherios paideia, the education of a free and noble person, qualifying them for civic, cultural, and intellectual pursuits (Raaflaub, 1983). Conversely, craftsmen were only trained for their narrow, dependent specialty, making them unfit for leisure according to aristocrats. Aristotle recommends “a sort of education in which parents should train their sons, not as being useful or necessary [technical], but because it is liberal or noble” (Politics, 1238a31). The aristocratic implications of leisure and liberal education are apparent in Aristotle’s discourse on music as a key aspect of liberal education and a virtuous activity of leisure. He admits that music is salutary for everyone as recreation and relaxation. Its most noble purpose, however, is the influence it has on the character and the soul of free men. Corresponding to his organic distinction between human beings, music performed at the theater should be of two types because
the spectators are of two kinds—the one free and educated, while the other a vulgar crowd composed of artisans, labourers, and the like—there ought to be contests and exhibitions instituted for the relaxation of the second class also. And the music will correspond to their minds; for as their minds are perverted from the natural state, so there are perverted modes and highly strung and unnaturally coloured melodies. (Politics, 1342a18)

Both Plato and Aristotle, therefore, are pessimistic about workers’ potential to use their limited leisure and narrow training to achieve excellence in themselves and in their community. Indeed, they are openly contemptuous of the working masses. Plato writes of the “unself-controlled and licentious” (Republic, 4.431c) and “base rabble” (Republic, 4.431b), comparing the masses to “cattle, grazing and copulating, ever greedy” (Republic, 586b). Aristotle refers to the polloi (masses) as “slavish in their tastes, preferring a life suitable to beasts” (Nicomachean Ethics, 1095b.19). Such characterizations do not suggest dispassionate analysis but rather create an impression of deeply seated prejudice.

The theories of work and leisure developed by the most prominent philosophers of Athens—and our chief sources today on classical work and leisure—were, at least in part, political reactions to the events of their day. Depicting working citizens as dependent, inferior, unprepared, and licentious, their aristocratic prejudice is palpable. Athenian society was based on public discussion. Thus, the common workers, especially those who labored in the city, would have likely received some version of the philosophers’ account of them. How did they react?

According to Austin and Vidal-Naquet (1977), the view of work and leisure espoused by Plato and Aristotle reflected “aristocratic values [that] were by and large not seriously challenged” (p. 17). Yet it is difficult to imagine that the ordinary citizens who performed the labor and made up the majority of the population would have unresistingly embraced a social ideal that impugned them. More likely they would have taken umbrage with at least those parts that explicitly demeaned and attempted to exclude them. Indeed, there was a law in Athens prohibiting slurs based on one’s occupation, suggesting an aristocratic prejudice toward labor and a definite reaction to it on the part of citizen-laborers (Ober, 1989). Donlan (1980) contends that despite the centrality of the aristocratic value system, it did not go unquestioned: “In reality, there, was, from the beginning, constant pressure from below which forced aristocrats to make defensive alterations…” (p. 178). Because they did not systematically record their impressions, however, it is not immediately clear what ordinary Greek citizens thought. What Athenian society as a whole thought about labor and leisure has been extrapolated from the writings of a few aristocratic philosophers, the likes of Plato and Aristotle. Nonetheless, there is enough evidence to wonder whether the aristocratic version was universally representative of Athens.

Another View of Work and Leisure

Limited evidence suggests that although leisure was an ideal in ancient Greece, work was not despised by everyone. Common people and aristocrats alike performed work in Homeric society (Applebaum, 1992). Hesiod (Works and Days) extols the virtues of labor, considering idleness the only disgrace. One of Solon’s laws required fathers to teach their sons a trade (Applebaum, 1992). Recognition of the importance of technology and labor for civilization is further evident in Hymn to Hephaistos, a celebration of the divine smith Hephaistos:

Sing, clear-voiced Muse, of Hephaistos famed for skilled works, who with bright-eyed Athena taught splendid crafts to men upon the earth, men who before used
to dwell in caves in the mountains, just like wild beasts. But now that they have learned crafts through Hephaistos the famed artist, they easily live tranquil lives in their own homes the whole year round. Be gracious, Hephaistos, and grant me arete and prosperity. (Quoted in Bryant, 1996, p. 114)

Tributes to labor and technology grew as trade and craft expanded in Greece. Greek plays, a popular form of entertainment open to all classes, provide some indication of public attitudes and the growing respect for work. In Sophocles’s Antigone the chorus sings praise to the arts and crafts that people use to help themselves, calling “clever beyond all dreams the inventive craft that he has,” (360) Antigone. The crafts are further glorified in Aeschylus’s mid-fifth century tragedy Prometheus Bound. Giving to human beings the fire he stole from Zeus, Prometheus pronounces “from it they shall learn many crafts,” (250) Prometheus Bound. Thus making it possible for humanity to create civilization. Highly idealized scenes on art work also glorify craft. Both art and literature, therefore, celebrated “the artisan’s contributions to society, thereby legitimizing both the profession and its practitioners” (Bryant, 1996, p. 115).

Unfortunately, the opinion of common people is mostly silent. Nonetheless, the few sources that do exist provide suggestive glimpses. Some of the more successful craftsmen left evidence of the pride they took in their work, such as the seventh-century sculptor who dedicated a monument to Apollo with the inscription “Euthykkartides the Naxian made and dedicated me” (quoted in Burford, 1972, p. 11). Competitions were held among craftsmen from the city-states (Bryant, 1996). The epitaph of the fourth-century-BC potter Bakchios read: “In the competitions which the city staged, of those who combine earth and fire [i.e., make pottery], Greece judged Bakchios the first in both character and in achievement. He took all the crowns” (quoted in Burford, 1972, p. 209). Because the practice of preparing epitaphs was rare in ancient Greece, it was remarkable that arts and crafts were mentioned at all, suggesting the standing they had in society (Burford, 1972). A craftsman dedicated his work as a tithe to Athena, the divinity of arts and crafts in Athens, with the inscription: “It is good for the skilled to exercise their skill according to their craft; For he who has a craft has a better life” (quoted in Dillon & Garland, 1994, p. 341).

An intriguing piece of evidence appears in Andocides’s “On the Mysteries.” Andocides was an aristocrat who was accused in 399 BC of profanation of the Mysteries (a religious cult) and mutilation of stone images of Hermes. On trial for his life, he addressed the jury, which probably included ordinary citizens and democratic supporters. In his speech, Andocides said:

Think, furthermore, what a citizen you will have in me, if you give me your protection. I was once, as you know, a man of great wealth. Then to begin with, through no fault of my own, but through the disasters which overtook Athens, I was plunged into utter penury and want. I then started life afresh, a life of honest toil, with my brains and my hands to help me. (144)

Here, then, an aristocrat, a victim of fate, admits to a jury that he has labored to alleviate his poverty, a statement he would have almost certainly not made if all work were regarded as degrading.

Finally, in his funeral speech accounting for the greatness of Athens, the democratic leader Pericles provides further indication of the compatibility between work, democratic principles, and the good life. As told by the historian Thucydides:

[The administration of our constitution] favours the many instead of the few; that is why it is called a democracy. If we look to the laws, they afford equal justice to
all in their private differences; . . . advancement in public life falls to reputation for capacity, class considerations not being allowed to interfere with merit; nor again does poverty bar the way, if a man is able to serve the state, he is not hindered by the obscurity of his condition. The freedom which we enjoy in our government extends also to our ordinary life. . . . [We] place the real disgrace of poverty not in owning to the fact but in declining the struggle against it. Our public men have, besides politics, their private affairs to attend to, and our ordinary citizens, though occupied with the pursuits of industry, are still fair judges of public matters. (The Peloponnesian War, II, 37-40)

Thus, Pericles depicts a city-state in which all citizens are free to live as they wish, enjoying many forms of recreation. Poverty is not a disgrace as long as one works to escape it. Moreover, contrary to the aristocratic view, the demos consider themselves capable politicians even though they must work.

Yet, because leisure studies has relied mainly on the texts of aristocratic philosophers to understand labor, it has been commonly believed that the aristocratic disdain of labor was shared by those who had to work for a living. Although the popular ideology created by aristocratic literature contained an antilabor ethos, working for a living was acceptable to the masses and skilled labor was a basis of respect in the radical democracy of Athens. Bryant (1996) concluded that although noblemen would have agreed with Plato and Aristotle regarding the impossibility of true citizenship for craftsmen, artisans themselves did not hold “these stereotypical slurs” (p. 113; also see Raaflaub, 1983, p. 532).

On the other hand, work for the sheer sake of work was not glorified (Wood, 1988). Pono s, the term for labor, generally referred to hard, painful effort, something that was better avoided if possible. Although independent labor was probably respected by ordinary citizens, and skill admired and honored, the Greek attitude toward labor should not be confused for a “work ethic” similar to what grew out of Protestant ideology. The center of life was the polis, not work.

Moreover, leisure was a central condition of Athenian life. Athens provided ample leisure activities at no cost, including drama, music, dancing, athletic games, and processions (Balme, 1984). The distribution of minimal pay further allowed workers leisure for political participation (Raaflaub, 1983). Slavery was also an essential institution for extending leisure and stimulating democratic participation. Yet, contrary to the depiction of a leisureed body of citizens (Goodele & Godbey, 1988, p. 23), the benefits of slavery and state compensation did not result in a citizenry entirely at leisure. According to Ehrenberg (1969), the thesis of an idle citizenry contemptuous of labor has been greatly overrated in modern discussions slanted by Greek political theories. Only wealthy aristocrats enjoyed absolute leisure (Bryant, 1996). The vast majority of citizens worked for a living, often laboring side-by-side with slaves. Therefore, working citizens had their share of leisure, indicative of their free and equal status, giving them access to the civic and cultural life that represented the most excellent life (cf. Hemingway, 1988).

Conclusion

We return finally to the original question. Was the Athenian conception of leisure a cultural ideal or a class prejudice? The answer is both. Leisure was an aristocratic ideal reaching back to the Homeric period. Prized for the freedom it extended for learning, culture, and civic participation—not to mention sensual pleasures—it was a key part of Plato’s ideal state and the center of Aristotle’s political theory, which were conservative of aristocratic traditions. The polis ideal, which represented the core of moral, social, spiritual, and political life for
the citizens of Athens, required leisure. Considering how indispensable the polis was to the identity and esteem of all citizens, from the wealthiest to the poorest, leisure was a most desirable condition and a cultural ideal.

As it was formulated by aristocrats, however, the leisure ideal contained a disdainful prejudice toward labor, treating it as antithetical to freedom, excellence, and citizenship. Common citizens who worked for a living were portrayed by aristocrats as natural inferiors, ill suited for freedom and excellence, whose degrading work deprived them of the time needed for politics and the other serious activities of leisure. The masses were seen as better off doing the difficult labor that was required to maintain the city-state, leaving cultural development and political leadership to leisured aristocrats. The labor-leisure distinction popular in the Western tradition was thus a barrier erected by aristocrats against the pressures of democracy to set themselves off from the masses, who were seen as threats to Athens’ political and cultural institutions (Donlan, 1980; Glotz, 1926). What began, then, as a defensive measure against the encroachments of democracy has been passed on by historians to us as a culture-wide antipathy toward work (cf. Wood, 1988, pp. 22–28).

Yet, despite aristocratic rhetoric, most work was not considered servile by the majority of citizens who labored for their livelihoods. Because of its association with slavery, dependent labor was undesirable, but even working for another was acceptable as an alternative to poverty or idleness. Therefore, the disdain for dependent labor should not be construed as a general contempt for work among Athenians (Wood, 1988). The freedom to work represented independence for common citizens who once were enslaved by aristocrats. Free labor was valued as an underpinning of independence, and technical skill was a source of pride and respect. Thus, as gradations of freedom, work and leisure were morally compatible, each playing an important role for the common citizen in the complex idea of freedom. As the fullest expression of freedom, however, leisure was paramount and thus preferred. Still, the preference for leisure should not be confused for a culture-wide disdain for labor. Neither should respect for labor be confused for its glorification. Although labor was a means of independence and respect, the Athenian ethic revolved around the polis. As such, workers embraced the aristocratic ideal of leisure. Borrowing it for themselves, they demanded leisure for civic and cultural participation.

Finally, it would be greatly mistaken to nullify wholesale the theories of Plato and Aristotle because of their aristocratic prejudices. Like us, they were products of their times, and reason, no matter how “high,” cannot escape the circumstances of everyday life. The leisure ideal powerfully articulated by Plato and Aristotle was adopted by all citizens as the key to the good life. Therefore, where some aristocrats might have demanded leisure for themselves, working democrats had reason to reply, in the words of Stocks (1936b, p. 497), “leisure for all.” This remains an ideal still worth our efforts.

References


