Hobbies, Alienation, & Identity Revision
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“America is the only place where a person can go hunting on a full stomach.”
- Chris Rock
American comedian

I’ve been spending a great deal of time, lately, thinking about the rise of hobbies in 20th century American culture. It seems like a harmless, nay, frivolous investigation to be sure. However, I am not convinced that hobbies are as innocent or irrelevant to our nature as one might assume. Hobbies reveal something about our personal identities as well as our human condition. It is ironic that old survival instincts, such as hunting, have been resurrected as hobbies. Instead of hunting wild animals to fill our stomachs, we fill our stomachs to go hunting. What follows is a journey down several rabbit trails, in an attempt to explain and understand the rise of hobbies in our society.

When one thinks of a hobby, activities such as reading, outdoor adventures, sports, collecting things, traveling, making arts and crafts come to mind. Our culture tends to see hobbies as an interest or activity pursued outside of one’s regular occupation and usually for pleasure.

First, let’s consider the internal need a person might have for pursuing such hobbies. Given that hobbies are unique to a capitalistic society, or so it seems, an analysis of such a system from the Marxist understanding of the working class can elucidate these internal needs. The Marxist doctrine of surplus labor/value plays an important role in giving a proper assessment of the rise of hobbies in the 20th century because self-alienation is born as a result. Self alienation, then, opens the door to the world of hobbies. These hobbies are pursued because the worker no longer feels as though his/her work is a reflection of who they truly are and the hobby they choose offers them a type of fulfillment. It also appears to offer personal identity, which may be a form of self-delusion.

Suppose that the workers at Gulfstream Aerospace here in Savannah have no clue about the Marxist understanding of surplus labor and alienation (which they don’t). Suppose further that they have hobbies (which they do). Since the workers do not have our vantage point, which is Marxist for this thought experiment, their work week will be filled with great anticipation of “knocking-off” for the day or weekend, in order to go find satisfaction in their hobby of choice. The delusion sets in once they begin to view themselves as something other than their occupation. They can only endure the trauma of alienation (which they are not conscious of) by identifying themselves with their hobby.

In my house I have a sign that reads “Born to hunt, Forced to work”. This illustrates perfectly the false consciousness I am trying to identify. When a person takes this slogan literally, they have replaced their true identity (their occupation) with a hobby (their false identity). While I agree with much of the Marxist assessment of capitalism, the only way, it seems, to keep from being known (identified) as a factory worker, mechanic, carpenter, or the like is to define myself by my hobby. Hence, the delusion or false identity consciousness (involved in the hobby) is helpful for my survival, because without it I might just revolt!

But let’s build on the delusional aspect a bit more and assume for the moment that one worker plays golf every afternoon during the long afternoons of summer and he/she becomes so good that said person no longer views themselves as a worker for Gulfstream, but rather a golfer. As a result this person quits their job to try and make a living as a golfer. If this scenario were in fact true (for true story examples, see the Disney movies Invincible and The Rookie), most of us would consider this
person foolish due to our understanding of what a hobby is, unless the person found great success. In this case, however, a hobby was more than just enjoyment away from an occupation. It was, in fact, a door opener for this individual to no longer be alienated. They have, in fact, become who they really are and been set free.

A second rabbit trail I feel compelled to follow will focus on the type of hobby one might choose. With an entire buffet of options at our disposal, it’s at least mildly interesting that a person might choose golf over, say, sculpting. It could be argued that the golfer is more prone to athletics than aesthetics, or that the sculptor hates getting sweaty and that is why they choose that particular hobby over golf. On the face of it that seems reasonable enough, but I doubt that either person would have given consideration to the other’s choice of activity because of each person’s predisposed tendency. It’s not as though everybody sits around contemplating which hobby they will find fulfillment in. It is likely, though, that an individual predisposed to athletics will try out several sports before settling on one, but highly unlikely that an athlete will seek out, say, baking cookies as a hobby. Now, I am not sure what exactly is at the heart of that disposition, but I believe we all possess at least one.

For me, it is enjoying the great outdoors. I would preferably be hunting, but I also like to fish, hike, camp, and raft down rivers. Granted, I was introduced to it by my family at a young age, but I wasn’t raised around it. My first time hunting I was only five years old and it would be some fifteen years later before I had the necessary means to go by myself. My point, however, is that I never sampled from the buffet of hobbies; I simply was drawn to one of the first one’s I encountered. Also, it is worth noting that at five years of age, there is no alienation to speak of. It seems to follow, then, that if a child is introduced to an activity early, then it easily becomes a type of identity for them as they progress in years. This may, in turn, lead them to make important decisions in life based on the idea that they are this hobby. Tiger Woods’ father started teaching him the game (hobby) of golf at three years of age. I can’t imagine Tiger Woods ever thinking of himself as anything but a golfer, in light of this fact. In my case, it was being an outdoorsman.

Lastly, I would like to consider the human tendency to seek out activities to fill what is perceived as “empty time”. Consider the following observation made in 1957: "Marketers quickly noted that there was one peculiarly American trait that was a happy one from their viewpoint: the average American hates to be idle. The idea of simply relaxing by absence of preoccupation is intolerable. Europeans noted that American sight-seers couldn't merely amble about soaking up the beauty; they had to be following some sort of schedule they could boast about when they got home. This loathing of nonpreoccupation suggested possibilities for luring 'relaxing' Americans by the millions into such money-burning activities as do-it-yourself, building hobbies that involved buying more and more merchandisable goods." (Packard, 151).

Assume there is no economic system causing alienation and we are just here on earth. According to my line of reasoning, without alienation there is no such thing as a hobby. There would only be humans doing what humans do, and that is finding something to do. I recall reading sometime ago Geneva Reformer John Calvin, who wrote in his Institutes of the Christian Religion that “the human mind is, so to speak, a perpetual forge of idols”(Calvin, 78). Calvin, through his theological convictions, has given us a helpful insight into our investigation of hobbies. By simply changing the word “idol” to “hobby” we have given a more contemporary and secular thrust to Calvin’s observation. Although, it isn’t good enough to simply tell us something about our condition. We are “lovers of wisdom” and as such, we need to know why our minds seek to forge idols and enjoy them. On this I have no answer and I am even uncertain whether this is the right question.

Works Cited