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This brings back memories [1]

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Bryan Caplan quotes the delightfully named Professor Nutter on the Soviet Union circa 1957 [3]:

> All this in an economy that apparently has not yet discovered the wheelbarrow - sledges and two-man litters are used instead - where the scythe is far more in evidence than the mower, where brooms are mostly bundles of twigs without handles, where the mop is a handless rag, etc. In the drive for modernism, the Soviet system has apparently ignored the multitude of simple yet dramatic inventions so important in the economic development of other countries.

Innovation, that vital part of increasing productivity, does not depend upon large and grand inventions. It depends upon the myriad of small changes which are made to this and that which in general make all of the peoples' time more productive. Inventing Sputnik is all very well, but just think of the time in aggregate that could be saved by the deployment of the simple Fuller Brush to babushkas across the country!

As many of you will know I spent most of the 90s living in the rubble of that Soviet system. It was the little things that grated, not the large. The standard washing machine which was really just a plastic version of a washboard placed in the bathtub, the mop in use was a rag wrapped around the brush which hadn't advanced all that much from the 50s, shopping for even trivialities required queueing three times in the one store.

Simply the things which we now take for granted as being entirely trivial tasks became horribly time consuming when, as so often they had to be, one had to tackle them with the technology of the 1920s.

When you look at the time use studies which have been done in all of the "western" countries over the past few decades you see that the huge growth in leisure hours has come from the equally huge reduction in household production hours that these seemingly trivial domestic technologies have allowed. And of course, trivial domestic technologies are not things which are going to be thought about by a small group of men trying to run a 140 million people economy centrally.

It's absurd but true that the workers' paradise simply ended up insisting that the workers were going to have to work much harder than us. For the system couldn't conceive of the real human desire, which is to labour less, let alone work out that another steel plant doesn't enable us to work less, while washing machines, brooms, mops, do.

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