

## [Medieval peasants really did not work only 150 days a year](#) [1]

Written by [Tim Worstall](#) [2] | Tuesday 3 September 2013

One of the things that irks my choler, yanks my goat if you like, is this idea that the medieval peasant led a life of incredible leisure, had to work vastly less than we poor saps ground down under capitalism have to. It's entirely nonsense [of course](#) [3]:

Plowing and harvesting were backbreaking toil, but the peasant enjoyed anywhere from eight weeks to half the year off. The Church, mindful of how to keep a population from rebelling, enforced frequent mandatory holidays. Weddings, wakes and births might mean a week off quaffing ale to celebrate, and when wandering jugglers or sporting events came to town, the peasant expected time off for entertainment. There were labor-free Sundays, and when the plowing and harvesting seasons were over, the peasant got time to rest, too. In fact, economist Juliet Shor found that during periods of particularly high wages, such as 14th-century England, peasants might put in no more than 150 days a year.

What Shor (and others, for there are others who make the same claim) has done is looked at the labour service expected of the villein and then claimed that this was the amount of work they had to do. Nonsense: this work on the lord's demesne was the rent payable for the peasant's own land to farm. Something which rather added to his workload of course, that farming his own land.

We might also point to the amount of household labour that had to be performed. Yarn had to be spun, cloth to be weaved. Cooking was over open fires: and that firewood had to be collected. Bread baked and so on and on. There was a recent report (rather exaggerated but still) which claimed that in the 1930s it took 65 hours of human labour a week to run a household. Today it takes 3. Things were worse back in medieval days.

And finally there's the obvious point that these villeins and churls were animal owning peasant farmers. And people who own animals just don't get 70 days off a year, you don't manage to go off and get pissed for a week and then expect to have live animals when you come back.

What has been done here is to mistake work in the market economy for all the work being done. As a vast amount of a peasant's work is not in that market economy (that's why they're peasants and why they're poor) then they've decided not to include that back breaking labour done inside the household as labour.

As to why this is all being trotted out:

As for the modern American worker? After a year on the job, she gets an average of eight vacation days annually.

The US is the only leading nation that does not have legislation as to how much paid vacation time an employee must get. There is thus a move to make such a law. Thus these rather tired misunderstandings of medieval life being trotted out, to aid in making that case.

But there's one more surprise here. If you look again at their argument it is that everyone does indeed get

paid vacation in the US even though there isn't a law insisting that they must. Therefore, because everyone gets it already we must have a law. Why not, you know, just leave everyone to get on with it themselves?

[blog comments powered by Disqus](#) <sup>[5]</sup>

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/regulation-industry/medieval-peasants-really-did-not-work-only-150-days-a-year>

**Links:**

[1] <http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/regulation-industry/medieval-peasants-really-did-not-work-only-150-days-a-year>

[2] <http://www.adamsmith.org/taxonomy/term/5778>

[3] <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2013/08/29/why-a-medieval-peasant-got-more-vacation-time-than-you/#comment-75408>

[4] [http://disqus.com/?ref\\_noscript](http://disqus.com/?ref_noscript)

[5] <http://disqus.com>