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Purchasing leisure [1]

Written by **Tim Worstall** [2] | Tuesday 26 August 2008

One of the things that I've been banging on about here and there recently is the way in which the costs of recycling systems are misstated. For no one ever adds in the costs of the time taken by households to sort the materials so that they can be recycled. My own crude numbers [3] tell me that the costs of this labour are greater than the costs of the rest of the entire system put together. No, I don't think those numbers are right but I am insistent that the basic concept is correct. Which is why I've been rather blindsided by those who say that time spent not working for money doesn't actually have a value.

Eh? Of course such time has a value, there's an opportunity cost to your being forced to labour instead of doing something else. All of which rather leads me to this assertion [4] by Robert Fogel (yet another Nobel Laureate at U. Chicago).

> A reader has questioned Fogel?s assertion that Americans spend only 13% of their incomes on necessities, noting that sounds low. To make meaningful comparisons across centuries, Fogel has looked at how much of the increase in incomes over a person?s lifetime has gone to buy leisure ? that is to work fewer hours, including more years in retirement. He put up a table at the Lindau meeting that showed that Americans used 18% of their incomes to buy time off in 1875 but 68% in 1995.

The table and argument are at page 190 of this book [4].

If, from the gargantuan rise in wealth over the past century and a bit we've decided to purchase more leisure rather than more goods and baubles, then we value that leisure higher than the baubles. So if someone starts telling us that we must labour, for free, to sort our rubbish, that has a cost to us as we now are spending our time on neither the leisure we prefer nor the baubles we've given up to get it. It still leaves, of course, the determination of exactly what that time is in fact worth and as I say, I know that my numbers are not right in detail. I just wish that someone would in fact let us know what are the correct numbers.

Fogel's argument does of course entirely slay another set of arguments, those of all who complain about the ever longer working hours, the way in which modernity leaves us with ever less leisure time. They are, quite literally, spouting rubbish for we've never been so rich in leisure as we are now.

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