Project Skive Background Paper: The History and Future of Skiving
Abigail Schoneboom, aschoneboom@gc.cuny.edu
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> I have taken to arriving at the office one hour later than I am expected. Therefore I am far more rested and refreshed when I do arrive, and I avoid that bleak first hour of the day during which my still sluggish senses and body make every chore a penance. I find that in arriving later, the work which I do perform is of a much higher quality.
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> <div align="right">Ignatius J. Reilly
Diary of a Working Boy</div>

Introduction

Project Skive looks at the creative time-wasting efforts of six English white-collar workers. Skiving, which derives from the French *esquiver* or "slink away," is an English slang term that includes all non-work activity engaged in during time when one is supposed to be working. The participants in this study all have excellent employment records and are currently in good favour with their bosses. They are also accomplished skivers, devising elaborate diversions that fill the interstices of their work day with idle pleasures and pursuits, including online shopping, false meetings, contests and tournaments, writing of weblogs, and malicious gossip.

Skiving is always an illicit activity that, although it may be tacitly tolerated, is not openly acknowledged by one's supervisor or boss. In most cases the fun of skiving comes from strenuous efforts to conceal it. The use of a computer "rear-view mirror" to spot an approaching supervisor or the carefully rehearsed cover-up story to disguise having taken the rest of the afternoon off after a short meeting imbue stolen work-time with a heightened value and excitement. But skiving also begs the question, why are we at work if there isn't really that much work to be done? And wouldn't our lives be better if we could just cut the surreptitious skiving and move to a three-day workweek?

Drawing on the work of E.P. Thompson, Arlie Hochschild, and Andrew Ross, this paper looks at the history of play and time-wasting in English work life, moving from the relatively lax work habits of seventeenth century artisans and the tightly disciplined factories of the industrial era to the "humane workplaces" of today. Guided by Thompson's vision of a shorter work week that would balance work-discipline and unbounded playtime, it considers why we are working longer hours than ever, and why skiving persists in playing such a major role in our working life.

The Origins of Skiving

Skiving is an integral part of English work culture that dates back at least as far as the seventeenth century. In his famous essay on work-discipline, E. P. Thompson describes the seventeenth century worker's habit of nipping off to the pub or indulging in a bout of skittles whenever the opportunity presented itself. He notes, "the work pattern was one of alternate bouts of intense labour and of idleness, wherever men were in control of their working lives" (373).

As time wore on, mechanical rhythms and Protestant ideas[1], marked by the steady hands of the workplace clock, gradually pervaded the factory and office, hammering home the message that *time is money*. By 1700, Thompson notes, Crowley's Iron Works had devised a 100,000-word Law Book that made deductions from wages for "playing, sleeping, smoking, singing," and "reading of news history" (384) while on the job.[2] Crowley's almost obsessive efforts to limit workplace antics, solidly reassure us that at the dawn of industrial capitalism, skiving was alive and well and reaching new heights of cunning and creativity.

One might even say that, now that time was money and had been inextricably linked to salvation, snatching a sneaky game of skittles or a cigarette break from under the employer's nose had taken on a more devilish thrill. Faced with fierce moral and economic doctrines touting the essentially preposterous idea of working continuously without indulging in silliness of any sort, the art of skiving took on an impressive urgency that has lasted, arguably, to the present day.

Thompson's Vision of the Future: Synthesis of Old and New Work Rhythms

Writing in 1968, Thompson wonders whether future automation might relieve the compulsion to use every waking minute productively, bringing a new synthesis of old and new work rhythms in a sort of polite compromise: "Punctuality in working hours would express respect for one's fellow workers. And unpurposive passing of time would be behaviour which the culture approved" (402) Thompson's vision implies an enlightened future where skiving, in losing its illicit character, might be redefined and legitimated. Life would be pleasant and relatively relaxed but with enough discipline and structure to support efficient production and keep things running smoothly.

So, how does the reality match up to Thompson's vision? Two developments in working life need to be considered here. First, the shorter working week has not materialised and we are working longer hours than ever with increases in stress-related illness brought on by overwork.[3] In this sense Thompson's vision has failed. But second, workplaces have become, arguably, somewhat more flexible and tolerant of unpurposive activity. Crowley's authoritarian code has been replaced by the peppy management doctrine[4] of what Andrew Ross calls the "humane workplace," which actually values socializing and playfulness on the job, and makes being at work more fun. Team-building retreats and comfy couches blur the line between work and play, promising workers not just a living wage but creative self-realization through full participation in the workplace community.

When Work Becomes Play: Skiving in the Humane Workplace

So how does skiving look in a landscape where playful work is sometimes condoned by management? All the workers in the Project Skive study spoke of a tacit understanding that they have with their supervisors, based on timely completion of tasks, maintaining standards of customer service, and meeting of deadlines rather than continuous labour. In this sense managers tacitly tolerate their skiving

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[1] For the Protestantism/work-discipline connection see Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*

[2] In *Capital*, Marx characterizes this kind of behaviour as "petty pilferings of minutes" on the part of capitalist employers. (p. 352)

[3] The *Guardian*'s Madeleine Bunting notes that after a steady decline in the UK work week through the 60s and 70s:"In the 1980s, the decline in working hours bottomed out and, inexorably, the number of hours we work began to rise again. Twenty-odd years later it is still rising, and the debate rages as to why the dreamed-of leisure society never materialized."

[4] This doctrine grew in part out of Elton Mayo's studies of General Electric in the 1920s, which illustrated the "Hawthorne Effect," which showed that workers are more productive when praised/encouraged by employers. Maslow's notion of self-actualization in the workplace is also a significant contributor, as later taken up and depoliticized by Drucker. This idea reached new heights in the work-culture of the dot.com firms of the nineties, which was hyped as liberating workers to pursue their dreams and achieve unfettered creative self-fulfillment through their work.

so long as the work gets done and deadlines are met. Yet, all the skives featured here are actively concealed from supervisors, indicating that much of the play and socializing that goes on at work retains a subversive element through which workers actively seek to regain the emotional and creative terrain that the humane workplace seeks to colonize.

Ethnographic studies of U.S. workers by Arlie Hochschild and Andrew Ross illuminate this need for resistance to the "worker-friendly" office environment. Hochschild finds that workers in a large, progressive corporation are caught in a "time bind" where worker-friendly policies break down the boundary between work and life and represent a tacit expectation that workers will give more of their emotional and physical selves to the company. Long hours create a vicious cycle where home life and ties outside of the workplace are time-starved and manifest in rocky marriages, intractable children, and deserted, unsafe communities. Work becomes a haven where people feel they can escape the problematic areas of their lives but, especially when downsizing threatens their jobs and subjects them to heavier workloads, they sense their essential vulnerability and the hollowness of caring company doctrine.

Looking at the demise of New York City's freewheeling "no-collar" dot.com industry in the late-nineties, Andrew Ross finds that workers became trapped by nightmarish work schedules as their companies became increasingly subject to the pressures of global competition, rationalization, and downsizing that affected corporate industry as a whole. Since their humane workplaces had essentially dissolved the boundary between work and private life, there was no place to hide. Ross writes, "perhaps the most insidious occupational hazard of no-collar work is that it can enlist employees' freest thoughts and impulses in the service of salaried time" (19). Workers who had reveled in the creative freedoms of the early dotcom days complained of panic attacks, hives, and rashes as they became locked into a unhealthy work ethos that is embodied in this perverse statement from the founder of about.com to his employees: "We're not a sweatshop – but we mean to actually free you up while having you work all the time." (77) [5]

The Future of Skiving

As the humane workplace reaches further into our lives, skiving is an important means of shielding our private and creative selves from its encroachments. Skiving does make work more fun and, arguably, is a compromise that absorbs our frustrations and prevents us from coming up with more radical challenges to the system. But skiving is also a quiet protest against the banality that underlies so much of white-collar work. And it expresses disdain for the interminable meetings, phone calls, and PowerPoint presentations that comprise our bloated workday.

The startling thing is that, as a society, we continue to keep up appearances rather than admitting that the whole thing is a sham and moving to a three-day week. Anxiety over losing our jobs prevents individuals from acknowledging publicly the pointlessness of much of what the system produces and many of us spend the day trying to appear as busy as possible while skiving at every available opportunity.

Without doubt there has been a grand and rather comical failure of vision in realizing the potential of modern technology to maximize our free time and eliminate the need for all this sneaking about. But

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[5] Both Ross and Hoschchild deal with corporate work environments, but workers in non-profit, government, and educational settings are subjected to similar pressures, partly through widespread adoption of management doctrine developed in the private sector. For example the work of Charles Handy, which draws on corporate management strategies, has been applied heavily in reorganizing the charity sector.

one also has to wonder whether life without skiving wouldn't be somehow rather flat. Perhaps, in spite of all the other reasons given, our adhesion to the 40-hour week also has to do with a timeless and beautiful aspect of human nature – the *Underground Man* urge to do something splendidly irresponsible and get away with it. It is from this stuff that great skivers and great skives are made.

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