

# Encyclopedia of Early Modern History Online

## Free time

(1,892 words)

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## 1. Concept

### 1.1. Historical background

The term *free time* (like Italian *tempo libero*, Spanish *tiempo libre*, and German *Freizeit*; cf. American *spare time*) is defined etymologically as the opposite of “occupied time” or working hours. The “freedom” of time has positive connotations; it suggests voluntary, pleasant occupations and a historical process of liberation from social obligations and travail. This is ultimately a negative definition, since free time is determined primarily by what it does *not* entail.

This differs from the word *leisure*, which goes back (via Old French *loisir*) to Latin *licere* (“be allowed”). The English and French words developed in parallel from the meaning “possibility of doing something,” understood as the availability of time; at the end of the Middle Ages, they meant “the possibility of doing something pleasant,” that is, time available for doing whatever one likes. Here the concept of free time recalls a classical precursor: in the practical philosophy of Aristotle, *scholé* (Leisure) had the positive sense of having control over one’s own time; it characterized the free individual whose social position allowed him not to have to work to support himself.

In many respects, this model was still in effect at the beginning of the early modern period: free time was distributed along the spectrum of the social hierarchy based on the principle of inequality: the manual labor (Work) of some gave others the opportunity to devote themselves to the tasks of leadership or intellectual pursuits. An ideological implication of this social reality was the contempt for work that characterized the traditional elites of the nobility as leisure classes [7]. In the utopian inversion of the real world, in the Land of [Cockaigne](#), all time is instead free time, by definition.

## 1.2. Time and work

Historical sociology (Norbert Elias, Eric Dunning) has constructed a detailed typology of free-time activities in Europe from late antiquity to the present day; the pleasures usually associated with free time (leisure in the narrower sense) constitute only a minor portion. Besides pure rest and relaxation, the typology includes a multitude of other pursuits, amongst which domestic activities (an area traditionally assigned to women) stand out. Among other things, it follows that the time spent in the workplace was defined with increasing clarity (Working hours), but it does not necessarily follow that the time spent outside working hours (e.g. at home or traveling) was (and is) totally discretionary, available for personal pleasure or profit. The situation was especially complex in pre-industrial Europe, an era dominated by the [household economy](#), since here there was even less distinction between working hours, the workplace, the workers, work activities, and their opposite.

In the European tradition, the perception and use of time were determined significantly by the views of the Christian churches, which were based on an ambivalent heritage from antiquity in which Greek tolerance for leisure (Latin *otium*) contrasted with Roman suspicion. Ever since the Middle Ages, leisure has also been viewed as [idleness](#). *Otium* could also be interpreted positively, for example in the sense of literary activity, but it was fundamentally a negative concept, idleness, which was characterized as pampering. In the moral system of the Christian Middle Ages, idleness was associated with the cardinal sin of sloth (Latin *acedia*). The church emphasized that time was a gift of God and therefore must not be squandered sinfully on petty or worldly pursuits. In the early modern period, in many schools of Christianity (e.g. in the Protestant ethics studied by Max Weber) it was expressly important not to “waste” time.

A secularized rebirth of *acedia* was the melancholy of the Renaissance, a state of mind that the theory of humors ([Humoralism](#)) in the tradition of Hippocrates and Galen associated with a particular temperament and was typical of [intellectuals](#) and [geniuses](#); melancholy demanded a responsible configuration of life, beginning with responsible use of time [\[12\]](#).

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## 2. History

### 2.1. Pre-industrial society

Historians and sociologists have developed various approaches and chronologies for the historical changes in the complex relationship between free time and work time – from the hypothesis that human free-time pursuits are “timeless” social activities to the view that real, genuine free time can appear only in certain historico-social situations. Because of the central importance of [industrialization](#) for the transformation of economics and society in Europe (and subsequently worldwide), the 19th century has often been identified as the beginning of free time in the modern sense (e.g. in the majority of studies carried between the mid-1960s and the mid-1980s).

More recently, however, aspects of early modern pre-industrial society have been emphasized that anticipated later developments or created the necessary conditions for them [\[6\]](#). This includes a growing interest in the topic of “entertainment” in early modern [conduct literature](#), where it is treated positively, and manuals on various leisure activities (from ball games to party games and sports): the more frequent representation of such free-time pursuits in the graphic arts, the growing custom of the urban aristocracy to spend their summer holidays in the countryside, and the

dissemination of information about recreational activities in the major cities, for example in 18th-century Paris through the *Almanach des loisirs*.

Free time is obviously closely related to games (Play, game), a complex category with which free-time pursuits were frequently classified in the early modern era (and still are today). A game is by definition an autotelic activity, subject to its own rules. In the court culture of the Renaissance, the spirit of play permeated a large proportion of pursuits and social relationships, for example in court ceremonial.

Another key concept – both in the eyes of the early modern era and from the perspective of the modern observer – is that of the [festival](#). According to the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, the culture of popular festivals typified the Middle Ages and Renaissance. He interpreted this culture as a socially liberating, anti-institutional phenomenon, in which laughter and [Carnival](#) were central; by around 1600, however, socio-cultural developments had put an end to this culture (the emergence of the modern state, rationalism, Counter-Reformation/[Catholic Reformation](#)). Stimulating as this theory has proved to be, critical studies have nevertheless challenged its core and chronology [\[11\]](#). Bakhtin's interpretation of Carnival as an inversion of the social order underestimates its additional function as a release of social tensions, enabling periodic transgression of social rules – while thereby ultimately affirming and strengthening them.

Attempts have been made to understand the changes brought by the 18th century as a transition from a festival culture to a leisure culture; Peter Burke saw the value of this concept in its applicability to the totality of the cultural changes that accompanied the transformation of European societies into the era of manufacturing (Manufactory). But he cautioned against viewing cultural change exclusively as a consequence of [industrialization](#): over the course of the early modern period, in the last analysis, it was reinforced by mechanisms of social discipline that were responsible for making the time of each individual more organized and institutionalized. As a result of this process, he argued, a new awareness of the nature of free time as a distinctive sphere emerged [\[6\]](#).

A special aspect of the treatment of time was the setting apart of Sundays and other [holidays](#), which according to Christian teaching should be devoted totally to the worship of God. In practice this obligation came into conflict with the custom (and necessity) of using the same period of time for the usual free-time pursuits. An original solution to the conflict was the institution of Saint Monday or Good Monday (Italian *santo lunedì*, French *Saint-Lundi*), attested in France and England in the 18th and 19th centuries but already found among Alsatian mineworkers since the late Middle Ages. This refers to the custom of devoting the first working day of the week to drinking bouts and amusements (*le dimanche à Dieu, le lundi à l'amitié*, “Sunday for God, Monday for friendship”) – evidence that a factory work ethic ([Factory \[industrial\]](#)) took hold only gradually. It is not by accident that this institution disappeared in the second half of the 19th century (see [Factory discipline](#)).

In early modern Europe, the experience of free time also varied by class, gender, and age. [Dancing](#) was among the free-time activities of various social groups, from the folk dances central to public festivals to the court dances; in this period, the latter were also a fundamental practice of female identity and body language among the nobility. Among the male nobility, [hunting](#) and competitions ([Contest](#)) were considered rites of passage (see Riding, [Fencing](#)). In these activities, it is difficult to distinguish between free time and work (active military engagement) among the nobility, as is shown by certain ambiguities in the delineation of the two spheres in the pre-industrial period.

In many towns of northern Italy, the widespread free-time activities among the common people included public exhibition bouts (Italian *battaglie*), engaged in since the Middle Ages, such as the *Pugna* in Siena and the *Guerra di canne* in Venice; in many respects they were similar to English [football](#), which has been studied by Norbert Elias. Beginning in the 16th century, the free-time activities of the elites diverged increasingly from the forms of recreation that they had shared for the most part with the lower classes [\[5\]](#). Increased specialization in children's games and toys over the course of the early modern period can also be observed.

## 2.2. Industrialization

Measured against the preeminent role of the nobility in the game culture of the Renaissance, in the 18th century we can observe a commercialization of free time, whose protagonists were now primarily the middle classes ([Bourgeoisie](#); [Bourgeois society](#)). This first true [consumer society](#) read (see Reading society), went to the theater and to pleasure gardens, visited spa towns and other tourist attractions (Tourism). This new dimension of free time was also associated with the ideas of the Enlightenment, which brought with it a new time structure characterized by secularization and individualization ([Individuality](#)) along with the use of clocks and watches to tell time.

The introduction of factories ([Factory \[industrial\]](#)) brought the process of drawing the line between free time and work time to a conclusion (in a domestic economy, they had been integrated and could scarcely be separated). As a result, socially organized forms of free time increased, from after work to vacation; at the same time, the traditional forms of diversion that had been linked to a different organization of the day and a different working year faded away. Socio-historical interpretations of the new free time of workers fluctuate between the theory of cultural class autonomy and the view that it served as an instrument of social control on the part of the authorities [\[4\]](#); [\[20\]](#).

In the middle decades of the 19th century, organizations associated with the workers' movement were already beginning to offer a series of recreational activities intended to represent an autonomous after-work culture of the workforce. This socialist and especially Marxist perspective, however, remains rooted in the centrality of the experience of work in anthropology. Although the liberation from alienated labor envisaged in his *Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (1859; "Critique of Political Economy") was expected to restore creativity and self-realization, Karl Marx stresses in his *Grundrisse* ("Outlines") that the increased pleasure an individual takes in work is ultimately intended to alter him in his nature as a producer and enrich the production process. Here Marx explicitly dissociates himself from the idea that labor is to be transformed into pure pleasure ("... which in no way means that it [labor] can be made merely a joke, or *amusement*, as Fourier naively expressed it in shop-girl terms" [\[11\]](#)). Organically associated with the workers' movement, the ideology of work – which Marx's son-in-law Paul Lafargue dissociated himself from in 1883 with his *Le droit à la paresse* ("The Right to Be Lazy") – finally banished free time to the margins of social planning.

Related articles: [Festival](#) | [Individuality](#) | Lifestyle | Play, game | Sport | Work | Work ethic | Working hours

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