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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

The Big Sleep

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THE new French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, has made no secret of his antipathy to his country's 35-hour workweek. This drastic solution to unemployment was mandated by the leftist government of Lionel Jospin in 2000. The intention was to share out the available work more evenly and to allow workers to spend more time with their families. Its long-term effects on the economy are still unclear.

In the autobiography-manifesto that he published during his presidential campaign, Mr. Sarkozy wrote of “the harm that the 35-hour week has done to our nation”: “What madness it is to think that the way to increase wealth and create jobs is to work less!” On Oct. 1, he effectively abolished the 35-hour week by removing fiscal penalties on overtime. The strikes and protests in France this month give a taste of the unions’ reaction to President Sarkozy’s measure.

President Sarkozy’s 19th-century predecessors would have been amazed that such comparatively small adjustments are treated as matters of economic life and death. They, too, were worried by the snail-like progress of the French economy, and wondered how to compete with the industrial powerhouse of Britain. But they were faced with something far more ruinous than unemployment.

Economists and bureaucrats who ventured out into the countryside after the Revolution were horrified to find that the work force disappeared between fall and spring. The fields were deserted from Flanders to Provence. Villages and even small towns were silent, with barely a column of smoke to reveal a human presence. As soon as the weather turned cold, people all over France shut themselves away and practiced the forgotten art of doing nothing at all for months on end.

In the mountains, the tradition of seasonal sloth was ancient and pervasive. “Seven months of winter, five months of hell,” they said in the Alps. When the “hell” of unremitting toil was over, the human beings settled in with their cows and pigs. They lowered their metabolic rate to prevent hunger from exhausting supplies. If someone died during the seven months of winter, the corpse was stored on the roof under a blanket of snow until spring thawed the ground, allowing a grave to be dug and a priest to reach the village.

The same mass dormancy was practiced in other chilly parts. In 1900, The British Medical Journal reported that peasants of the Pskov region in northwestern Russia “adopt the economical expedient” of spending one-half of the year in sleep: “At the first fall of snow the whole family gathers round the stove, lies down, ceases to wrestle with the problems of human existence, and quietly goes to sleep. Once a day every one wakes up to eat a piece of hard bread. ... The members of the family take it in turn to watch and keep the fire alight. After six months of this reposeful existence the family wakes up, shakes itself” and “goes out to see if the grass is growing.”

It is unlikely this was hibernation in the zoological sense. While extreme cold might have set off a biological response normally seen only in squirrels, bears and marmots, human hibernation probably reflects a sensible, communal decision to stay in bed for as long as possible.

But the French seem to have been particularly sleepy. They “hibernated” even in temperate zones. In Burgundy, after the wine harvest, the workers burned the vine stocks, repaired their tools and left the land to the wolves. A civil servant who investigated the region’s economic activity in 1844 found that he was almost the only living presence in the landscape: “These vigorous men will now spend their days in bed, packing their bodies tightly together in order to stay warm and to eat less food. They weaken themselves deliberately.”

President Sarkozy’s campaign slogan, “Work more to earn more,” would have meant nothing to most French peasants. After the Revolution, government officials complained that farmers were “abandoning themselves to dumb idleness,” instead of undertaking “some peaceful and sedentary industry.” Income acted only as a deterrent. The people of Beaucaire on the Rhône made enough money at their summer fair to spend the rest of the year “smoking, playing cards, hunting and sleeping.”

Until the 20th century, few people needed money. Apart from salt and iron, everything could be paid for in kind. Economic activity was more a means of making the time pass than of making money, which might explain why one of the few winter industries in the Alps was clock-making. Tinkering with tiny mechanisms made time pass less slowly, and the clocks themselves proved that it was indeed passing.

In modern France, where the overheated ski stations of the Alps and the Pyrenees are busier in winter than at any other time, no one is proposing a return to the five-month year. But perhaps there are lessons to be learned from those hibernating ancestors who shared their homes with heat-producing herbivores.

In September, at the General Assembly of the United Nations, President Sarkozy proposed “un New Deal écologique et économique,” but without explaining how economic growth can be reconciled with conservation. If he is serious about saving the planet, and if he wants to reassure the unions that workers will still have time with their families, he should consider introducing tax incentives for hibernation. The long-term benefits of reduced energy consumption would counterbalance the economic loss. There has never been a better time to stay in bed.

Graham Robb is the author of “The Discovery of France: A Historical Geography From the Revolution to the First World War.”