



## Working through the allotment\*

Abigail Schoneboom with photographs by Julian May

### abstract

Using photography and critical reflection, this article explores the relationship between contemporary allotments and paid employment in the UK, making connections to contemporary debates about the future of work. Via interview data and portraits of plot-holders in Newcastle upon Tyne it considers how allotments fit into working lives and the challenges and satisfactions they represent. The project critically reflects on the social theory surrounding work and leisure, looking at the interplay between emancipation and submission that epitomises modern leisure time. It argues that allotments represent a complex discourse on rebellion against and accommodation of an intensified labour process, which can inform discussion about how best to spend our time.

### Introduction

This note explores the relationship between today's allotments, which are currently in huge demand (Jones, 2009), and paid work. It represents a reflection on allotment work and a provocation towards further theoretical engagement in relation to time, durability, work-life boundaries and social engagement. Using photos of allotment-holders in a fairly affluent area of Newcastle upon Tyne, it looks at how the allotment complements the working life of a teacher, taxi driver or nurse, and how it facilitates the transition from the structure and routine of a job into retirement. Inspired by the work of Humphrey Spender and the Mass Observation Movement (Past Perfect, n.d.), as well as Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot's (2005) notion of portraiture, the project involved

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ethnographic fieldwork, interviews and a three-day photography shoot at two allotment sites in Newcastle upon Tyne during the summer of 2011.

The study critically reflects on the social theory surrounding work and leisure, looking in particular at the tension between emancipation and submission that is at the core of modern recreation. In a contemporary labour process characterised by intensification, is the allotment a way to dilate time or just another way of staying busy? Does the allotment's permanence and wholeness appeal to those of us who are engaged in intangible and precarious work or is it a mere extension of a production-consumption cycle that creates nothing enduring? In a post-scarcity society that is nonetheless threatened by looming ecological catastrophe and financial meltdown, how might productivity and play be interwoven?



Figure 1: *The Ashington Allotments*, by Humphrey Spender, 1934.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 2: Emma (Silversmith and Caregiver): 'At the same time that this is incredibly relaxing and fruitful, it also can be stress-inducing at the same time.'

Existing at the nexus between hunger and beauty, the allotment's prosaic rows of potatoes and its indulgently eccentric structures, fashioned from found objects, are a fascinating site of inquiry into these questions. Since its inception in the late eighteenth century, the modern allotment has been a means of containing problems of capitalism and a source of possible rebellion. In the

early stages of industrialisation, allotments promised a way to nurture work-discipline and sobriety, offering a means of subsistence to complement meagre wages or enable survival during unemployment. However, pre-Victorian

<sup>1</sup> More allotment photos may be viewed at <http://www.pastperfect.org.uk/sites/woodhorn/archive/humphrey.html>. Reproduced with permission of Bolton Archives.

landowners worried that their allotment-holders would develop a spirit of independence that would make them work-shy and insubordinate (Crouch and Ward, 1988).

In a similar vein, the contemporary vegetable plot may be a source of harmonious work-life balance but it might also be a locus of creative resistance to our jobs, signalling unmet needs and desires. Although recent research has highlighted the role allotments play in managing stress and building community (Hope and Ellis, 2009; London Assembly Environment Committee, 2006; Scottish Allotments & Gardens Society, 2007) and the health benefits of allotments to retired people (Milligan et al., 2004), the interplay between today's allotments and paid employment has not been adequately explored. Engaging with this area of inquiry, this project captures allotment-holders on their plots and reflects with them on how their gardening activity fits in with their working lives.



**Figure 3: Hattie (IT Project Manager):** 'Before children I used to do 12 hours sometimes, and not even realise, then suddenly feel faint and look at the clock and think, I haven't eaten anything, and I've been here all day ... But now I don't get there nearly as much, and I'm finding it quite hard to keep on top of the plot, and I get weed warnings.'

## Methodology: Photographing allotment work

In 1934, photographer Humphrey Spender took pictures of Northumbrian coalminers, exploring how the men traversed the boundary between work and leisure in their daily lives (Past Perfect, n.d.). The photos include several portraits of the men on their allotments. In one, a man stands spade in hand at his leek trench, separated by his shed (or 'hut', as allotment-holders often call these structures) from the slagheap and pitworks chimney behind. Another of the photos depicts a cloth-capped man contemplating his climbing plants inside an archway constructed from old furniture: the corkscrew-carved ends of a wooden banister clearly visible in the entrance (see Figure 1). A third photo features the smoky profile of a man standing before a display of competition dahlias in pop-bottle vases.

As a member of the Mass Observation Movement (Madge and Harrisson, 1937), Spender was interested in documenting daily life in working class communities in a way that made sense to his subjects. His allotment photos document leisure time but are inevitably a commentary on the exigencies of coalmining work. To see a man who spends his working life underground devoting his leisure time to labouring on the land suggests both a community based on continuous toil and economic scarcity and, by contrast, independence from the work discipline of the pit, a mental and physical space uncolonised by industrial rhythms. The depiction of cloth-clapped workmen before their delicate blooms or pleasing arbours simultaneously reminds us of the harshness of mining culture and the resilient creativity sparked by a brutalising labour process.



Figure 4: Sam (Business Consultant): 'I would say that I'm much more authentically me here. I don't believe that I'm authentically me when I'm working... when I come here I revert back to the more full version of the real me, which is a scruff, who prefers manual labour to intellectual labour.'

Setting out from the tension between freedom and toil that Spender's allotment photos encapsulate, I became interested in using photography to explore today's allotments. As a descendant



Figure 5: David (Property Developer): 'My spare time somehow has got to be shared...so we built a sandpit and gravel pit at the end of it to plonk the kids in, so I could then do a bit of digging.'

of Northumbrian coalminers, I have long been fascinated by the role that allotments play in working life. In particular, I am interested in how the allotment has shifted from being a largely working class pastime to becoming a mainstay of middle class aspiration. In particular, I wanted to explore the role allotments play in the lives of time-challenged



professionals with demanding jobs and young families. However, I also wanted to document how the allotment replaces the structure and intensity of paid work during the transition to retirement.

This interest emerges from my own involvement on my family's allotment plot in Newcastle upon Tyne, which helps me to handle the stress of doing an academic job and raising small children, yet also creates another dimension of time scarcity where I never seem to have enough time for the digging and weeding. The project involved ethnographic fieldwork at two nearby



**Figure 6: James (Retired Operations Manager):** 'I've always been a busy person, if you know what I mean. I don't like to be sitting around.'

allotment sites in a relatively affluent area of the city. I am directly involved at the first site, where my parents' plot is one of 28 plots, but I sought interview contacts at a second, much larger site, conducting a total of 35 interviews across the two locations. I spent a six-month period in 2011 documenting my personal involvement in allotment activity through field-notes, followed by a one-month period of conducting interviews with allotment-holders on their plots. I then worked with photographer Julian May to document a subset of the plot-holders on their plots, drawing on some of the themes that had emerged during the interviews.



**Figure 7: Liam (Lecturer):** 'It's one of the very, very few things in my life that is entirely up to me. If it all goes horribly wrong it doesn't matter, it's my learning experience, and no-one knows where I am when I'm here, and no-one can come and get me.'

The portraits are explicitly focused away from the face, partly to protect allotment-holder identities (real names have also been replaced by pseudonyms), but also in order to draw attention to the setting and tools as well as to the work of the body that the allotment entails. We were inspired by Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot's interpretation of portraiture as a tool of social science inquiry that attempts

a “probing, layered and interpretive” (2005: 5) understanding of human identity and social interaction. Lawrence-Lightfoot emphasises a purposefully interdisciplinary approach that aims to capture the richly textured and aesthetic nature of human experience, engaging the emotions as well as the intellect, aiming at an account of human experience that is “generous and tough, skeptical and receptive” (*ibid.*) such that subjects are introduced to perspectives, or ways of reflecting about themselves, not previously considered. As such, we employed a collaborative approach (Pink, 2001), working with the allotment-holders to develop their portraits, drawing on themes that emerged through the interviews.



Figure 8: Paul (Retired Town Planner): ‘I’m attached to this partly because it was given to me by my daughter – it’s rather a nice dibber, rather elegantly made... it also makes life so much easier for doing so many things... it’s a thing of beauty as well as certainly useful.’

## Allotments and work

A 2009 *Guardian* article announced 40-year waiting lists for allotments in parts of London and a surge in allotment demand throughout the UK (Jones, 2009). The allotment sites featured in this project, which had a surplus of plots in the 1980s, are currently experiencing waiting lists of several years. When an aspiring plot-holder receives the call and is told a plot is available, he must fit the new responsibility into his life, accommodating it around his paid employment and care-giving obligations. Those who stick at it and, armed with gardening books and advice from neighbours, succeed in taking on the challenge, may carry their plots with them for decades, through career changes and into retirement.

### *Making time*

The participants in this project – some new ploholders with full-time jobs, others veteran retirees – spoke of the relaxing and trying aspects of having an allotment. Emma<sup>2</sup>, a caregiver and silversmith, calls it relaxing and stress-inducing (see Figure 2); Hattie, who juggles an IT job and two small children,

<sup>2</sup> Participants’ real names have been replaced by pseudonyms.

describes the guilt she experiences when her plot goes neglected, but also values how the allotment seems to expand or slow down time, allowing her to become focused on an activity (see Figure 3). Sam, a business consultant, described simultaneously losing himself and (re)discovering aspects of his identity, in the absorbing rhythm of outdoor physical labour (see Figure 4).

For those plagued by time scarcity and caught up in the social networking hurricane, allotments offer a welcome pause and contrast, yet bring with them new challenges around fitting everything in. David, a property developer with a young family, has constructed a sandpit so that he can simultaneously cover childcare and allotment duties (see Figure 5). At the other end of the spectrum, retired allotment-holders retrieve the temporal structure of the work day without



**Figure 9: Tom (Taxi Driver):** ‘Once in a while you plan a job, you go out and buy the stuff, you make it, and you finish it...You don’t get that in the work that I do. It comes and goes and it’s gone, you know?’

the compulsion that attended their paid work life: James, a retired operations manager and extremely active site secretary finds himself very occupied with allotment-related tasks (see Figure 6).

In relation to scholarship on contemporary work, the allotment suggests the need for ‘constant busyness’ (Hochschild, 2008: 89) that is the new opiate of the

masses, but it also raises the possibility of contemplation and escape. The unceasing activity involved in planning and tending an allotment possibly invokes Horkheimer and Adorno’s (2001[1944]) contention that the capitalist labour process seeps into the workers’ leisure time, such that, ‘his experiences are inevitably after-images of the work process itself’ (*ibid.*: 137). However, the way people experience their time on the allotment is also a direct contrast to the intensity (Warhurst et al., 2008a) of contemporary employment. Liam, a lecturer who visits his plot before and after work, notes how allotment time feels very much his (see Figure 7). By disrupting usual patterns, creating separation from the wired world outside, and enabling flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), the allotment can offer an authentically free moment to those who feel their time and their thoughts are not their own (Marcuse, 1964).

*Countering evanescence, discovering scarcity and abundance*

Allotment activity is an integral whole, steeped in rich, layered narrative where objects and processes have stories behind them: this windbreaker was made from scavenged twigs cast off by the local racecourse; that handcrafted wooden dibber was a gift from a daughter in London (see Figure 8). Tom, a taxi driver, relished the opportunity to design and build a shed on his plot (see Figure 9). Set against the evanescence (Gorz, 2005) of much contemporary work, the allotment-grown potato or hand-built shed provides a satisfying objecthood that provides an antidote to intangible knowledge or service work. Planning and crop rotation, foiling pests, nurturing and planting out seedlings, weeding, picking and processing fruits and vegetables involve sometimes repetitive or unpleasant work. However, these tasks also invite creativity and innovation, which flourish because the allotment is not a necessity. We can buy potatoes from Tesco if these ones fail, so allotmenting allows us to *play* at scarcity, pitting our wits and ingenuity against nature.

This creative and productive satisfaction that derives from traditional allotmenting is increasingly intertwined with commodification, which replaces the handmade, hand-reared and innovatively makeshift with pre-fabricated and made-to-order gardening supplies, from luxury worms (Vermisell, 2011) to iPhone gardening apps. Yet the allotment production and consumption process remains largely extra-economic, holistic and mucky. Nicole, a retired NHS



Figure 10: Nicole (Retired NHS Clinician):  
 'I did a very busy job which didn't involve soil or growing or anything at all, and I drove around a lot. And now I feel much more... it sounds corny, but I feel much more connected with what's important in life, and that now I could feed myself at least for some of the year if I couldn't buy things in shops.'

clinician, is delighted by her partial independence from the supermarket (see Figure 10). Theresa, a nurse who cultivates endless varieties of basil in her greenhouse, envisions becoming increasingly self-sufficient in her retirement (see Figure 11).

Plot-holders become conscious of their capacity for self-provisioning and experience a sometimes exhilarating sense of abundance, contributing to our understanding of luxury and wealth as socially constructed, dynamic concepts



(Berry, 1994; Veblen, 1994[1899]). The capacity to give away armfuls of fresh herbs to your neighbours; the secure knowledge that your cabbages are untouched by pesticides or slave labour; or the sense of social superiority that derives from having a healthy outdoor lifestyle are all part of an unfolding ethic of consumption that simultaneously complements and contradicts contemporary capitalism (Campbell, 1987).

Steeped in this process, the allotment gardener might be seen, in Arendt's (1998[1958]) terms, as addicted to a production-consumption cycle that connects her animalistically to the "sheer bliss of being alive" and allows her to "remain and swing contentedly in nature's prescribed cycle" (*ibid.*: 106) producing nothing that endures or develops her humanness beyond the level of reproduction and devouring. As a captivating hobby, smoothly absorbing the



Figure 11: Theresa (Nurse): 'We've got this idea, when we have more time, that we'll come down, we'll have a stove and we'll just dig and create our food out of what we've got. I lived in Crete for quite a while so I'm quite used to taking things off the land and just cooking with what's around...'

leisure moments of an atomised and content gardener, it draws us into a privatised dilettantism that distracts us from the social injustice of the larger system. Yet, against Arendt's suprabiological definition of what constitutes durability, allotments combine story, creativity and place-hood in a way that extends and resonates well beyond this year's growing season and transcends the perishable.

### *Sustaining social connections*

While it exists in sharp aesthetic and rhythmic contrast with the office or 9-to-5, socially the allotment has some strong resonances with the workplaces we frequent. Relative to the private garden, the allotment is a public space that, like many organisations, affords its members a congenial, cooperative spirit as well as a rich dose of gossip, power-mongering and drama. Although much of the actual labour is solitary, it is interwoven with the fabric of the site as a supervised and regulated social space.

In Newcastle's allotments, power is devolved, with each site overseen by a management committee consisting of a minimum of three, usually the Secretary, Chairman and Treasurer, although others can be co-opted. They regulate

activities, managing the waiting list and handling cases of plot neglect. For retirees or those experiencing unemployment, this fabric can be an antidote to anomie (Durkheim, 1984[1933]). For the overworked, it can provide a refreshing alternative social attachment. Imbued with its own distinct tempo, language, rituals and mode of social interplay, the allotment offers a habitus (Bourdieu, 1977), a possible refuge for identity buffeted by or relieved from work pressures.

The type of collaboration and knowledge-sharing that goes on among plotholders is not dissimilar to the professional social networks of the IT development or intellectual spheres, and contemporary knowledge workers are well-placed to move between both milieus. Discussion and consultation about the raising of produce provide endless opportunities for banter – but are also a means of pleasantly limiting the intimacy among plot-holders who may work side by side for years and share the knowledge and fruits of their gardens without being uncomfortably familiar with each others' private lives or political leanings. At the same time, family members working a plot find an opportunity for untroubled togetherness: educators Stephen and Louise have made their allotment a way to spend quality time with their teenage children, hanging out and working the plot alongside each other (see Figure 12).

#### *Understanding and re-envisioning contemporary work*

Attention to the activities that unfold outside of paid work can sharpen our awareness of the sensual or creative shortcomings of our careers, contributing to labour process and work-life boundary debates that, increasingly, regard work as intertwined with the broader socius rather than as a clearly separable domain (Thompson and Smith, 2010; Warhurst et al., 2008b). Allotments are experienced in relation to paid employment. Bill, a retired printer, commented on how his plot used to clear the noise of machinery from his head (see Figure 13); others reflected on how their allotment provides thinking time to mull over work problems. Mary, a library assistant, enjoys the novel sensation of self-directed, tangible labour after a morning's work at the helpdesk (see Figure 14).



Figure 12: Steven & Louise (Educators): 'We've had to buy so many tools because we all had to have one. We wanted it to be a family thing, not just a mum and dad thing.'

These functions exist alongside busy (and often rewarding) jobs, richly uncovering how workers actively limit the colonisation of their bodies and minds by their jobs, and exploring whether this is a harmonious or conflict-laden negotiation.

Scholarship on contemporary employment has highlighted incompatibilities between the profit incentive and humane or fulfilling work (Bunting, 2004; Hochschild, 1997; Kunda, 1992), and raised the ontological and ecological imperative to look beyond wage labour and consumer society to more sustainable forms of work and leisure. The enduring notion that an ideal society is that which restricts necessary labour to a few hours per day, freeing people to pursue spontaneous self-development in the arts, horticulture, and other pastimes has roots in such places as More's *Utopia* (1992: 37) and provocative 19<sup>th</sup> century pamphlets (Dilke, 1821; LaFargue, 1883). Using technological advancement to shorten the working day, unleashing spontaneous creativity and productive activity, is an idea that underpins *The German ideology* (Marx and Engels, 2001[1846]: 53) and *Grundrisse* (Marx, 1993[1858]: 706). In the early twentieth century (Hunnicut, 1988) and the automation-crazed 1980s (Handy, 1984), visions of a leisured society gained purchase in mainstream circles.



Figure 13: Bill (Retired Printer): 'I could walk out of [work] and my head would be buzzing, spinning, and I'd get here and I'd sit here for five minutes and, you know, everything's right with the world again.'

Concerned by the negative environmental and societal impact of our current system, contemporary scholars have advanced the radical notion of delinking income and work (Aronowitz and DiFazio, 1995; Gorz, 2005), while the 4-hour work week and other variations have been promoted by management gurus such as Tim Ferriss (n.d.). This society has failed to materialise, and we have seen instead the rise of an

overworked elite maintained by an army of low-paid service workers (Rosenberg, 1993; Schor, 1993). Yet, as Granter (2009: 111) argues, does this merely show that a leisure-based society – one that removes the societal control that work enforces – is easily attainable yet too frightening to contemplate?

Existing in dialogue with paid employment, allotments provoke consideration about how we might best spend our time in a society, faced by economic recession and imminent ecological disaster, where paid work makes less sense as society's central organising principle. As a form of unwaged, eco-friendly production and consumption, the allotment suggests possibilities for a society that looks beyond the wage labour/consumption binary to more sustainable forms of social interaction. It helps us contemplate the social benefits and organisational challenges (those weed warnings remind us of the limits of autonomy in any communally managed space) of a third sector based on unpaid self-development. Importantly, the allotment enables us to picture a post-work scenario not as an atavistic back-to-nature scramble but as a way of life compatible with cappuccino-drinking and vibrant urbanism. Further theoretical engagement with allotment work – its temporality, tangibility and sociality – may thus lend clarity to debates on present and future work.

More than anything, this note emphasises that the allure of allotments is bound up with the exhilarating and demanding urban work patterns and lifestyles they complement. Today's allotments are neither a form of pure rebellion nor a harmonious antidote to work-related stress but a many-layered and contradictory discourse on wage labour and its alternatives. These portraits are a celebration of the creative freedom, ingenuity and self-reliance that thrives alongside our careers but they also reflect tension and possibility as we negotiate how best – in a society capable of co-opting all our emotional and physical resources – to spend our time.



**Figure 14:** Mary (Library Assistant): 'I absolutely love picking the crops and gathering the harvest then taking it home and sitting down to a meal that is almost entirely grown by us. You feel empowered, that this is your bit of the earth and that you're creating something beautiful out of it.'



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