

## **Can We Have a Holiday from Shopping?**

On Labor Day, like most every holiday, the mall is swamped. The trade in backpacks, jeans and pencil cases is understandable, back to school and all. But it doesn't end there, retailers are also flogging those end of summer staples: big screen TVs, mattresses and Game Boys.

Yet Labor Day isn't really about shopping, or back to school, or even the end of summer. The day was established to recognize the contributions of workers. It may seem bizarre to have a holiday saluting the drones who do the work that makes the economy go, but that was Labor Day's origin.

The holiday began in 1882 in New York City at the behest of the Central Labor Union. Throughout much of the Twentieth Century, Labor Day featured parades, union rallies, and rousing speeches by labor leaders. Those days are long gone; only 12.5% of American workers are unionized, and many Americans take a dim view of the labor movement.

So what are people doing the first Monday in September, instead of attending an AFL-CIO Labor Day Picnic? Likely, they're shopping, or working.

A few years ago I found myself in a Target at 8:15 A.M. on Labor Day. I shouldn't be here, I thought, as I roamed the aisles. And you, Target, shouldn't be open. Still, there both of us were. Me with my batteries and plastic storage bins, the checker with her scanner. Couldn't these purchases have waited until the next day? Of course they could have, but if the big box is open, then we consumers, like cats, will peer in.

Nobody is forced to shop on Labor Day, nor are stores mandated to open on the holiday. But you won't see Mattress King close of its own volition on Labor Day; it's too scared it will lose out to the competition. The result is that most everything in the retail sector is open Labor Day, and the idea of a Labor Day holiday for retail workers is a fiction.

According to free market logic, if Mattress King wants to open on Labor Day, and that's when Mattress Consumer wants to shop, then everybody's happy, maybe even the workers earning holiday pay. Who's the government, or anyone else, to say that there should be no traffic in mattresses on Labor Day?

Very true, and were there a law prohibiting Labor Day commerce, some wouldn't be happy. But there is a larger and less easily specified loss when every day, except perhaps Christmas and Thanksgiving, is a shopping day. We lose the ability to disengage, even for a day, from the consumption cycle. Moreover, the expansion of shopping and work into weekends and holidays does not ebb and flow, it just flows – once the retail parameters are expanded, there's no going back.

At one time Sunday shopping was prohibited in Rhode Island, but now Sunday is much like any other shopping day, except for shorter hours in some cases. This practice will probably soon change so that Rhode Island can be brought in line with Connecticut and Massachusetts. The state of Rhode Island and the big merchants are keenly aware that they must keep up with their

Southern New England counterparts, otherwise retail sales and tax revenues will be lost. When Massachusetts changed its law in 2003 regarding Sunday alcohol sales, Rhode Island quickly followed suit. It had to, otherwise Ocean State liquor stores would be put at a disadvantage. The only problem is that liquor stores are often family businesses – Sunday was the one day everyone was off. But no more.

The freedom to shop on a holiday gives the individual more choices, but it's hard to see if people in the larger sense are any more free. There's a freedom in not having to go to work on a holiday, as well as not being in consumption mode for a change. There's a reason stores are closed on Christmas Day, and religion is only part of it. Almost everyone, regardless of faith, recognizes that enough is enough, a day off all around is a good thing. When retail hours are continually expanded, and holiday sales permitted, the underlying assumption is it's because that's what the citizenry wants. At the same time, however, it's almost become a mantra that everyone's too busy and we need more down time. Strangely, the fact that people *are* so busy has become the rationale to expand shopping ever further, when in fact it might be part of the problem.

It doesn't have to be so. In Nova Scotia, voters in a 2003 referendum actually decided to retain their province's ban on Sunday shopping. I don't know how Rhode Islanders would vote if given a similar choice, but it's no less worthy a question to put to them than whether they want a casino. No doubt, the casino, if approved, will be another place, in addition to the mall, that will be open on Labor Day.

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