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Publication Date

2021-06-27

Peer reviewed



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To cite this article: Dean Mathiowetz (2016): "Meditation is Good for Nothing:" Leisure as a Democratic Practice, New Political Science, DOI: [10.1080/07393148.2016.1153193](https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2016.1153193)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2016.1153193>



Published online: 02 Mar 2016.



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“Meditation is Good for Nothing:” Leisure as a Democratic Practice

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ABSTRACT

Does meditation bring political benefits in the sense of strengthening citizenship or democracy? Taking the Zen phrase “meditation doesn’t work—it’s good for nothing” as my point of departure, and reading Aristotle’s discussion of leisure in relation to citizenship, I argue that meditation can foster significant dimensions of democratic citizenship. This argument focuses particularly on the avowedly anti-instrumental aspect of mindfulness meditation. The connection between meditation and leisure demands a shift in our understanding of leisure, away from relaxation available to the privileged few and toward practices that are open-ended, non-instrumental, and, like democracy and citizenship, due to all. Finally, meditation offers an example of how to appropriate and inhabit excess in ways that support egalitarian citizenship. Meditation needs to be of “no benefit” in order to foster citizenship in these ways.

Introduction

The late resurgence of popular interest in mindfulness raises for some political theorists—including those included in this *New Political Science* symposium—the question of what good (or ill) mindfulness may pose for politics. My thinking about this question takes as its point of departure the Zen teaching that “meditation is good for nothing.” I argue that by virtue of this good-for-nothingness, meditation can support practices of citizenship. The perspective that I develop in this essay illuminates how some mindfulness practices may support replacement of dominant “means-ends” rationality, not with another form of rationality (for example, deliberative or communicative), but instead, as Chantal Mouffe has described, as part of an “ensemble of practices that make possible the creation of democratic citizens.”¹ I argue that meditation can be a potent part of this ensemble by counteracting the instrumentalization of human activity and relationships. Considering the relationship of meditation to citizenship demands a shift in our understanding of leisure, away from relaxation available to the privileged few and toward practices that are open-ended, non-instrumental, and, like democracy and citizenship, due to all. Meditation offers an example of how to appropriate

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¹Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2005), p. 95.

and inhabit excess in ways that support egalitarian citizenship. It fosters an orientation to time that renders it a democratic resource and strengthens capacities that foster the deliberation of justice. Paradoxically, meditation needs to be of “no benefit” in order to foster citizenship in these ways.

I begin my engagement with the role of leisure in citizenship and politics with a discussion of the recent celebrations of mindfulness in the West, drawing upon Zen traditions of meditation as they have been adapted in the West in the last half-century. I touch briefly on political critiques of modernity offered by Georges Bataille and Michel Foucault, as a way of beginning to think politically about the specifically non-gaining aspects of meditation practice, expressed in the Zen school as its paradoxical good-for-nothingness. My elaboration of this argument draws support from an intersecting and important line of thinking in the history of political thought: Aristotle’s discussion of leisure (*scholē*). After justifying my turn to Aristotle and discussing how I think alongside some significant objections to his account of politics (particularly its hierarchical and exclusionary aspects), I examine the role that leisure has played in his thinking. He too sought to attenuate the instrumentalization of activity, but emphasized as well how leisure, though an end in itself, fosters capacities for political engagement—and crucially so, in that educating citizens to be at leisure becomes the primary practice for supporting citizenship. In place of Aristotle’s example of music enjoyment and performance as exemplifying leisure practice, I turn to good-for-nothing meditation as an apt practice for our time that, when viewed as a form of “democratic leisure,” offers a potent resource for citizenship.

“Citizenship” and “democracy” are fraught signifiers upon which to hang aspirations of political freedom today. Citizenship is typically defined in modern terms as state-recognized membership in the political community, and as conferring therewith a range of privileges, rights, and duties.² However, this familiar liberal and legalistic notion of citizenship is troubling, in that it appears at once to be both a tool of disenfranchisement and exclusion (of its non-citizen others), and it is troubled, in that it depends upon an entity (the nation state) whose salience and stability are threatened by global flows of human bodies and transnational capital.³ In the light of these problems, political theorists have turned beyond the state to articulate cosmopolitan conceptions of citizenship, or to leaven citizenship in relation to multiculturalism or “differentiated universalisms.”⁴ Others have developed a view of citizenship linked less to legal or cultural ties and focused more on forms of participation in matters of common concern, sometimes called “republican citizenship.”⁵ Some scholars work through a blending of types: Linda Bosniak has developed a conception that she calls “alien citizenship,” and thus explored the ways that, for example, migrant women’s community networks illustrate this form of citizenship.⁶ Their citizen activity both evinces their involvement and participation in addressing shared concerns, while bringing to light the state powers and gaps therein that form and deform these women’s activities.

²Thomas Humphrey Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1950), pp. 28–29.

³Linda Bosniak, *The Citizen and the Alien: Dilemmas of Contemporary Membership* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁴Andrew Linklater, “Cosmopolitan Citizenship,” *Citizenship Studies* 2:1 (1998), pp. 23–41; Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford UK: Clarendon Press, 1995); Ruth Lister, “Citizenship: Towards a Feminist Synthesis,” *Feminist Review* 57 (1997), pp. 28–48.

⁵Adrian Oldfield, *Citizenship and Community: Civic Republicanism and the Modern World* (London: Routledge, 1990).

⁶Linda Bosniak, *The Citizen and the Alien*. See also Steven Robins, Andrea Cornwall, Bettina von Lieres, “Rethinking ‘Citizenship’ in the Postcolony,” *Third World Quarterly*, 29:6 (2008), pp. 1069–1086.

My own invocation of citizenship in this article—and especially of the way that I understand mindfulness meditation to be supportive of it—is close to the republican view, but perhaps better identified as a democratic one that draws its compass points from the republican and alien conceptions sketched above. Mary Dietz describes democratic citizenship as

a valuable alternative conception of politics that is historically concrete ... [and that] takes politics to be the collective and participatory engagement of citizens in the determination of the affairs of their community. The community may be the neighborhood, the city, the state, the region, or the nation itself. What counts is that all matters relating to the community are undertaken as “the people’s affair.”⁷

Dietz cites republican sources for her view, and her appropriation of them in the context of feminist theory provides a counterpoint to republicanism’s historically exclusionary and elitist connections. Her work also draws upon and works through the writings of Hannah Arendt, whose own perspectives were broadly informed by readings of Aristotle.⁸ The conception of democracy implicit in the last line of Dietz’s words above, and which informs my conception of democratic possibility in meditation, may be further illustrated with reference to Sheldon Wolin’s conception of fugitive democracy, according to which ordinary people “become political beings through the self-discovery of common concerns and of modes of action for realizing them.”⁹ Hanna Pitkin notes that such a conception of democracy is “an idea or an ideal realized more or less well in various circumstances, conditions, and institutional arrangements.”¹⁰ Democracy thus involves not only its most agonistic moments, in which “the *demos* is activated and takes shape in the midst of revolt, resistance, or revolution, ... contest[ing] established boundaries, institutions, and practices.”¹¹ For Pitkin, it also entails knowing the ways that one is connected to others, and taking responsibility for the consequences of those connections; of shifting one’s perspective to encompass that of a diverse and ever-shifting “we,” and *in so doing*, joining in political action.¹²

I seek to draw out meditation’s potential for such a conception of democratic citizenship by way of an exploration of the concept of leisure in the writings of Aristotle. Perhaps the most ancient republican theorist Aristotle is hardly an egalitarian thinker, let alone a feminist or fugitive democrat. Even so, aspects of his thinking draw a rich picture of citizen participation that undergirds democratic citizenship through sharing in decisions about and responsibility for the city, while ruling and being ruled in turn.¹³ *The Politics* also bonds this picture of citizenship to practices of leisure.¹⁴ This connection makes Aristotle an appropriate and compelling thinker with whom to explore the potential of mindfulness practices for democratic citizenship today. Working with this connection in the context of Aristotle’s work also means keeping closely in mind the potential of *any* practice to become a site of subordination and exclusion—leisure included.

⁷Mary Dietz, “Context is All: Feminism and Theories of Citizenship,” *Daedalus* 116:4 (1987), p. 14.

⁸Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

⁹Sheldon Wolin, “Fugitive Democracy,” *Constellations* 1:1 (1994), p. 11.

¹⁰Hanna Pitkin, “Representation and Democracy: Uneasy Alliance,” *Scandinavian Political Studies* 27:3 (2004), p. 337.

¹¹Wayne Gabardi, “Contemporary Models of Democracy,” *Polity* 33:4 (2001), pp. 547–568.

¹²Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, “Justice: On Relating Public and Private,” *Political Theory* 9:3 (1981), p. 349.

¹³Aristotle, *Politics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2014), pp. 1275b18–20 – 1277b15–17. For a thorough account of Aristotelian citizenship congruent with the “democratic” picture of citizenship, see Susan D. Collins, *Aristotle and the Rediscovery of Citizenship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹⁴Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk. 1 Ch. 8. I return to and elaborate this connection later in this article.

In order to begin my account of contemporary mindfulness meditation practice as a kind of democratic citizen engagement, I wish to define leisure as *the non-productive having of time*. In other words, I wish to begin by foregrounding leisure as a non-instrumental relationship to time. This definition of leisure will turn out to be consonant with Aristotle's, as I will explore it later in this essay. Is such a relationship to time a privilege or a luxury? In the terms of the argument as I am developing it here, the answer is No. I wish to consider leisure in part through its distinction from luxury, however these terms may overlap in everyday usage. Luxury's implications of hierarchy and exclusion set it at odds with leisure; luxury represents ways that excess time is not had, but rather *used* in the service of hierarchy. Here, the non-productive *having* of time is diverted (or perverted, as Georges Bataille would have it) into the non-productive *use* of time.¹⁵ In this way, leisure and luxury alike direct our attention to the question of personal and social excess, while their difference invites us to consider varying ways this excess relates to the social stratification that may be corrosive of democracy.

Mindfulness Meditation: Beneficial, or Good for Nothing?

Meditation has a long and wide-ranging history in "Western" cultures, reaching from the Greeks, through Augustine, Ignatius of Loyola, John Donne, René Descartes, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and others. From the late nineteenth century to today, Westerners have turned more frequently, in often eclectic and ahistorical ways, to Asian sources for inspiration and guidance—so much so, that meditation is today generally seen as an import to the West.¹⁶ In the past forty years, meditation practices from Asia began to have wide-ranging influence on psychotherapeutic practices, resulting (for example) in the development of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy and the dissemination of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) within the mainstream of employee "wellness" programmes and health care delivery in the United States. These latter phenomena reveal the extent to which mindfulness practices brought from Asia to the West have been "secularized," in the sense of being ostensibly detached from their religious, spiritual, or wisdom contexts. John Kabat-Zinn, the developer of MBSR in the 1970s, gave the term "mindfulness" its most salient modern definition, one that reflects this secularization: "The awareness that arises through paying attention on purpose in the present moment, and non-judgmentally."¹⁷ A broad field of MBSR research for deployment in health care settings and uptake in corporate wellness programme has continued to build on Kabat-Zinn's seminal work in this area.¹⁸

If the typical Western practitioner of meditation is not called to the sacred or the religious, or to traditional Buddhist beliefs and practices, to what purposes is she called? Secular proponents of mindfulness meditation promote the practices based on its mundane benefits.

¹⁵ Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy* (New York: Zone Books, 1988).

¹⁶ Brian Stock, "Minds, Bodies, Readers: Healing, Meditation, and the History of Reading," *New Literary History* 37:3 (2006), pp. 489–501. For a brief discussion of the Zen meditation technique that serves as my example in this article, available online at: <<http://www.zenmind.org/basics.html>>.

¹⁷ John Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life* (New York: Hyperion, 1994), p. 4. Meditation is a mindfulness practice in the sense that it enlarges and strengthens the capacity to be mindful in the course of everyday experience, just as playing scales enlarges a musician's virtuosity in the course of music performance.

¹⁸ See, for examples, John Kabat-Zinn, Leslie Lipworth, Robert Burney, "The Clinical Use of Mindfulness Meditation for the Self-Regulation of Chronic Pain," *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 8 (1985), pp. 163–190; Shamini Jain, Shauna L Shapiro, Summer Swanick, Scott C. Roesch, Paul J. Mills, Iris Bell, Gary E. R. Schwartz, "A Randomized Controlled Trial of Mindfulness Meditation versus Relaxation Training: Effects on Distress, Positive States of Mind, Rumination, and Distraction," *Annals of Behavioral Medicine* 33 (2007), pp. 11–21.

They mobilize myriad studies (many with the imprimatur of science) to buttress the practice in these terms.¹⁹ One widely cited 2011 study, for example, reports that “participation in MBSR is associated with changes in grey matter concentration in brain regions involved in learning and memory processes, emotion regulation, self-referential processing, and perspective taking.”²⁰ The latter two effects in particular are *prima facie* supportive of citizenship. Consider them in relation to, for example, part of Pitkin’s way of formulating citizenship, as knowing the ways that one is connected to others, and taking responsibility for the consequences of those connections; of shifting one’s perspective to encompass that of a diverse and ever-shifting “we,” and in so doing, joining in political action.²¹ So, on the basis of scientifically affirmed effects of meditation alone, effects that are widely deemed beneficial, we can see the potential for political benefits—and it would likely be worthwhile to explore those benefits. I shall set aside all of these “benefits” to explore some more unlikely—and more fundamental and significant—attributes of mindfulness practice in relation to the demands of democratic citizenship.

Not all of meditation’s acclaimed benefits are so intuitively political. Indeed, meditation may appear obviously unpolitical, in the sense of having nothing to do with power and shared endeavours, or even anti-political, in the sense that it appears to foster narrow individualism and retreat from public concerns. Advocates construe mindfulness as a kind of relaxation, reflecting and promoting a widespread picture of the practice, particularly amongst non-practitioners. Countless book covers, Web pages, and brochures depict a person (often the silhouette of a person) sitting cross-legged against a backdrop that suggests a vacation. Such approaches to promoting mindfulness and meditation as a beneficial kind of relaxation are not in themselves new, but in the last decade or so, there has been a surge in attention to these studies and these practices in mainstream media. Consider, for example, a recent technology review in *The New York Times*.²² The reviewer describes three meditation apps, two of which are relevant here: Calm and Headspace. The reviewer frames both of these apps as being about relaxation. They give users choices about their preferred music, “like gentle waves, rain in a forest or relaxing music,” and choices amongst sessions aimed “to increase confidence, creativity, and other positive traits, in addition to calmness.” Headspace, which the reviewer found particularly “relaxing and rewarding to use,” is meant to inspire “mindfulness habits;” the reviewer notes that “you even get rewards for sticking to your habits, in the form of cute little animations.” These apps and this review unremarkably illustrate the baseline of mindfulness and meditation culture amongst privileged consumers in the Global North.

At this baseline, meditation appears as a timely strategy to further that most modern (and all-too-American) of goals: self-improvement. The promise of meditation to “increase confidence, creativity, and other positive traits” draws the practice, even when depicted as relaxation, into being a kind of preparation or groundwork for productivity. Thus, we read of Wall Street hedge fund managers and Davos-going elites declaiming the ways that

¹⁹Paul Grossman, Ludger Niemann, Stefan Schmidt, Harald Walach, “Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction and Health Benefits: a Meta-analysis,” *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* 57 (2004), pp. 35–43.

²⁰Britta K Hölzel et al., “How Does Mindfulness Meditation Work? Proposing Mechanisms of Action From a Conceptual and Neural Perspective,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 6:6 (2011), pp. 537–59.

²¹Hanna Pitkin, “Justice,” p. 349.

²²Kit Eaton, “Apps for Meditation and Calming on iPhone and Android,” *The New York Times*, February 25, 2015, sec. Business.

meditation sharpens their competitive edge.²³ At each level—from the smartphone app, to the corporate mindfulness seminar and the lifestyles of the rich and famous—privileged denizens of the Global North are assured that meditation is time well invested in accumulation or well spent on self-improvement. To put the same point in Foucauldian terms, at the very moment that a subject appears to be most resistant from the perspective of how we are enjoined to the virtue of “being busy,” the subject proves her- or himself as docile to techniques of self-management, particularly the imperative to maximize value.²⁴

A core perspective on meditation within several traditions of Buddhism contrasts sharply with the “benefits of meditation” approach. Instead, these traditions emphasize a practice of mindfulness as non-instrumental. A *koan*-like phrase often shared in the American Zen tradition insists that “meditation is good for nothing.” Although most often attributed to Kodo Sawaki Roshi, who gave it this particular formulation in the 1970s, the idea has ancient precedents in dharma literatures, such as the *Heart Sutra*, an ancient text whose elaboration of the Buddhist concept of *shunyata*, or nothingness, is central to most Buddhist practice.²⁵ North American Zen practitioners frequently join Sawaki’s deliberately paradoxical idea that “meditation is good for nothing” with the assertion that “meditation doesn’t work” and that “no one should do it.” These remarks are most likely to arise in discussions where commentators begin (re)citing benefits of the practice or the duty to practice. The phrase is a reminder to drop the tendency to turn practice into a means for something else or into a duty.

Part of the paradox of “meditation doesn’t work, it’s good for nothing” is not in fact that therefore one should avoid the practice. To the contrary, the paradox is precisely that one truly meditates *when* the practice is not working and is good for nothing. That is, the specifically non-instrumental character of meditation is an indispensable feature of the practice. Meditating for the sake of something is not meditation—it is something else, like work. “Meditation is good for nothing” touches on an essential paradox of mindfulness practice: in order for the practice to be fruitful, it must be pursued as an end in itself, and not for the sake of another good.

Good-for-nothing meditation is counterintuitive and sometimes vexing for observers and practitioners alike. They are apt to ask (and have doubtless asked each other, countless times): “are you *really* doing it for nothing? Don’t you *really* meditate because you think it makes your life better?” The candid answer to this question is, for most practitioners much of the time, “yes.” But “meditation is good for nothing” is not actually about what brings one to the practice. People sit because they hope to address suffering—their own, and perhaps that of others. It is a central Buddhist teaching that people suffer, and that something *can* be done about it. “Meditation is good for nothing” is put to work while meditating—“sitting quietly, doing nothing.”²⁶ Practitioners may seek meditation for the sake of benefit, but the practice itself is one of relinquishing, over and over again, attachments—to patterns of thinking, to emotional habits, *and* to benefits. Emphasizing the importance of relinquishing the latter, a

²³Michelle Goldberg, “The Long Marriage of Mindfulness and Money,” *The New Yorker*, April 18, 2015; Kazuaki Tanahashi and Roshi Joan Halifax, *The Heart Sutra: A Comprehensive Guide to the Classic of Mahayana Buddhism* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2016).

²⁴Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978–1979* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008); Lois McNay, “Self as Enterprise: Dilemmas of Control and Resistance in The Birth of Politics,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 26:6 (2009), pp. 55–77.

²⁵Kosho Uchiyama and Shohaku Okumura, eds., *The Zen Teaching of Homeless Kodo* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2015); Tanahashi and Halifax, *The Heart Sutra*, 2016.

²⁶Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen* (New York: Vintage, 1999), p. 134, citing an ancient *Zenrin* poem.

typical short ceremony following meditation in a Buddhist practice centre is a dedication of any merit inadvertently accrued during meditation to the liberation of all beings. As Stephen Bachelor describes the Buddhist teaching behind these practices, suffering is caused not only or even principally by lacking what is good, but also (and especially) by an attachment to not-lacking what is good. Similarly, suffering is caused not only by the existence of a hindrance, but also (and again, in a special way) by the desire for the hindrance to go away.²⁷ In other words, a significant part of human suffering arises from attachment to the cessation of the hindrance and the realization of a benefit. Easing human suffering is, in this way, paradoxically facilitated by way of a practice that cannot be pursued instrumentally to that end: a practice that is immediately (if not ultimately) “good for nothing.”

Leisure and Citizenship in Aristotle

The complexities of practice in relation to Buddhism’s soteriological aims continue to be richly explored in other literatures, so let us turn without delay to the political questions raised at the beginning of this article. If meditation does not work and is good for nothing, what might it have to do with politics? I offer an answer to this question by drawing on the connection between meditation and leisure. This, of course, seems like the most unlikely place to find its political potential, because leisure seems to us practically the opposite of what is political: encountering conflict and staying with contestation as we partake in conjoined action to address shared problems and meet shared aspirations. In order to present the paradoxical idea of a good-for-nothing practice that is nonetheless good for citizenship, I have spoken and will continue to speak of meditation as *fostering* citizenship. I have chosen this term for its sense of the nurturing and bringing up of something by something else that is not related to it by blood or legal ties—or, in this case, logical or causal necessity.

To begin, then, staying focused on the good-for-nothing core of meditation is a resource to confront the late modern demand that subjects utilize and maximize their time and efforts. It supports a shift in our thinking of leisure, away from the sensually comforting scene of relaxation and toward practices that are, perhaps like meditation, open-ended, non-instrumental, uncomfortable, and difficult. It also requires a shift in our thinking from leisure as a privilege for the few to leisure as something due to all. With this, I now turn to Aristotle, whose political and ethical writings explore the political potential of leisure, and whose ethical and political thinking about human capacities and their development is a useful resource for theorizing democratic possibility today.

But why Aristotle? Some of political theory’s most recent engagements with leisure have explored the potential in this concept by way of Marxist feminism; under present-day conditions, it stands to reason that looking to the work of capitalism’s foremost critic offers multiple ways to thinking about the potential in leisure as a site not only of commodification and value extraction, but also of freedom and emancipatory practice. Recent books by Kathi Weeks and Nichole Shippen exemplify these efforts.²⁸ Weeks’s work is aimed at the development of an anti-work politics; Shippen’s seeks to “decolonize time” by developing a politics of time that

²⁷Stephen Bachelor, *Buddhism Without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), p. 48.

²⁸Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Nichole Shippen, *Decolonizing Time: Work, Leisure, and Freedom* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

privileges the qualitative aspects of the good life including leisure.²⁹ For Shippen, this entails “develop[ing] a collective or political consciousness about time ... that seeks to resist, challenge, or transform the colonization of time.”³⁰ At stake in this effort, she says, is “autonomy and creating the conditions that lead to its reflexivity.”³¹ Aristotle plays an important role in Shippen’s account, because he conceptualizes freedom (including citizenship) in relation to work and necessity in ways that she finds useful, and that Karl Marx extends and transforms with a historical analysis of the conditions of capitalism.

Shippen’s account is important for thinking about the shape that political organizing and policy must take to undo important aspects of capitalism’s deep harm. In following Marx’s development of Aristotle’s insights about leisure, necessity, and freedom, however, an important part of Aristotle’s thinking about leisure and freedom drop away from her account—in particular, the relevance of leisure to the realization of autonomy, alongside the active life of the citizen today. This contribution becomes invisible to Shippen because, with her focus on the *Ethics*, she attributes to Aristotle an “ontological conception of humans as contemplative, rather than laboring beings.”³² Staging the contrast between Aristotle and Marx in this way, contemplation is thoroughly displaced by Marx’s work upon Aristotle’s distinction between necessity and freedom. In *The Politics*, however, Aristotle draws the distinction between humans and *other* political animals on the basis that they commit their voices to the shared search for justice.³³ Foregrounding this aspect of human distinctiveness, a number of differences emerge between Shippen’s account and mine when it comes to conceptualizing not only the significance of leisure to politics, but also the image of the citizen that fosters and is fostered by appropriate practices of leisure.

Foremost amongst these differences will be my image of the citizen not only, as Shippen emphasizes, as one who rules and is ruled, but more fundamentally as one who shares in deliberation (*kritik*) and responsibility.³⁴ Susan Bickford has demonstrated that, for Aristotle, deliberation both signals and addresses deep disagreement and conflict in the political world, and therefore demands careful attending-to on the part of citizens.³⁵ In this context, a citizen deliberates and takes responsibility for many things, especially questions of justice. The “ruling and being ruled” dimension of citizenship cited by Shippen follows not from “being relieved of necessary sorts of work,” but rather from participation in *kritik*. Here, I suggest, we come to understand contemplation (from *The Ethics*) as neither prior nor consequent to, but perhaps *alongside* the practices of citizenship that necessarily entail deliberation about justice. The contribution to citizenship that I argue is offered by meditation is similar, in that it fosters non-instrumental having of time that can disrupt entrenched and even foreclosed images of necessity confronting the polity.

As I have noted at several points above, Aristotle’s discussions of leisure and freedom appear to be entwined with a sweeping and deeply troubling array of exclusions and

²⁹Shippen, *Decolonizing Time*, p. 4.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 7.

³¹*Ibid.*

³²Shippen, *Decolonizing Time*, pp. 25, 36–37.

³³Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2012), 1253a.

³⁴“The citizen in an unqualified sense is defined by no other thing so much as by partaking in decision [*kritik*] and office.” “Ruling and being ruled” is the virtue of the citizen. Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1275b19 – 1277a27–28.

³⁵Susan Bickford, “Beyond Friendship: Aristotle on Conflict, Deliberation, and Attention,” *The Journal of Politics* 58:2 (1996), pp. 398–421.

subordinations: children, foreigners, women, slaves. However, it is a mistake to position Aristotle as accepting the exclusive dimensions of Greek life in his time, and building his conception of citizenship upon them.³⁶ A wide and deep literature has irrevocably destabilized this image of Aristotle's thinking, demonstrating him to be construing the exclusion of these figures from citizenship in ways that cut deeply against existing Athenian practices, and furthermore in ways that should open to citizen deliberation the question of justice in relation to these exclusions from citizenship.³⁷ So, for example, such interpretations attend closely to Aristotle's classing women as "free persons" and his comment that the relation of husband and wife is a "political" one. They explore how such remarks open even apparently naturalized questions of gender and Aristotle's own apparent misogyny to political deliberation. With this sort of example in mind, working with Aristotle's thought becomes itself a practice of exploring exclusions and subordinations that may seem natural or are barely perceptible to us today, such as political gerontocracy or anthropocentrism. Aristotle's writings will never meet the modern standard of disavowing exclusions as a precondition for political freedom, but now these exclusions become questions to be deliberated in terms of justice.³⁸ To take another example important to my reading below, consider Aristotle's discussion in Book 7 of *The Politics*, which infamously appears to advocate a colonial project of constructing an ideal city in which naturally slavish Asians will do the work.³⁹ Stephen Salkever has offered a reading of this book as instead Aristotle's damning criticism of a popular, chauvinistic Athenian opinion in his day, criticizing it as logically incoherent and historically forgetful.⁴⁰

Perspectives on Aristotle such as Salkever's and the others that I noted above present the Aristotelian political theorist as one who withholds from telling citizens how their world should be (for example, as just), instead offering citizens conceptual tools and provocations for their deliberation (for example, about justice). Although it is not his aim, Salkever's work also shifts our understanding of how *The Politics* construes the relationship of politics and leisure, so that we understand it in a mutual, rather than linear causal relation. Instead of Aristotelian leisure seeming to be made possible by the realization of the colonial project of enslavement, in which case, citizenship is for the attainment of leisure, we can now understand Aristotle's critical engagement with Athenians' colonial desires as clearing the ground for a leisure as an alternative (and virtuous) path toward the good life of citizenship.

Marxist analyses of capitalism are essential to thinking and acting systematically and strategically toward the recovery of leisure time in the present day, but they are apt to go too far in directing our understanding of the challenges to the structural level, while avoiding or assuming away the questions of consciousness and desire for transformation at more intimate levels.⁴¹ Ken Jones has particularly examined the difficulty that Western sociological

³⁶Shippen's interpretation reflects this too-quick foreclosure. See Shippen, *Decolonizing Time*, pp. 8, 11, 24–26, 40, and *passim*.

³⁷See, for examples: Thomas K. Lindsay, "Was Aristotle Racist, Sexist, and Anti-Democratic?" *The Review of Politics* 56:1 (Winter 1994), pp. 127–151; Jill Frank, "Citizens, Slaves, and Foreigners: Aristotle on Human Nature," *American Political Science Review* 98:1 (2004), pp. 91–104; Dana J. Stauffer, "Aristotle's Account of the Subjection of Women," *The Journal of Politics* 70:4 (2008), pp. 929–941; Harold L. Levy, "Does Aristotle Exclude Women from Politics?" *The Review of Politics* 52:3 (1990), pp. 397–416.

³⁸See, for example, Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

³⁹"Asians" here refers to the inhabitants of present-day Turkey. The classic reading of Aristotle as endorsing such a project of colonial enslavement is Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1994).

⁴⁰Stephen Salkever, "Whose Prayer? The Best Regime of Book 7 and the Lessons of Aristotle's Politics," *Political Theory* 35:1 (2007), pp. 29–46.

⁴¹Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

theory has had in handling the importance of consciousness and desire, calling the view that a structural transformation solves everything the “social fallacy.”⁴² Consonant with the re-emergence of ethics in recent critical theory, the works of Aristotle, Michel Foucault, and others, including Buddhist thought, can help us grasp the ethical practices—capacitation, habituation, self-care, and so on—that play necessary supporting roles to social transformation. So too we may explore myriad practices already in use for their powers of ethical cultivation, particularly as they contribute to resistance and transformation. This has been the strategy of the Cultural Studies movement at least since the groundbreaking interventions of Stuart Hall.⁴³ It is in the spirit of such interventions that I wish to situate mindfulness, especially in the Zen meditation practice I have described above, as a practice whose good-for-nothingness nonetheless supports practices of collective liberation today.

With all of this justification out of the way, what does Aristotle have to say about leisure, and what can that tell us about the citizen potential of meditation? A complete account of Aristotle’s thinking about leisure is beyond the scope of this essay.⁴⁴ Instead, and like Shippen, I will draw out one of its most important features: non-instrumentality. Leisure, to be leisure, must be undertaken for its own sake, not the sake of anything else.⁴⁵ This non-instrumentality is implied by Aristotle’s way of thinking about leisure in relation to the contrast between necessity and freedom; exploring the kinds of action characteristic of each is a thread that runs through *The Politics*. This analysis structures his discussion of slavery and, importantly, informs his linking not only slavery, but also *mastery* to necessity, by way of the master–slave relationship.⁴⁶ Thus, he excludes masters from leisure *and* citizenship.⁴⁷ It is also important to note that, as Jill Frank has demonstrated, Aristotle destabilizes (rather than depends upon) existing Athenian discourses about “slave nature,” opening the possibility that slave nature is revealed primarily by a refusal to freely deliberate, in other words, a refusal to relinquish necessity-thinking, when given the opportunity to do so.⁴⁸ This way of reading Aristotle has important implications for our understanding of freedom, because it significantly reorients our picture of slavery (and mastery) to one that emphasizes not nature but instead the refusal to choose freedom, in such forms of deliberation (*kritik*) and leisure, when it is available.⁴⁹ Of course, this way of reading still appears objectionably incompatible with democratic values so long as we imagine or experience leisure itself as simply unavailable to many or any people. I will return to this objection below. For now, I would note that the association of “leisure” and privilege in modern idioms—where it can connote being of independent means, or freedom from responsibilities—is part of what misguides us into expecting elitism from Aristotle on this topic. It is worth noting at the start that his first use of the term *scholē*

⁴²Ken Jones, *The New Social Face of Buddhism: An Alternative Sociological Perspective* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2003), pp. 39–41. Shippen is aware of the need for a transformation in personal consciousness, and turns to György Lukács to develop a perspective on time that she argues speaks to that need. See Shippen, *Decolonizing Time*, Ch. 3.

⁴³See, for example, Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies,” *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 277–294, as well as Robins et. al., “Rethinking Citizenship in the Postcolony,” *Third World Quarterly*, 2008.

⁴⁴For highly detailed explications of Aristotle’s concept of leisure, see Joseph Owens, “Aristotle on Leisure,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 11:4 (1981), pp. 713–723.

⁴⁵Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1777b1–2.

⁴⁶Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1255b31–36.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 1252a7–9 – 1255b17–19. Mastery is an occupation; see below.

⁴⁸Jill Frank, “Citizens, Slaves, and Foreigners,” *American Political Science Review*; Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1255a3–1255b19.

⁴⁹Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1333a42–1333b2.

in *The Politics* refers to a lowly shepherd.⁵⁰ Leisure (*scholē*), for Aristotle, is the practice of non-instrumentality itself, and it is something that even a shepherd can have.

Non-instrumentality is entailed by leisure's principle contrasts, namely business or occupation (*ascholia*) and amusement (*paidia*). In *The Politics*, Aristotle explores the danger when occupation shifts from household management, which provides things necessary for leisure, to money-making, which provides things for the sake of accumulation itself. In the latter case, need becomes boundless and leisure is thus foreclosed.⁵¹ Thus in *The Politics*, Aristotle writes that "occupation [is properly] for the sake of leisure," and in the *Ethics* that "happiness is thought to reside in leisure from business; for we busy ourselves in order to have leisure."⁵² The contrast between being busy and being at leisure may usually be intuitively evident to us, but the contrast between amusement and leisure is perhaps trickier. Amusement, according to Aristotle, may entail relaxation and many fine pleasures—and it does so for the sake of preparing us to work.⁵³ Needless to say, this means that amusement plays an important role in supporting leisure, because we do need recreation in order to be able to do our business—but collapsing leisure into amusement leaves humans in a desperate state of ever resting only for the sake of working again. Indeed, this seems to be the case for many people today, and it may be viewed as a poverty of leisure as well as a condition of exploitation, as Marx perceptively analysed with his conception of socially necessary labour time.⁵⁴

In the *Ethics*, Aristotle explores the apotheosis of leisure in contemplation—a practice that much resembles good-for-nothing meditation. "Reflective activity," he says, "would seem to be the only kind loved because of itself; for nothing accrues from it besides the act of reflecting, whereas from practical projects we get something."⁵⁵ While the rest of the *Ethics* Book X Chapter 7 explores the virtues of contemplation, it quickly turns to noting that contemplation is solitary, and thus "higher than the human plane;" when humans engage in pure contemplation, therefore, they do so not insofar as they are human, but rather insofar as they are divine.⁵⁶ Aristotle then turns to *human* happiness, and the discussion flows directly to the laws, to citizenship, and thus to the themes of *The Politics*—including the practices that support both divine and human freedom from necessity in leisure.⁵⁷ In that text, we encounter Aristotle's exploration of the relationship of leisure to political life, and in particular to democratic citizenship.

Having criticized many of Athenians' ideas about how to achieve an ideal city in *The Politics* Book 7, Aristotle turns instead to education (*paideia*) as the means for fostering the good of the city, and thereby of the people in it.⁵⁸ Leisure, for Aristotle, is *the* primary objective of education—an idea that lives on in our association of schooling and liberal (free) arts. Aristotle's situating leisure's development in the public educational setting of *paideia*, and the responsibility of the legislator to foster this setting, already indicates that, for him,

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 1256a31.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 1256a1–1258a20.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 1333a35; Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1177b4–6.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 1176b34–1177a1.

⁵⁴Karl Marx, *Wage Labor and Capital* (Mountain View: New York Labor Press, 2000) p. 10.

⁵⁵Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1177b1–3.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 1177b27–28. This point weighs heavily against Shippen's claim that Aristotle works with "an ontological conception of humans as contemplative beings" (Shippen, *Decolonizing Time*, p. 24), and supports my move to think of Aristotle's account of leisure *alongside*, rather than as superseded by, Marx's intervention.

⁵⁷Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1179b35–1181b25.

⁵⁸Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1333b3–5, 1252a1–7.

leisure is a shared, collective, and public endeavour. But while education in favour of leisure appears to be an aim of legislation, and its discussion at the end of *The Politics* may lead to the impression that leisure is what politics is *for*, Aristotle pauses to note that educating people to be capable of leisure “is the beginning point of everything.”⁵⁹ Congruent with the point I extrapolated from Salkever’s work above, this remark helps us to see the mutual, rather than causal relation between citizenship and leisure, and thus understand how leisure is neither a result, nor precondition, but rather a *condition* of citizenship.⁶⁰ It is the environment in which citizenship can happen. In much the same way, good sailing depends on fair weather, but the weather is never literally made for sailing, nor does one sail for the sake of the wind.

Examining the various kinds of education most suitable for developing the students’ capacities for leisure, Aristotle settles on music. This is in part because, according to Aristotle, different harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic styles excite different ethical states in listeners. One harmony will make listeners inspired; another, steadfast; still another, settled, and so on.⁶¹ The analogue to these ethical states in my discussion of meditation above may be the “benefits” of meditation, such as perspective-taking and compassion, benefits which, as noted earlier, I have set aside. Aristotle is also interested in music education because, unlike other educational subjects (he mentions gymnastics, letters, and drawing), music was originally chosen “because nature itself seeks . . . to be capable of being at leisure in a noble fashion.”⁶² This is what leads Aristotle to study the musical modes I mentioned above, but I wish to pursue a different possibility. If, as I have already suggested, we think of leisure as a kind of environment in which practices of citizenship can flourish, we may think of music (in Aristotle’s account) as the kind of practical training that attunes people to such an environment. Surely music offers rich possibilities for linking leisure and citizenship today; going forward, however, I wish to explore good-for-nothing meditation as a kind of practical training that similarly fosters citizenship in the present-day.

Democratic Leisure

As I discussed earlier, the non-instrumental imperative of meditation is intrinsic to its effects—what practitioners sometimes call “the fruits of practice,” and what we (as docile subjects) are ever prone to thinking of as its “benefits.” Similarly, a practice of leisure, in order to escape the perversions or diversions Bataille and others warn of, needs to have non-instrumentality (good-for-nothingness) at its centre. Meditation offers a practice that directly confronts and can habituate a person against the ever-encroaching instrumentalization of any practice—the imperative to turn anything extra back toward production, which (whether seen from the perspective of Marx or Bataille) becomes the production of inequality. So too, the affirmation and practice of good-for-nothingness in meditation supports the attenuation of instrumental thinking within citizen activity itself—what we might call “necessity-thinking,” or the reduction of political discussion or process to seeking the best means to a pre-given end. Meditation does not tell practitioners what to do when they engage in citizenship, but it does provide practical experience in letting go of narrowly instrumental demands confronting the complexities of shared action.

⁵⁹Ibid., 1337b32–33.

⁶⁰Ibid., 1255b36–38.

⁶¹Ibid., 1340a40–b14.

⁶²Ibid., 1337b30–32.

Another contribution of good-for-nothing meditation to citizenship, and one that deserves more study than I can devote to it here, is practical experience in handling paradoxical thinking. Like good-for-you, but good-for-nothing meditation, the political world is inherently paradoxical. What I mean is this: political problems and events are as complex and heterogeneous as is the polity and its people. The grounds of political action are frequently ambiguous, and an attitude of ambivalence is often appropriate to them. And yet, to share in decision and take responsibility, citizens ultimately have to take sides and do something. This is itself a paradox, and only an acceptance of this paradoxical situation enables deliberation along the lines that, as I mentioned earlier, Bickford finds in Aristotle—deliberation about justice that nonetheless sustains the diversity and deep conflicts underlying political action.⁶³

Each of these points highlights good-for-nothing meditation's contributions to the kinds of capacities and practices that foster democratic citizenship. A third point touches directly upon ways that, despite the elitist connotations of leisure, meditation is democratic in another sense, that is, available to the participation of the many. Here we must face the challenging topic of time: the inequitable experience of having or not-having it, and the importance of good-for-nothing's non-instrumental relationship to it.

Like most activities, meditation requires time, but in a particular way: it involves removing time from the circulation of values that characterizes modern political economy. Meditation prioritizes appropriating the temporal dimension of our lives, "taking time," for the sake of simply having time. This brings us back to a point I made at the beginning of the article, when I touched upon the difference between the *having* of extra time and the *using* of it (for example, of individuals for status, or of capital for accumulation). Good-for-nothing meditation, I argue, decidedly shifts one's practice from *using* extra time (for example, for benefits) to *having* it (for nothing).

Strictly speaking, everybody has time by the fact of being alive. Yet, people are inequitably related to their time, depending on whether they are in a position to deploy much of it freely, or must give most (or all) of it away. Lacking time is, of course, a structural feature of life in late capitalism—many working poor are compelled to divide all their time between working (inside the home and out) and resting only inadequately and only for the sake of working again. But in another way, "lacking time" is ideational or habitual, as in the widespread compulsion people feel to declare themselves "busy" when asked "how are you?" or to justify their vacations so they can be better workers afterwards. Our resistance to these narratives must include structural changes in or against capitalism, and it must go beyond these changes, entailing practices that reshape habits, including habits of relating to time. Indeed, people changing their habits around time is *a part of* structural transformation—after all, economy is not something "out there," but rather is made up of everyone's everyday actions. Here is where meditation, with its potential viewed through the lens of Aristotle's account of freedom, can cultivate intimate and shared practices of relating non-instrumentally to our activity, beginning by relating non-instrumentally to the condition of all activity, time.

Meditation takes time, which is also perhaps the most common objection to the practice. At a personal level, this objection may be simple avoidance; but it is problematic in a different way as a political critique. Meditation does not require *much* time, and it requires little else, a fact which weights heavily against the idea that meditation is for the privileged. It is true that the American meditation practitioner is disproportionately white, liberal, middle-aged,

⁶³Bickford, "Aristotle on Conflict," *The Journal of Politics*, p. 399.

and upper-middle-class, and that the institutionalized supports for practice in the Global North reflect as much.⁶⁴ But the critique of meditation that begins with the image of a bourgeois manifestation of present-day meditation culture may perform its own work of exclusion. Meditation can last all day, but also for a minute, or the space of a single breath. It becomes good-for-nothing meditation when—for no matter how long—it is done wholeheartedly and for no reason. So, for example, in “Bells of Mindfulness,” Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh suggests the chime of a bell, from its being struck to falling silent, as a length of time for meditation.⁶⁵ With this in mind, the objection that some people have no time (for meditation) reinforces their exclusion by assuming *as* meditation a particular form of the practice that represents one of its classed variations. The image of meditation as relaxation performs similar ideological work. As any practitioner knows, the mind quickly rebels in highly uncomfortable ways, and the rest of the body follows not long after. Both the marketing and the critique of meditation as a luxury obscure and effectively cut off meditation from its democratic dimensions, amongst which is that the practice requires only attributes, time and breath, that each person has by virtue of being alive. Identifying a state of affairs where any person has been deprived of these things (“I can’t breathe!”) speaks to the cruel injustice of the world, not of the practice.⁶⁶

Thus, we may think of meditation as a democratic practice in a double sense. In the first sense, it is a practice that supports capacities for free citizen engagement, understood as (amongst other things) requiring resources for non-instrumental thinking and action, and openness to the perspectives of others and the possibilities of co-action. In a second sense, it rests upon attributes that every person (and every sentient being) has by virtue of being alive—a birthright, as it were. Structural impediments such as poverty and exploitation are thus perceptible as injustices for, *inter alia*, impeding people from appropriating these attributes for the distinctive kinds of human flourishing that are fostered by deliberation (*kritik*) and co-action around shared concerns.

To be sure, there is strong theoretical precedent for considering leisure (in the broad sense of free time) to be a need, the lack of which induces deprivation.⁶⁷ Therefore, to say that meditation is democratic in the sense of requiring time is to say that it requires something that, like democracy, is due to everyone. As I described at the beginning of this article, democracy is not a fact about political or governmental institutions, but instead is an inheritance—something to which we (the people) can lay claim.⁶⁸ But even amongst “basic needs,” leisure retains an irreducible dimension of “excess”—non-dominated time that goes beyond the other needs, which are imperatives. It may be an important paradox of the human condition that *amongst* our needs is access to something, in this case time, beyond what is needed. Good-for-nothing meditation is a uniquely apt strategy for taking and having this time.

Meditation is not the silver-bullet or sine qua non of citizenship. It will not be instrumental in resolving the political questions of the day, in rescuing democracy, or in any of the other

⁶⁴James William Coleman, “The New Buddhism: Some Empirical Findings” in Dunken Ryuken Williams and Christopher S. Queen (eds.), *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship* (London, UK: Curzon Press, 1999).

⁶⁵Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life* (New York: Bantam 1991), p. 19.

⁶⁶On July 17, 2014, Eric Garner was heard gasping “I can’t breathe!” as he was put in a chokehold by New York Police Department officers. He was later pronounced dead at the hospital. A video of the event including this phrase circulated on the Internet, and the phrase became a popular meme of the #BlackLivesMatter movement.

⁶⁷Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), Ch. 1.

⁶⁸Wolin, “Fugitive Democracy,” *Constellations*, pp. 11–25.

projects in whose potential students of politics search for “solutions.” It will not be good *for* any of these things because the heart of the practice is good for nothing. For this very reason, meditation offers unique and powerful support to projects that resist hierarchy and promote freedom. It thus is an important resource amongst the great many that must be deployed, against the oligarchic forces of our time, in the name of citizenship and democracy.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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