

RESEARCH · AI AND CITIZENSHIP

The Time Problem: Aristotle, AI, and the 2,500-Year-Old Question Democracy Has Never Answered

John F. Long · MPA, Roger Williams University. Founder, Zestigram, Inc.

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TL;DR

Aristotle argued that democracy required *scholē*, time of one's own, unencumbered by labor. He concluded that most people would never have it, and for 2,500 years he was right: every productivity revolution since has captured the surplus at the firm, not at the citizen.

AI is the first time-saving technology in history that arrives at the individual before the institution. A consumer subscription puts the same model in the hands of a working professional that an enterprise would deploy. The cognitive labor that consumed the modern citizen's hours is, finally, automatable at the personal level.

The fork now is whether the saved hours return to the citizen as time for self-government, or get absorbed as a new productivity baseline. The history of capture suggests the latter is the default. Whether the holders of these tools recognize what they are holding is the political question of the next twenty years.

"A paradox of two worlds curled close enough that you could feel the rough sides when it almost collides, though seems to slide by in such a way, almost sideways, that it creates a maze in a misty haze that seems to rearrange the page in time."

(from "Friendship," 2006)

I. Aristotle's Missing Word

Aristotle had a word for what democracy required. Almost no one had it.

The word was *scholē*. It is the root of the English word *school*, and it did not mean classroom. It meant time. Time unencumbered by necessary labor. Time when you were not earning your bread, raising your children, or surviving the day. Time you owned.

In Aristotle's *Politics*, *scholē* was the precondition for citizenship. Not the reward. Without time of your own, you could not deliberate. Without deliberation, you could not govern. Without governance, you were not really a citizen. You were a person who lived in a city run by other people. "In a well-ordered state," Aristotle wrote, "the citizens should have leisure and not have to provide for their daily wants" (Aristotle, 1957).

This is the most consequential sentence in the history of Western political thought. Almost no one talks about it.

The reason is that Aristotle used it to justify exclusion. Slaves had no time. Workers had no time. Women had no time, because the labor of running a household consumed it. Even rich merchants were suspect, because their time belonged to commerce. Citizenship was reserved for the small class of free men whose labor was performed by other people on their behalf.

The conclusion is ugly. The premise is true. Self-government requires time. Every political philosopher since Aristotle has worked around this problem. None has solved it.

II. The 2,500-Year Workaround

Picture what *scholē* actually meant. A free Athenian man wakes up. He does not go to a job. He goes to the agora. He argues about laws. He listens to a case. He votes on the city's wars. His afternoon is for the gymnasium, his evening for philosophy with friends. The food on his table was grown by someone else. The clothes on his back were sewn by someone else. The children sleeping in his house were raised, in large part, by someone else. His day is free for the city because his life is funded by the unfree time of others.

That is the system Aristotle called good. The history of political philosophy from Plato forward is a long set of attempts to fix the moral problem without giving up the time.

Plato gave up. *The Republic* concedes that most people lack the time and capacity to govern. His solution: philosopher-kings. Citizenship for the few, obedience for the many. The honest version of Aristotle's exclusion (Plato, 1961).

Hobbes surrendered. In *Leviathan*, the answer to the war of all against all is to hand sovereignty to a higher power. The sovereign has time. You do not need any (Hobbes, 1982).

Locke hid the problem. *Two Treatises of Government* grounds property in labor. What you mix your labor with becomes yours. Then Locke justifies vast accumulation through "tacit consent" to money. Once money exists, you can own far more than you can use, which means others must labor on land they do not own. Their time goes into your property. Locke gestured at this and moved on (Locke, 1980).

Rousseau saw it and could not solve it. *Discourse on Inequality* identified private property as the origin of unfreedom. The moment one person fenced off land and others accepted it, time stopped being equally distributed. Rousseau's answer was a return to a more natural state. A wish, not a program (Rousseau, 1997).

Madison managed it. *Federalist 10* admits factions cannot be removed because they are "sown in the nature of man." The American constitutional order was designed not to solve the time problem. It was designed to channel it. Bicameral legislature. Indirect election. Judicial review. All engineered to slow the propertyless from acting on their interests (Hamilton, Jay, & Madison, 2000).

Marx thought he could end it. If the proletariat is the universal class, the answer is not redistribution but abolition. Take the means of production into common hands and the labor problem dissolves with the property problem. The aspiration was *scholé* for everyone. The 20th century delivered something else, and the failure was so total that most readers now treat the question itself as closed. It is not closed. Marx asked the right question and got the wrong century to answer it (Marx & Engels, 1976; Marx, 1977).

Rawls wanted to redistribute around it. *A Theory of Justice* proposed that inequalities are acceptable only if they benefit the least well-off. Rawls left the labor itself untouched. The poor would get a bigger slice. They would still be too tired to govern (Rawls, 1971).

The pattern is unmistakable. Every major thinker recognized that democracy without time is theater. None solved the labor problem. They redistributed the surplus. They restructured the state. They redefined the categories. The hours someone has to work to live remained the floor everything else was built on.

Stanley Aronowitz, in his sweeping survey of class in political philosophy, ends with the question Aristotle left open: "must we capitulate to the notion that democracy is inevitably for the few, or will we create a situation in which the individual emerges as the subject of history?" (Aronowitz, 2009). He does not answer it. No one has.

III. What Capitalism Did to Time

The industrial revolution promised to solve the time problem. Machines would do the work. Humans would get the time back. Democracy would become possible.

It did not work. Machines did the work. The time did not come back.

The English Enclosures drove peasants off land they had collectively used for centuries, "freeing" them from feudal obligations and depriving them of any way to live except by selling their hours. E.P. Thompson and Karl Polanyi both document the same shift: a 200-year fight over the working day that pushed the industrial week from 80 hours down to 40, and looked, by the late 20th century, like victory (Polanyi, 2001; Thompson, 1963). It was not.

The pattern is older than the industrial revolution, and it runs through my own lineage. Oliver Cromwell hit both sides of the family, four centuries before the Enclosures finished what he started. The **Coffin line** lost its Devon estate, Brixton Manor, when Cromwell's Roundheads won the English Civil War. Tristram Coffin fled to Massachusetts in 1642 with his wife, five children, and his widowed mother. Seventeen years later he organized the consortium that bought Nantucket Island for £30 and two beaver hats and founded what would become the whaling capital of the colonial world. The **Long side** carries the same operation in a different key. Irish farmers dispossessed by the Cromwellian conquest of Ireland, scattered across generations of tenancy and hunger, finally arrived in Fall River in the 1800s. Both displacements ended in southeastern Massachusetts. Both branches of the family I came from started over because someone else made a political decision about who got to own what (Long Family Archive, 2026).

That is the story of capital and time in compressed form. A political class makes a decision. The losers spend generations buying back hours that were taken from them. Sometimes they succeed. Sometimes the next wave of dispossession arrives before they finish.

Three things erased the 20th century gain.

First, household labor was never counted. As women entered paid work, the cooking, cleaning, and childcare did not disappear. It doubled up. Arlie Hochschild called this "the second shift" (Hochschild, 1989). The 40-hour week became 60 to 80 hours of actual labor for most working families. The gain on paper was a loss in life.

Second, the boundary between work and life dissolved. Email, then constant connectivity, expanded white-collar work to fill whatever container it was given.

Third, the cognitive load of modern life became its own unpaid shift. Managing accounts. Navigating bureaucracies. Performing the self online. David Graeber called much of professional white-collar work "bullshit jobs," labor that exists for its own sake, consuming hours that could have gone somewhere else (Graeber, 2018).

Americans in 2024 worked roughly the same total hours as Americans in 1974, despite substantial productivity gains over the same period (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). The productivity went somewhere. It did not go to the worker as time.

The encumbrance is not accidental. It is the point. A population without unencumbered time cannot effectively contest power. Power has every incentive to keep that time scarce.

IV. The First Real Exit

For 2,500 years, no technology meaningfully reduced the cognitive labor required to live a modern life. Tractors reduced agricultural labor. Washing machines reduced household labor. Computers accelerated office labor without reducing its hours. Each wave of automation captured surplus time at the level of the firm, not the individual.

Artificial intelligence is different.

AI is the first tool whose primary effect is to compress the hours an individual must spend on tasks that previously required full human attention. Research. Writing. Scheduling. Analysis. Communication. Decision support. Hours of work compress to minutes.

A first draft that once took a week takes a Saturday morning. A research summary across forty sources arrives before the second cup of coffee. A spreadsheet untangled before lunch. The output is often better than what unaided effort produced before, and it arrives in a fraction of the time.

I notice this in my own week. The hours show up. The question is whether they stay.

Previous productivity tools required institutional capital. Tractors required farms. Industrial machinery required factories. Office software required corporate IT departments. Each tool reached the individual only through the firm, and the firm captured the surplus by default.

AI does not require institutional capital to deploy. A consumer subscription gives an individual access to the same models that power enterprise systems. The tool is in the hands of the person before it is in the hands of the firm.

This is genuinely new. For the first time in 2,500 years, the time-saving technology arrives at the level of the citizen, not the institution.

V. The Fork

Aristotle's question was never really "who deserves citizenship." It was "what does citizenship require, and how is that requirement distributed?"

His answer was *schole*. His distribution was unjust. He concluded that most humans would never have the time citizenship required, so most humans would never be citizens. For 2,500 years, the structure of his argument has held even as the categories shifted. We expanded who is allowed to vote. We did not expand who has the time to govern.

Now there is an exit.

The cognitive labor that consumed the modern citizen's hours is, finally, automatable at the individual level. The technology is in the hands of the person. The fork is what happens next.

If the surplus returns to the citizen, individuals use the hours AI gives them back to think, deliberate, learn, build community, participate in self-government. This becomes the first generation in 2,500 years that could plausibly meet Aristotle's precondition.

If the surplus is captured by the firm, the productivity gain becomes the new baseline expectation. The worker does the work of ten with no reduction in hours. The cognitive grind continues at higher altitude. We will have built the most powerful productivity tool in human history and used it to make ourselves more tired.

The history of every previous productivity revolution suggests capture is the default. Polanyi, Thompson, Hochschild, Graeber. The entire literature on time and labor is one long account of how capital absorbs whatever surplus technology produces. Surplus that is not actively reclaimed gets captured.

Something is different this time. The tool arrives at the individual before the institution. For once, the citizen has something to reclaim with.

Whether they recognize what they are holding is the political question of the next twenty years.

The most important political act of the next decade may also be the most mundane. Choosing not to fill the saved time with more work. Choosing to let the hours become time of your own. Choosing, finally, to take Aristotle at his word.

The two worlds are curled close enough now that you can feel the rough sides. What gets written on the page next is up to us.

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ABOUT THE WRITER

John F. Long writes from Newport County on the South Coast of Massachusetts and Rhode Island. MPA, Roger Williams University. Two years of doctoral coursework in higher education administration at UMass Dartmouth. The practice underneath the writing is real estate (johnlong.realestate) and verification infrastructure (longfamilyarchive.com). The writing sits at johnlong.io as the canonical surface for the body of work on citizenship and its material preconditions.

The body of work is structured as a quartet of citizenship surveys (time, ground, voice, currency), with [The Periscope](#) as the catalyst essay, [The Map](#) as the compressed survey, [The Absent Presence](#) as the meta-frame, and [Acting in the Cracks](#) as the applied note. The full reading order is at [/the-index](#).

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