

What Work Means & Why That Matters

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2013

Contents

Appendix:

What do we mean by work?	
A response to Bob Black’s “The Abolition of Work”	11

In the beginning of David H's "What Do We Mean by Work?"¹ he writes: "In the beginning of Bob Black's 'The Abolition of Work,' he calls work an ideology. This use of the word ideology in relation to work is one that has never been previously used. This semantic misuse by traditional standards is a reflection of what is to come." Later, H will fake quotations. Here, he fakes a paraphrase. Toward – not right at – the beginning of my essay (in its fourth paragraph), I say that "all the old ideologies are conservative because they believe in work. Some of them, like Marxism and most brands of anarchism, believe in work all the more fiercely because they believe in so little else." (17)² David H's falsification "is a reflection of what is to come."

This does not say that work is an ideology. It says that *belief* in work is *part* of several ideologies – including, as David H soon makes all too clear, his own: anarcho-leftism. A text whose thesis is my "semantic misuse" should not, "in the beginning," or anywhere, falsify meanings. As is obvious throughout my essay, for me work is an activity, indeed an institution, not an ideology. The noun "work" goes with the verb "work." "No one should ever work," my *real* beginning (17) is nonsense otherwise. But even if my ideas are nonsense, they aren't semantic nonsense.

Someone like H, who doesn't understand the difference between "its" and "it's" – *it's* taught in grade school, or *it* used to be – and who is largely unfamiliar with the use of commas, shouldn't criticize anybody's use of language.³ Also, "independent" does not mean "different," as H supposes: "Work however in the myriad of ways the term is used" – come on, not *that* many ways – "is in many of its usages [redundant] independent of the way Black defines it." Later, he says, "Use values are things we make because we need to use them ... " – the same redundant tautology. It is not the case that "farm work is use value work," because "use value" is not an adjective and it does not mean "useful" – by the way, is tobacco farming "use value work"? And who is the "socialist's Marx"? Is there yet another Marx Brother? The *anarchist's* Marx – would that be Groucho or Harpo?⁴ Here I can't even guess at what H is trying to say. And that's why some of these points, regarded one by one, might seem to be quibbles, but the cumulative impact of these blunders is not only wearisome, it either obscures meaning or invites the suspicion that there is none to obscure.

Actually, H himself repeats, without disapproval, my real definition of work (the short version): "forced labor that is compulsory," except that my version isn't redundant: I refer to "*forced labor*, that is, compulsory production." (18) Thus he contradicts his initial accusation. If this "minimal definition" (as I call it) – dare I say, my working definition? – does not agree substantially with commonsense or dictionary definitions of work, H never says so, or if so, why it does not. After

¹ Available online at <http://libcom.org/library/>.

² There have been, starting in 1985, many published editions of the essay, translated into many languages – even Esperanto! Here I will cite, in parentheses, the page numbers in *The Abolition of Work and Other Essays* (Port Townsend, WA: Loompanics Unlimited, n.d. [1986]).

³ Speaking of punctuation: H notes my ironic use of "scare quotes" around the word "communist." I have long since concurred in Adorno's condemnation of quotation marks used as ironic devices. I quote Adorno at length (without irony, and without quotation marks) on this point in *Anarchy after Leftism* (Columbia, MO: C.A.L. Press, 1997), 38: Theodor W. Adorno, "Punctuation Marks," *The Antioch Review* (Summer 1990): 300–305, at 303. Left anarchists are among the worst offenders (thus I am usually an "anarchist," not an anarchist, etc.). These punctuation marks as used by my enemies have also been called "sneer quotes." J.O. Urmson, *The Emotive Theory of Ethics* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1968), 123–24.

⁴ I have implied as much. Black, "Theses on Groucho Marxism," *The Abolition of Work and Other Essays*, 41–43; Bob Black, "In Defense of Marxism," *Friendly Fire* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1992), 69.

all, H agrees with it. It is easy to find definitions of work which resemble mine.⁵ I complete the definition by saying that “Work is never done for its own sake, it’s done on account of some product or output that the worker (or, more often, somebody else) gets out of it.” (18–19) The “more often” comment acknowledges my awareness of such work-systems as slavery and wage-labor.

Work, then, can mean what I say it means. I wasn’t trying to be original, I was just trying to be understood. But the word can also mean, says H, “*fulfilling* work.” Now, as a definition of work, or one of them, this will not do. It’s like saying that a definition of “dog” is inadequate if it does not include “brown dog” — in the definition. A definition isn’t usually a catalog of all the attributes that the *definiendum* may have. There are brown dogs, big dogs, rabid dogs, running dogs, etc., but these adjectival facts about certain dogs have no place in the definition of dog.

All my careful efforts to define and distinguish work and play are lost on David H. I sharply repudiated those who, like Johan Huizinga and Bernie de Koven, *define* “play” as inconsequential, as inherently unproductive, by the same sort of “semantic misuse” I fault in H: “The point is not that play is [necessarily] without consequences. This is to demean play. The point is that the consequences, if any, are gratuitous.”⁶ (20) I made clear that while work and play are not the same thing, it’s possible for them to have something in common, and it is what they *can* have in common that could form the, for lack of a better word, “economic” basis of a ludic way of life.⁷ (28–31) In this respect I am not too far from Peter Kropotkin and Emma Goldman, and I am closer still to Charles Fourier and William Morris. But I am very far from today’s organizationalist, workerist anarchists.

In a rather exasperated reply to a libertarian conservative critic — who is, I am sorry to say, to this day my most intelligent critic — I wrote: “My proposal is to combine the best part (in fact, the only good part) of work — the production of use-values — with the best of play, which I take to be every aspect of play, its freedom and its fun, its voluntariness and its intrinsic gratification ... Is this so hard to understand? *If productive play is possible, so too is the abolition of work.*”⁸ Well, David H? Is it so hard to understand?

David H is therefore trivial, and irrelevant, in saying that some people like their work. I acknowledged this phenomenon. Even a job, I said, can have “intrinsic interest.” (19) H probably overestimates the number of such people. How many people who say this, would do the same work without pay? Here I agree with Nietzsche: “Looking for work in order to be paid: in civi-

⁵ E.g., Ralf Dahrendorf, *On Britain* (London: British Broadcasting Corp., 1982), 183; John White, *Education and the End of Work: A New Philosophy of Work and Learning* (London & Herndon, VA: Cassell, 1997), 10.

⁶ This tenet of Huizinga’s is inconsistent with what his book is mostly about: the identification of a “play element” in, among other activities, law, war, poetry, philosophy, art, and even business. J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1955). I don’t know about DeKoven — I got his phrase (play as the “suspension of consequences”) from the late Gary Warne, whom I harshly criticized in “The Exquisite Corpse,” *Abolition of Work*, 139. It was at Warne’s Gorilla Grotto, “an adult play environment,” that I gave my original speech on the abolition of work. The only thing I’ve since learned about DeKoven is that he is a major figure in the New Games movement which designs noncompetitive games (everybody wins). My position is that there is more to play than playing games. The quoted expression may come from Bernie DeKoven, *The Well-Played Game: A Player’s Path to Wholeness* (3d ed.; San Jose, CA: Writers Press Club, 2002) (originally published in 1978), to which I have no access.

⁷ The Latin word, *ludi*, refers to games. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 174. But the dictionary definitions of play are much more encompassing. *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 2: 2244–2245.

⁸ Black, “Smokestack Lightning,” in *Friendly Fire*, 48 (emphasis in the original). For another restatement of the basic idea: “No Future for the Workplace,” *ibid.*, 16. The latter text was first published in a daily newspaper, the *Baltimore Sun* — the paper H.L. Mencken was involved with for most of his professional life. I like that.

lized countries today almost all men are as one in doing that. For all of them work is a means and not an end in itself... But there are, if only rarely, men who would rather perish than work without any *pleasure* in their work.”⁹

Some people like to *think* they like their work, into which they put so much of themselves, because, if they didn’t think so, their self-esteem would suffer. They don’t want to think that they’re being played for suckers (and I never said that they were: I pass judgment on no individuals). People try to make the best of things, and to rationalize the inevitable. David H, in 2013, understands work almost as well as Friedrich Nietzsche understood it in 1882, but not nearly as well as I understood it in 1980.

Since H has reminded me of the Marxist concept “alienation,” let me in turn remind him of the Marxist concept “false consciousness.” In general, it’s H, not I, whose grasp of Marxist economics is weak. Thus there is no such thing as “Marx’s distinction between a use value and a commodity.” Marx’s distinction is between use-value and exchange-value. Many commodities have use-value. That makes them more saleable. Use-values are not “things that we make” because use-values are not things. To say so is, as Marx would say, “reification.”

H must have no idea what my thesis is, since he never mentions it. H has just not thought through what it would take to separate and consolidate what can be fulfilling in work from what cannot. One of us has given some thought to the matter, and it isn’t him. Isn’t this a place where the class struggle anarchists might lend a hand, instead of running around pestering workers and organizing each other? They champion the worker, but they don’t know much about what makes a worker a worker: work.

H implies that he is that kind of anarchist — “a Salt” — who takes a job in order to “organize it.” This still happens? Another shot in the foot (the left foot) from language ... H doesn’t want to organize the *job* — the boss has already done that! — he wants to organize the workers in the workplace. I would like to see some success stories from Salts (taken with a grain of salt?). Do they call themselves Salts because they think they are the Salt of the Earth? Anyone who can afford to take a job which he can expect to be fired from, should not be speculating about whether I am “privileged,” as H reports “some people” do. In this way, H interjects false, irrelevant and derogatory gossip about me while disclaiming responsibility for it.

“Curiously,” H says, “it isn’t evident that Black has read Marx enough to know that Marx already has a term for this. Marx’s term is alienation which is his word for when we are abstracted from the products we create, or even more generally it means how we are disconnected from our work through the wage system.” I know something of Marx on alienation, thank you so much, to the extent that he is comprehensible. What he discussed, infrequently, is mostly not what I discuss: not out of ignorance, but by choice. There is more about work *as such* in “The Abolition of Work” than there is in all three volumes of *Theories of Surplus Value*. But then Marx never held down a job for the last 35 years of his life. *He* was never a Salt.¹⁰

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, tr. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 108 (§ 42). Nietzsche also discusses how nearly all European men have to accept an occupational role, a job: “The result is rather strange. As they attain a more advanced age, almost all Europeans confound themselves with their role; ... they themselves have forgotten how much accident, moods, caprice disposed of them when the question of their ‘vocation’ was decided — and how many other roles they might perhaps have been *able* to play; for now it is too late.” Ibid., 302 (§ 356).

¹⁰ Nor was Engels. He *owned* factories.

Marxists, including anarcho-Marxists like H, regard work *under capitalism* as an institution of exploitation. But they neglect what I highlight: work as an institution of domination, and not only under capitalism. I have often heard workers complain about work. I have never heard workers complain about alienation. Work was repressive for several thousand years of civilization before capitalism. What worries me is that, administered by Marxists or syndicalists, work will still be repressive *after* capitalism. “In all previous revolutions the mode of activity always remained unchanged and it was only a question of a different distribution of this activity, a new distribution of labour to other persons, whilst the communist revolution is directed against the hitherto existing *mode* of activity, does away with *labour*, and abolishes the rule of all classes with the classes themselves, ...”¹¹ This is Karl Marx. If H doesn’t believe me, maybe he will believe Karl Marx.

I see no reason to pour the critique of work into Marxist molds. Much would spill over. In fact, I see no reason for anarchists to respect Marxism at all. Marxists have mocked us, defamed us, betrayed us and slaughtered us, but they have never respected us. Marxism is anti-anarchist, through and through. Anarchism should be anti-Marxist, through and through.¹² Not only out of principle, but out of expediency: “The anarchists *are* at a turning point. For the first time in history, they are the *only* revolutionary current. To be sure, not all anarchists are revolutionaries, but it is no longer possible to be a revolutionary without being an anarchist, in fact if not in name.”¹³

Lecturing on, H informs us that “some people [who *are* these people? is H one of them?] say that Black lets capitalism ‘off the hook’ because he ignores the specific exploitative nature of capitalism. By saying just work and not distinguishing work that is capitalist wage work, which is the majority of the work done in a capitalist society and less forced ‘activists’ [huh?] that we also call work.” This is either a sentence fragment or a sentence which, toward the end, dissolves into gibberish. What are “forced ‘activists’”?

Black, by this reasoning, also lets dogs off the hook (or off the leash?) because he leaves out the specifically “brown” nature of brown dogs, the specifically “big” nature of big dogs, and the specifically “rabid” nature of rabid dogs. By H’s reasoning, one can’t say anything serious about work, only about wage-labor, which is only one of the forms work assumes, even in late capitalism, as even H eventually gets around to admitting. Marxists and other workerists can talk about brown dogs – about exploitation, wage-labor, surplus value, the falling rate of profit, etc. – all they want to. I might agree with some of it. But there’s an undistributed remainder. It is work itself.

In 1985 I chose to write about dogs (as in “working like a dog”) – not brown dogs – partly because almost nobody else was.¹⁴ To some extent, I’ve changed that. H’s own criticism is evidence

¹¹ Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (3d rev. ed.; Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 60.

¹² Bob Black, “Chomsky on the Nod,” *Defacing the Currency: Selected Writings, 1992–2012* (Berkeley, CA: LBC Books, 2012), 131. I have said the same about anarchists who think that Murray Bookchin is an anarchist. Black, *Anarchy after Leftism*, esp. ch. 5; Bob Black, *Nightmares of Reason*, available online at The Anarchy Library. Bookchin – uncharacteristically honest – eventually announced that he was not an anarchist, and never had been. I wait, with more hope than expectation, for Chomsky to follow suit.

¹³ Black, *Anarchy after Leftism*, 140.

¹⁴ An exception: *Why Work? Arguments for the Leisure Society*, ed. Vernon Richards (London: Freedom Press, 1983). I did read this book before writing my essay, although not before delivering the speech the essay is based on (that was in 1980). My copy was a gift (in 1984) from Gregor Jamroski, who shoplifted it from Left Bank Books in Seattle. The anthology is very uneven, but includes some good stuff, such as Tony Gibson’s “Who Will Do the Dirty

of that.¹⁵ I think the zero-work idea was in the air in the mid-1980's. It must have been, because Andre Gorz, who never had an original idea in his life, wrote a book espousing a watered-down version of the abolition of work which was published in English in the same year (1985) that my essay was first published.¹⁶ In 1995, perennial trend-surfer Jeremy Rifkin published a stupid book, *The End of Work*, which I savaged.¹⁷ And now – this proves that I've really *arrived* – there's a book by a Marxist-feminist college professor which has “antiwork” and “postwork” in its subtitle!¹⁸

Among those in the post-left anarchist tendencies, the critique of work is widely acknowledged, even taken for granted, for the very good reason “that this monster called WORK remains the precise & exact target of our rebellious wrath, the one single most oppressive *reality* we face (& we must learn also to recognize Work when it's disguised as ‘leisure’).”¹⁹

On this point, one of H's misquotations of me is a little more serious than most of his fuck-ups: “Black says that many leftist [leftists?] and anarchists are so obsessed with work they ‘talk about little else.’” Ironically, H is trying, for once, to be nice and agree with me here. But what I *really* said, and which I have already quoted, is that “all the old ideologies are conservative because they believe in work. Some of them, like Marxism and most brands of anarchism, believe in work all the more fiercely because they believe in so little else.” (17) I didn't say that leftists and most anarchists *talk about little else* than work, I said that they *believe in* work all the more fiercely because they *believe in* so little else. Leftists, including left anarchists, were, with rare exceptions, *not* talking about work in the 1980's. It wasn't a conspiracy of silence, but it might as well have been. Leftists were thinking about workers (in the abstract) without thinking about work, and certainly without talking about work. But work needed to be thought about, and talked about, critically. So I thought about work and talked about work, critically.

As is more apparent from my essay than from H's, work assumes various forms. There is wage-labor, but there is also chattel slavery, serfdom, peonage, housework, and self-employment. The last two are still very important in “capitalist society.” I'd say that capitalist society couldn't do without them, even if “most work” is wage-labor. But you can't organize *those* workers! H even says so! This is, for left anarchists, a source of sadness. Indeed, it condemns them to futility. As

Work?” which I alluded to in my essay. Some academics borrowed the title, probably unwittingly: Robin Patric Clair *et al.*, *Why Work? The Perceptions of a “Real Job” and the Rhetoric of Work Through the Ages* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2008).

¹⁵ My argument is taken over in its entirety by James Bowen, “The Curse of the Drinking Classes,” in *Twenty-First Century Anarchism: Unorthodox Ideas for the New Millennium*, ed. Jon Purkis & James Bowen (London: Cassell, 1997), 151–169 – who doesn't cite me.

¹⁶ Andre Gorz, *Paths to Paradise: On the Liberation from Work*, tr. Malcolm Imrie (London: Pluto Press, 1985). I didn't see his text until much later, and I'm sure he didn't see mine.

¹⁷ Jeremy Rifkin, *The End of Work: The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1995); Bob Black, “What's Wrong with This Picture? A Critique of a Neo-Futurist's Vision of the Decline of Work,” available online at The Anarchy Library and elsewhere.

¹⁸ Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011). I haven't seen this one.

¹⁹ “Immediatism vs. Capitalism,” in *Immediatism: Essays by Hakim Bey* (Edinburgh, Scotland & San Francisco, CA: 1994), 20–21. See also Alfredo M. Bonanno, *Let's Destroy Work, Let's Destroy the Economy*, tr. Jean Weir (London: Elephant Books; Berkeley, CA: Ardent Press, 2013); CrimethInc. Ex-Workers' Collective, *Work* (n.p.: self-published, 2011). I had already made the point about leisure: “Leisure is nonwork for the sake of work.” (18) Someone else who has made the point is White, *Education and the End of Work*, 11–12, 62–63. So did Karl Marx: “Free time – which includes leisure time as well as time for higher activities – naturally transforms anyone who enjoys it into a different person, and it is this different person who then enters the direct process of production.” Karl Marx, *The Grundrisse*, ed. & tr. David McLellan (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971), 148.

so often, H (his fourth paragraph) takes back his previous criticism (that “alienation” jazz) and agrees with me.

A critique of work is necessarily a critique of capitalism, but a critique of capitalism is not necessarily a critique of work. That is why the critique of work is more radical. A critique of work is more of a critique of domination than of exploitation. A critique of wage-labor is more of a critique of exploitation than of domination.

If all you object to is exploitation, it might seem that workers’ liberation is complete in a workers’ state where state ownership has supplanted private ownership of the means of production, and wages are equalized. Nobody is exploited, and everybody is dominated. No anarchist ever believed in this. H isn’t sure, but he has this bad feeling that I might have objections to workplace democracy. And I do. Since I reject work, I necessarily reject workplace democracy. But I also reject democracy itself in every way, shape and form – full stop. I reject self-managed servitude. That was only an incidental consideration in “The Abolition of Work,” although it is in there. But the critique of democracy is increasingly salient in much that I have written since 1985. I summarize it in “Debunking Democracy.”²⁰

I’m sorry (well, not really) to draw attention to another David H fabrication. He quotes me thusly: “He also makes the separate and more damning claim that in a work place run by the workers the ‘people become the tyrant and what the fuck is the point.’” This supposed quotation does not appear in “The Abolition of Work” or in anything else I have ever written. Anybody moderately acquainted with what I write, and how I write, knows that I would never say this. I was never a snotty little (“what the fuck is the point”) art school punk.

H has trouble with quotation. He commenced with a fake paraphrase. Later he invented fake quotations. But even when he honestly tries to quote me, he fails every time. *Every quotation H attributes to me is inaccurate.* He can’t even copy words accurately.

Contrary to H, his “fulfilling work” is *not* what I *mean* by play. Most play is now indeed inconsequential: it’s unproductive in an economic sense, and, I hope, most play always will be. All or some of what H calls fulfilling work, might be transformable into free activity *in a free society*. I might have been at fault for contributing to H’s confusion when I wrote: “Such is work. *Play* is just the opposite.” (20) Believe it or not, I haven’t noticed this inconsistency in 28 years. Apparently nobody has, including H. As I define work, work is indeed “just the opposite” of play but only insofar as the one is voluntary and the other is not. The rest of the essay is clear on this crucial point. What I really meant, as is apparent from my next sentence, was to identify *one respect* in which work and play are opposites: “Play is always voluntary. What might otherwise be play is work if it’s forced.” (20)

In 1885, William Morris, who was a British Marxist and communist, wrote: “As long as the work is repulsive it will still be a burden which must be taken up daily, and even so would mar our life, even though the hours of labour are short. What we want to do is to add to our wealth without diminishing our pleasures. Nature will not be finally conquered till our work becomes

²⁰ Black, “Debunking Democracy.” *Defacing the Currency*, 3–33. It’s also available as a pamphlet from C.A.L. Press. H writes: “What if Black’s critique is a critique of democratic decision making in the work place specifically? “No, my critique of democracy is a critique of democracy. “If we wanted to start this conversation” — who’s stopping him? — “we would have to discuss the difference between democratically controlled workplaces under capitalism and under capitalism.” They would probably not be very different, inasmuch as they would be the same. H must have meant to contrast democratically controlled workplaces with *undemocratically* controlled workplaces, but that’s not what he says. Instead he says that “under capitalism” there exist “democratically controlled workplaces”!

part of the pleasure of our lives.”²¹ That is *exactly* the thesis of “The Abolition of Work,” although I did not, and would not, speak of the conquest of Nature, which sounds more like Francis Bacon than the way Morris usually sounded. The only difference is that Morris would continue to call “work” what I would prefer to call, to avoid confusion and to emphasize the difference, something else. Morris in his essay (like mine, originally a speech) made quite clear what he meant by “useful work” — just as I was quite clear in contrasting work, with or without traces of fulfillment, with productive play.

Morris and I — and, before us, Charles Fourier, and others — discussed, and tried to identify, principles for the social transformation of what is now work, or rather some of it, into free productive play.²² Another way to put it, which may appeal to certain tastes, is that we all aspire to the realization and suppression of work. David H doesn’t discuss this most important dimension of my argument, probably because he doesn’t understand it.

H’s proposal to call fulfilling work “work,” and to call unfulfilling work “Work,” serves no purpose. It will be universally ignored. It’s not that we are, in H’s words, “lacking in terminology.” We have too much terminology! We have lots of words. It’s just that some people don’t know “how to do things with words.”²³ H is one of these people. We have so many words that William Morris and I can say the same thing in different words. H has trouble saying what he has to say in any words. Words are a snare for H. They’re a source of splendor for me.

At some remote future time, an anarcho-leftist — supposing, as I doubt, that there will be anarcho-leftists at some remote future time — might produce an intellectually respectable critique of my critique of work. The left has had 28 years to try. Naturally, in my vanity I like to think that the reason is that my argument is unanswerable.

There might be other explanations. Anarcho-leftists own all the anarchist bookstores and these all ban my books. They were, until recently (I refer to AK Press and PM Press), the only ostensibly anarchist distributors, although you might not suspect that they were anarchist if you look at the stuff in their catalogs.²⁴ Leftists also operate most of the anarchist websites. The leftist leaders know what I am capable of in the way of polemics. They know how I dealt with Murray Bookchin, among others. To respond to me, as they know, only affords me opportunities in reply to make fools of them even as I publicize my own ideas, which they don’t want to get around. So they

²¹ “Useful Work versus Useless Toil,” in *Political Writings of William Morris*, ed. A.L. Morton (New York: International Publishers, 1973), 95, reprinted in *Why Work?* (Richards ed.), 35–52. Morris’s essay was first published, by an anarchist publisher (Freedom Press), in 1896. Morris also wrote the utopian novel *News from Nowhere* and some minor classics in the fantasy genre.

²² I mentioned some names, but I deliberately didn’t provide references, or an assigned reading list, because, unlike today’s class struggle anarchists, I was not writing primarily for white middle class college students. I tried to write something that real-life workers might read and appreciate, and, in the many years since 1985, I’ve received many testimonials suggesting that I’ve had a limited measure of success. A number of people have told me, or told others, that I changed their lives. I receive these reports with mixed feelings. However, for the footnotes not provided in “The Abolition of Work,” there are now the footnotes provided in Black, “Primitive Affluence: A Postscript to Sahlins,” *Friendly Fire*, 34–41, and the references provided in “Zerowork Revisited,” *Defacing the Currency*, “Suggested Readings,” 333–37.

²³ A book title: J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J.O. Urmson & Marina Sbisa (2d ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975). The book is short, interesting, and refreshingly free of politics, and it has nothing to do with the issue at hand.

²⁴ Bob Black, “Class Struggle Social Democrats, or, The Press of Business,” *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed* No. 64 (Fall/Winter 2007): 26–29, available online at The Anarchist Library. There is now a consistently anarchist/autonomist publisher/distributor, Little Black Cart, and several other genuine anarchist publishers, such as C.A.L. Press, Eberhardt Press and Elephant Editions.

try to ignore me, which complements their censorship of my writings. But, as I observed a few years ago,

What I think I did do was define work as a basic anarchist issue. I forced even the pro- work anarchists like anarcho-syndicalists and Platformists to defend work instead of just taking it for granted. They ridicule the zero-work idea instead of trying to refute it, so, the idea goes unrefuted. Naturally that means that more people will agree with it.²⁵

I may have exaggerated the extent to which, by 2005, I'd forced the leftists into defending work, but, David H is an example of how my challenge to the left can no longer be ignored.

Although the critique of the left was not a main theme in "The Abolition of Work," it openly appears there, and it's a critique of the left so far as work is concerned. Other aspects of my critique of the left appear in other, previously published texts which are also in *The Abolition of Work and Other Essays* or in later books. With the collapse of European Marxism some years later, to universal rejoicing, the question arose as to where this left the left. Capitalist and democratic triumphalists proclaimed – as we now know, prematurely – the end of history. This was a chastening time for leftists – not only the utterly discredited Marxist-Leninists – because they had all, even if they were anti-Marxist (as most anarchists then were), assumed that history was on their side. History doesn't take sides.

All leftists, it turned out, were more Marxist than they thought they were. That's why left anarchists like David H cling to scraps of Marxist doctrine (as does, among others, Noam Chomsky) which were never entirely plausible even within the whole Marxist ideological apparatus, and which mean nothing outside of it. The Marxist economics which anarcho-leftists still dabble in has been discredited in theory and in practice. But they have nothing to replace it with. I don't think there has ever been an anarchist economist, unless you count Proudhon, and he is now even more irrelevant than Marx, when it comes to economics.

Leftists, although they have lost all theoretical bases for doing so, still stand firmly on the ground of *the economy* (the "base," as the Marxists used to say). And base it is. The left shares with the ideologues of capitalism the myth of productivism.²⁶ What I call the abolition of work, what Charles Fourier called attractive labor, what William Morris called useful work vs. useless toil, amounts to a call for *the abolition of the economy*. Leftist anarchists who laugh at that, might ponder that what they supposedly call for, the abolition of the state, would get just as many laughs. Although the economy is even less popular than the state. Work is not popular at all. Every proposal that's worthwhile, starts out being considered crazy or scandalous.

The abolition of work, the abolition of the state, the abolition of the economy, and even the abolition of art: these abolitions all arrive at the same place. They don't all mean the same thing, but they designate the same social condition. In that condition, there is no place for institutions of coercion, such as work and the state. In that place, there is no place for workers. Instead, there's a place (every place) for playful creators and producers and their friends, and even a place for the lazy. In that place, art, for instance, isn't a specialized activity. It could be part of the life of anybody who wants it there, and almost everybody will want it in their lives, I believe, when they can believe in that possibility. The revolution of everyday life is the only revolution that's worth the trouble. And the abolition of work is central to the revolution of everyday life.

²⁵ Black, "Zerowork Revisited," 332.

²⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, tr. Mark Poster (St. Louis, MO: Telos Press, 1975).

Appendix:

What do we mean by work?

A response to Bob Black's "The Abolition of Work"

David H

In the beginning of Bob Black's "The Abolition of Work," he calls work an ideology. This use of the word ideology in relation to work is one that has never been previously used. This semantic misuse by traditional standards is a reflection of what is to come in the rest of the pamphlet. For Marxists, ideologies are the dominate belief systems in a culture. Work however in the myriad of ways the term is used is in many of its usages independent of the way Black defines it. Black says work is "forced labor, which is compulsory production." We do use the word for compulsory production but we also use it to represent the fulfilling acts in our lives we put energy into and we also use it for an act that is simply a thing you do that you can do without having any belief tied to it whatsoever.

Black denies he is playing a semantic game saying "I am not playing a definitional game with anybody." Black may not think he is making a semantic argument and what this reveals is not that Black is being manipulative it shows there is an ambiguity within our language when we use the word work. When we say work we may mean what Black means, forced labor that is compulsory or we might mean painting our greatest masterpiece, writing our best song, writing a dissertation on a subject we love. Black makes a similar point later on but confuses the reader with the language he chooses. He calls for a society where we only "play" but then his definition of play looks a lot like fulfilling work. He goes on to list some of these activities such as babysitting for a few hours or "even cleaning." He says some people even enjoy cleaning, all this just looks like the old socialist, and by extension, anarchist attempt to have human beings only do the work they find fulfilling.

Curiously, it isn't evident that Black has read Marx enough to know that Marx already has a term for this. Marx's term is alienation which is his word for when we are abstracted from the products we create, or even more generally it means how we are disconnected from the work we do through the wage system. Marx's analysis connects this to the actual products made demarcating the difference between use value and a commodity. Use values are things we make because we need to use them but as Marx points out commodities have a specific value independent of their use value which is their exchange value. Marx believes people's separation from the work they do makes them less human and he is out to do away with this. Marx shows us the difference between work that we do find fulfilling and work that is forced compulsory production. Perhaps this is why some say Black lets capitalism 'off the hook' because he ignores the specific exploitative nature of capitalism. By saying just work and not distinguishing between work that is capitalist wage work, which is the majority of the work done in a capitalist society and less "forced" activists that we also call work.

It should be said Black shares a virtue with anarchist theorists that socialist's Marx included are less concerned about his acknowledgment that coercion and domination are not unique to capitalism, Black points specifically to work in the Soviet Union saying that the dynamic of domination becomes more elaborate over time "all industrial societies whether capitalist or 'communist' work inevitably acquires other attributes which accentuate its obnoxiousness usually and this is even

more true in ‘communist’ than in capitalist countries where the state is the sole employer.” One reaction could be to extenuate what Black has nicely pointed out with his scare quotes that the Soviet Union wasn’t “really Communist.” I think a more important reaction would be to realize what Marx’s analysis of Alienation doesn’t cover. How work itself can be “obnoxious” outside of a system where you sell your labor power, that work that is non-capitalist or not linked to capitalism still has the potential to be a burden.

I am brought back to the semantics that are central to Black’s argument. The problem with Black’s argument is that we tend to call many different acts “work” but these acts are really quite different. The most important distinction being fulfilling work we enjoy doing and exploitative “obnoxious” work we do to survive usually for a wage, we just don’t use two different words for these two different kinds of work. Since we are lacking in terminology I propose a supra term to go beyond Marx’s terms: we could use a little w for the fulfilling type of work and big W for the kinds of work anarchists and socialists strive to get rid of. We can also use the word drudgery. Our fulfilling work is the same thing as Black’s “Play.” We can also however make a three point distinction between the two we just mentioned work that is fulfilling and work that is forced but finally work that isn’t forced but is needed for survival and not necessarily fulfilling, this work is pre-capitalist or non-capitalist. Before I started working at a new job, I had asked a friend of mine who lives on a farm in upstate New York If I could come visit before I had to be working to get some rest and she said yes but everyone who does gets up at 6am to farm. This 3rd kind goes back to Marx’s distinction between a use value and a commodity; farm work is use value work.

Black poses two separate challenges that much of the left might find superfluous but I want to address. Black says that many leftist and anarchists are so obsessed with work they “talk about little else.” He also makes the separate and more damning claim that in a work place run by the workers the “people become the new tyrant and what the fuck is the point.” We will first focus on why the left and a good portion of anarchists do talk about work so much, me included. It’s for multiple reasons but for purposes of brevity let me break it down into two categories; the first I would call the “classic union reason,” which is to make peoples’ lives immediately better in a capitalist system. The relation of a wage earner who sells their labor power is a miserable one because they are in a totalitarian relation to their boss. This is the same goal Black is striving towards to at the ground level — make the world less toilsome.

The other category I would call the “Socialist Reason.” This one has to do with power in the meta-societal sense, the left sees work as important because it is a place where the totalitarian nature of capitalism is vulnerable to the democratic mass, to put it simply the 1% needs the people, the people don’t need the 1%. So work quite rightly is seen as a place of battle against the 1% and a piece of the struggle against Capitalism. So Black is quite right when he says, “Without work who would the left organize?” But for the wrong reasons, work is a point of weakness within the unfair system of capitalism. These two tendencies, the “socialist” and the “union” weren’t always the same as well chronicled in Rudolph Rocker’s Anarcho-Syndicalism.

As far as Black’s critique that in a collectively owned factory “the people become the new tyrant.” Its hard to know what Black means by this does he mean that some people will eventually rule over others no matter what or does he mean that every one ruling together is somehow tyrannical? If either is true, then democracy as well as anarchist models of representation or any form of egalitarianism is impossible. Fortunately most radicals of all stripes believe that when people get together and decide to make decisions its better than being told or controlled by one or a few. What if perhaps Black’s critique is a critique of democratic decision making in the

work place specifically? Black does not say this however and past his one sentence his point is unclear. If we wanted to start this conversation we would have to discuss the difference between democratically controlled workplaces under capitalism and ones after capitalism.

I think if anarchists and socialists write Black off as being “privileged” and don’t take his call for a society without work seriously that something will be missed. There is something poetic and refreshing about this pamphlet, reading it at work I specifically recommend. Anarchists and Socialists need to remember what differentiates their beliefs from the Protestant work ethic which is that we are for a life that is more fulfilling and more democratic and not for fetishizing the act of work. Black is right; we on the left do tend to talk about work a lot and worse without saying why, worse still possible without thinking why? Anyone who has been a Salt, which is someone who gets a job in order to organize it, knows how much even work for a noble cause can suck; it can be like having two jobs — one for the company and one in opposition to the companies practices. The second part the one going against the grain of the company can be just as grueling. The IWW has an old phrase that shares the same sentiment as Black’s pamphlet name but is more useful — “Free the Wage Slaves.” It tells us more than Black’s title and therefore has more utility. Likewise I think the best thing written on work and how we all relate to it is “Hallelujah, I’m a Bum” the old Wobblie tune. Some of the lyrics are, “O why do you work till you’re ready to fall? If you slowed down a bit there be work for us all.”

So there is importance in taking what Black is saying seriously. The problem is because of Black’s awkward terminology we can’t take him on his own terms. What we can get from Black is like the IWW’s slogan we can turn away from a toilsome world, one where we “Free the Wage Slaves.” With the later Wittgenstein, to understand what a word means we look at how it is used. With Heidegger we understand some work is *dasein* and so we know that no thought or ideology goes into it at all. We also know we have fulfilling work and we have drudgery, we just happen to use the same word. I like Black’s essay as a mint that flushes out in order to gain a new perspective. To strive towards a Left and Anarchist movement that doesn’t forget what we’re after is more joy, more play and more fulfillment. Hallelujah, I’m a Bum!

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