

No One Should Ever Work on Introductions

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Bob Black and I are contemporaries, and I rather dread writing my predestined reminiscence about this old book of his, because of the spectral implication that neither he nor I will ever write anything better.

Still, I'll explain the vanished cultural surroundings of this book, because historical context is always useful.

I'm a novelist and journalist, and not one of Bob's own milieu of political theorists. I doubt our writerly paths would ever have crossed, except for our shared interest in the people Bob aptly called "marginals."

"Marginals" were basically self-published figures, the writers and distributors of "zines." Zines were amateur magazines, copied in small print runs, on various eccentric topics. Zines appeared in profusion because technical advances in paper photocopying had demolished many entry-barriers to small-scale publishing. The upshot was that a host of writers and propagandists spontaneously appeared: people from the margins of society, who had rarely been heard from in print.

Thanks to my journalism training, I had a very high tolerance for this sort of text. Instead of avidly reading great writers that I admired or envied (which is what novelists tend to do), I'd learned to acquire and sample texts more objectively, in a cultural search for newsworthy trends. J. G. Ballard, another novelist who was also a journalist like me, called this "invisible literature." Ballard used this radically non-literary material to refresh his own fictional work, and Ballard was a guru to writers of my generation.

Ballard worked for the chemical industry press in Britain, and he collected obscure, ultra-specialized material such as medical crash-industry reports. I was an Austin bohemian, so I specialized in outre fodder such as underground comics, obscure pop music and woozy, cultish drug-experimentation. There were heaps of that stuff in the marginals milieu, big inky eruptions of it, for it had all been repressed by the forces of decency that owned the conventional media. Suddenly, you could have all of that you wanted, if you paid for postage.

So, I accumulated plenty of that, along with other prototypical "marginal" productions that were basically over-publicized diaries: the geek's trip to his archery contest, the teenager's grief on the death of her kitten, that sort of slush. Of course it was mostly rubbish, but that was okay. I didn't mind. A writer needs to know these things. It was something of a worldly education.

Then there was Bob Black, another guy diligently exploiting this sub rosa form of publishing. Unlike most “marginals,” Bob Black was clearly a genuine dissident. He was a lucid writer with legal training, who was not a political crank or deluded mystic, but a coherent thinker who was really, truly, severely unconventional.

Bob’s thesis was that he — and all of us really — existed in conditions of mentally mutilating, systematic oppression. We didn’t know that, because we didn’t dare name our oppressor, any more than Eastern European dissidents living at that time could boldly name the Communist Party and the KGB as the authors of their daily distress. But our oppressor was “work.”

“No one should ever work.” Bob was an essayist of rather broad interests, but this was the flagpole of the Black ideology. No Work. His analysis studied the actual deprivations of our freedom. Not the power-structures within various states, or the rights allegedly guaranteed by constitutions, or the effects of racial or gender prejudice, but really, just, life: the lived hours of your precious days. Where did your lifetime actually go? In the “free world,” most people spent their lifetime working. They were “free” to work.

That’s what this book is about. It is all about how “work” is much better conceived as a malignant, destructive condition called “forced labor.” It’s not that people want to “work,” by their nature. No, they’re cajoled into work by moral suasion, then kept confined within their work by large, cumbersome, irrational, spirit-crushing, economic, legal and police frameworks.

Bob pointed out that “work” is not about “doing your work,” because you are required to stay in the workplace during all work hours, whether the necessary tasks are completed or not. Workers were never allowed to leave “work,” any more than some child in school would be allowed go play once he learned the textbook lessons. Both the school and the workplace were mechanisms of discipline. They were vast apparatuses that had rather little to do with their alleged purposes of education or production.

It was “forced labor” that appalled Bob Black, not productive activity per se. Bob wasn’t encouraging inert idleness. He had in mind a very different arrangement for civilization, a ludic “play labor” where society would maintain itself through people doing what they wanted to do.

Of course that prospect sounds rather silly: Aristotle used to make fun of that idea way back in ancient times. Aristotle used to justify Greek slavery by stating that the shuttle won’t weave clothes, and the lyre won’t play music, by itself. So we have to be practical, tough-minded, and get those slaves.

It was clear to Bob Black, though, that in modern civilization our factory looms do weave autonomous clothes, and our radios do play music by themselves. Yet, despite all this huge productive capacity, wage slavery still abounded. So, forced labor was not about clothing Professor Aristotle. No, forced labor was all about the force. The slavery was its own justification.

Idle hands were the devil’s workshop. With enough idleness, the churches would burn down. No priests, no masters. With “work” abolished, an entirely different economic order would spontaneously appear.

Everybody always claims that anarchists don’t understand real-world economics. That’s probably true, as tenured economists judge the truth, anyway. However, I’d point out that Facebook and Google today are colossal, super-rich commercial empires that don’t “pay” most of their “workers” any “salary.” Google and Facebook are both “free” to millions of users, because the users are just inside there, playing around, pursuing their own private interests, in very much a Bob Black ludic style.

So, yes, it turns out that unpaid, informal, unforced labor is in fact hugely productive economically. It's worth a hell of a lot of money. Every time you perform a Google Search, you are invisibly aided by thousands of other people clicking buttons. These glossy, collective big-data empires are certainly the dominant economic titans of our modern era — if you don't count the domineering prisons, the lethal military, and the sinister, climate-wrecking oil companies.

However, I'm rather anticipating Bob's own narrative here; ABOLITION OF WORK was written ages ago, way back in the era of manual typewriters and Xerox machines. It's not Bob's fault that Facebook, Amazon and Google exist, for the time being, and we all enrich them, and that's not called "work," and we don't get any salary for it. Bob was a lone, marginal crusader in pursuit of his unique vision of freedom and social justice. He was never a disruptive venture capitalist.

However, there were useful, broad hints in his work that his area of the "margin" was a general avant-garde.

I never became a Bob Black disciple, although I used to write and post him the occasional paper letter. Mostly, I just admired and tried to emulate his conceptual freedom. I learned about the Situationists through Bob Black: those French ultra-leftists who believed that the apparently solid bourgeois world was mere "spectacle." The Situationists liked to pretend that the streets of Paris weren't the "real" streets, that they were map-less grid of absolute possibilities: you could drift through streets at random and discover wonders, you could dig up the hard cobblestones and there would be a beach underneath.

It was great that Bob so effortlessly understood this deeply alien philosophy, and also thought that the Situationists were befuddled Europeans that us Americans might somehow transcend. The Situationists were rather a lot like embittered, angry, Molotov-tossing science fiction writers. Spreading useful awareness of this kind to those who sought it, that was just one of Bob's many laudable public services.

In my own milieu of the American popular mid-list novel, there had always been a cadre of guys who thought that writing fiction should be "hard work." These were the Gradgrind characters within my profession, the grim obsessives who rose at 5 AM, ran four miles, took a cold shower and wrote their 2,000 words every day without fail.

In their mode of labor, the Muse was for sissies; creativity would come if you cracked the deadline whip; your mass-market paperback novel was an industrial entertainment product in direct competition for the consumer's beer money. These guys were basically artists who'd swallowed the poison of "forced labor" that Bob Black decried. They were self-employed, but cruelly keen to become their own abusive bosses.

I quite liked writing fiction, and I thought maybe there was something to this sternly disciplined workaday approach to it, but having read Bob Black, I decided to knock that off. I resolved that my writing wouldn't be a commercial product to efficiently entertain the reader. No, it would be much more like the stuff that Bob Black wrote: weird, provocative, maybe radically wrong-headed, but something intelligent, fresh and unconventional that didn't waste the reader's precious hours of allotted lifespan.

Like the writing of Bob Black, my writing might not be exactly pragmatic in intent, but it would have Bob's sense of cogency, his obscure urgency. In prose, I would go for his frankly-declarative sense of Orwellian precision: *"The reinventing of daily life means marching off the edge of our maps."* *"In order to stop suffering, we have to stop working."* *"You are what you do. If you do boring, stupid, monotonous work, chances are you'll end up boring, stupid and monotonous."*

I had a day-job while I was first reading Bob Black. It was a pretty good job, but I gave it up. I realized that my “work” would always be in my way. Not just that “work” limited my free time for writing — I wrote my second novel at work, frankly, and I wasn’t “suffering” all that much from my kindly boss and amusing co-workers — but the daily coercion of work was delimiting my imagination. “You are what you do,” and I liked to do freewheeling, imaginative novels.

So, I ended up with no job. And no particular resume or skill set. No house, no heaps of property, no particular home address. Nowadays my passport is bursting with stamps, and I’m probably best known these days, not for my novels that people pay me money for, but for free aphorisms that I toss onto social media.

So, it’s not that unlikely a lifestyle, this Bob Black never-work scheme. It’s what life is like for people the age of my own adult children. They’re a “precarious” generation: they’re semi-, under-, or unemployed, they don’t have suburban white-picket houses, lunch buckets and union cards.

So, nowadays, I just live like a modern person lives. It means that when I talk about real life to people half my age, we can talk as contemporaries. I will always be very grateful to Bob Black for that.

Bruce Sterling — Belgrade, 2015

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