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Eight Hours Too Many?

E. Kerr

2000

Work less to live more. What a beautiful slogan! I wonder if the one who coined it understood the unintended truth it contains, that work is the negation of life. “Eight hours of obligation is enough to exhaust a person’s energy. What he gives at work is his life, the better part of her strength. Even if the work has not degraded her, even if she has not felt himself overcome by boredom and fatigue, he leaves exhausted, diminished, with the imagination withered.” So a worker wrote several decades ago. Anyone who has worked even for just one day understands the meaning of these words. This is why the reduction of work hours has always been one of the primary demands of those who don’t commission the work, but who carry it out, and so bear its entire burden.

It is taken for granted that less time spent at work means more time dedicated to oneself, and thus that every minute, every hour snatched from the factory or office could only represent a step forward toward a better quality of life. Most likely no one would venture to deny it once someone says it. But we shouldn’t ignore the contradictions to be found in such a conviction. If one wants to work less, it is clearly because one does not love work. But why? If work gave satisfaction, joy,

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contentment, why would one every renounce it? If work was really the dimension through which the human being creates the world and himself, why does she feel it as a burden? If it is true that work is human nobility, why hope that a stroke of fortune will free us from it forever? Clearly because work does not exalt the human being at all, but rather degrades her. Life is the consumption of vital human energy, but through work this squandering of energy occurs at times, in places, in ways and for aims that are not those of the person working. When one works, it is always for someone else. So by detesting imposition, one ends up detesting work.

But if we don't love work, if it is a constraint, then why work? Because we can't do anything else; this is the most common response. And it's true, we can't do anything else. If we don't want to die of hunger, we are forced to earn money, we are forced to go to work. If we want to work, we are forced to learn a trade, whichever one circumstances suggest to us, so that we end up adapting ourselves to whatever befalls us. The people on this planet who can sincerely claim to love work, to feel fulfilled by what they do, are very few. But beyond this privileged few, we are all forced to do something that we don't want to do, we are forced to do a job that we would gladly avoid if we could. And what compels us is the fear of poverty. It really seems that all the conditions are there so that we can speak of extortion.

So working means submitting to extortion. But then what does a reduction in work hours mean? To begin with, reducing the hours of work means making a change. Many say a positive change. But there is a contradiction here as well. Changing a clause in a contract does not mean annulling the contract as such. On the contrary, as everyone knows well, a contract is renegotiated only if one intends to extend it. In other word, to continue to work. "But to work less and less!" someone will say. I don't think so. Rather I think that work isn't just a loss to all of us, but that there is a hoax involved in all of this as well. The

the face of any extortion. It is the very nature of work that is intolerable, not its duration. It is the need to exchange one's aspirations for biological survival. Work is not reduced, but destroyed. Extortion cannot be renegotiated. It has to be refused. And refusing this blackmail entails coming to daggers drawn with the blackmailers and also acquiring a different perception of the world, of life, and of the human activity that we now know only in its alienated form: work.

Of course, our blackmailers and their henchmen reject this sort of criticism. They certainly admit that the development of capitalism has produced some “imbalances”, but everything is explained away as excesses overcome by progress, a historical period already closed forever. In support of this thesis, one of their best arguments involves displaying the reduction of the workday. The fact that the daily hours of work have gone from sixteen to eight, and soon even less, should convince us that capitalism is not quite the bloody monster that we continue to depict, but rather is prepared to give a fair payment for services rendered in the years of exertion and fatigue. The “historical reduction” of work time would constitute the materialization of the workers’ conquest, the demonstration that the freedom and the reign of necessity can coexist, the proof of a possible progressive and peaceful modification of capitalism. But with such a pretense, something is left out. When the English parliament passed the first law limiting the length of the workday (the Factory Act) in 1848, it did so in order to put an end to workers’ agitation that threatened to become a civil war. After the legislative reduction of the workday to ten hours — which also allowed the reduction of wages to by about 25 per cent — the working class, as its godfather Marx had to say, “was struck by a deprivation of rights and placed under the law of suspicion”. In France, the reform proclaimed after February 1848 led to the bloody suppression of the June insurrection in Paris. A close connection thus exists between social war and legislative intervention: the latter works essentially to placate the former, or to avert it. In the same way, the laws that limit the workday are enacted when it becomes vital to avoid social disorders that might break out in an increasingly indefensible social order.

When they started to talk about the reduction of work time to eight hours a day at the beginning of the last century, an old anarchist got straight to the point, exclaiming, “Work eight hours a day for a boss?... But that’s eight hours too many!” This anarchist’s indignation is the indignation that should be felt in

reduction of work hours will not make us work less, but more. In fact, in the great majority of cases, it isn’t just the hours that are reduced, but the earnings as well. We work less, but we also earn less. It follows from this that anyone who wants to maintain the acquired standard of living, and perhaps improve it, will be forced to find a second job to round out her wages: to work more, not less. Instead of doing one job for eight hours every day, one will now do two jobs, one for six hours and another for four hours, for example.

I could be wrong of course. Maybe we really will manage to work less for the same wages. Maybe our Masters are really willing to grant this to us. But let’s be sincere. In a world where everything calls for unbridled consumption, in which it is utterly necessary to pay rent or a loan for a house, the installment on the car or furniture, the bill for the dentist or plumber — and what about the latest fashion in boots, should we do without them? and the movie that won ten Oscars, should we miss it? and that new restaurant that just opened, shall we see how the food is? — it is easy to predict that no one will be content with a lower wage in exchange for a few more hours for himself. If we gain more time, we will not use it for ourselves. We will use it to go look for another job that will let us earn more money. So it doesn’t matter whether wages are lowered or remain the same: either way we will go in search of new employment. And the new jobs all have the virtue of *flexibility* loudly invoked by industrialists. These jobs are inferior, poorly paid, with little security. And no one can protest against it. No one is prepared to face trouble for a temporary job to which he is bound for just a short time.

In short, we will not really have more time for ourselves. So what is this time that gets talked about so much? Time is always money. Whether it is the time spent at work, the time spent traveling between home and the workplace, the time necessary for putting oneself in order with the management, the time reserved for professional development, the time passed

curing diseases caused by work, the time dedicated to restoring the energy spent on work or the time spent looking for a new job, the thesis does not change: all our time belongs to work, twenty-four hours out of twenty-four. Besides, in order to dedicate time to ourselves, we would at least have to know who we are, we would have to recognize ourselves, we would have to possess passions that are foreign to work time, that make our hearts pound. Do we have such passions? Do we really know ourselves? And how is it possible, considering that we have never had the time for it?

Besides anyone who puts up with being blackmailed must put up with the conditions set by the blackmailer. Blackmail is always based on a relationship of force and anyone who thinks she can change it to her advantage without having this force is naïve. This is why I think that reduction of work hours could only benefit industrialists and their political friends, in short, the blackmailers. Of course, we know that many of them turn red with rage when they hear talk about the reduction of work hours. Others, the shrewdest, have already sniffed the matter out and declared themselves willing.

It is true that in the past industrialists have always been interested in extending the workday to its extreme limits. The more their subordinates worked, the richer they became. And every increase in productivity comes about through a more constant, methodical and intense use of productive forces. It's just that after a century, the principle productive force is no longer the human being. It is the machine. Since the industrial revolution, humans serve almost solely to make machines function. And the machines are becoming more and more powerful. In order to be able to maintain and increase their profits, industrialists are thus compelled to update and modernize their technological equipment. But at the same time as capital changes its work methods, it also transforms human beings, because it changes their relationship to work and to what surrounds them. The advent of information technology is indicative in

this sense. Today a world of work that revolves around workers and factories is unthinkable. Of course, the continuing improvement of machines, so that they can function with less and less attention, makes the human presence almost superfluous. There is no longer a need for a thousand workers to build an airplane; it requires much less skill to handle a computer. But these wonderful computers are expensive and become quickly outdated, very quickly. Purchase one and another one that is better is already ready, and it is absolutely "necessary". In order to make them render the maximum, they must always be working, without a moment's pause. Otherwise, how would the industrialist pay off the costs he must bear? Thus, the presence of human beings is still necessary. But fewer and fewer are needed, it is true. This is where the possibility for reducing work time would be effectively concrete. But if the civilization of machines can free us from the burden of work, why does everyone mourn its loss? Because no one can just stand there twiddling his thumbs. Well then, everyone should work since, aside from providing us with the means of subsistence, work *keeps us occupied*. It controls us. It weakens us. The job is a kind of preventative police. This is why when one is jobless, it is necessary to invent a job for her. Modern information technologies permit it. And this is how thousands, if not millions, of individuals are prepared to let themselves be nailed down in front of a computer, to work for more than eight hours a day. Because this is the reality of "telework". You work to exhaustion.

In case we haven't understood it, technological innovations are prepared by our blackmailers to give us the illusion that they make our lives better. Their aims are not exactly beneficent; their purpose is not to produce things in half the time it used to take in order to alleviate the fatigue of the individual. On the contrary, the more the productive processes are sped up, the more possibilities for expanding it further open up. If the old economy seems to have reached its full development, a new one is started. New economy, precisely.