# Claire Wolfe: Dark Satanic Cubicles

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Great article by Claire Wolfe in the Loompanics catalog. Wolfe starts by riffing off of Tennessee Ernie Ford's hit "Sixteen tons" (actually a cover of a 1946 song by Merle Travis, which had got him branded a commie fellow-traveller by the U.S. government).

> Although Travis was a patriotic Kentucky boy, the U.S. government thought any song complaining about hard work and hopeless debt was subversive. The song got Travis branded a "communist sympathizer" (a dangerous label in those days). A Capitol record exec who was a Chicago DJ in the late 40s remembers an FBI agent coming to the station and advising him not to play "Sixteen Tons."

She goes on, quite eloquently (if less lyrically than Travis), with some prose that might get her labelled subversive in her own right:

> In a healthy human community, jobs are neither necessary nor desirable. Productive work is necessary –

for economic, social, and even spiritual reasons. Free markets are also an amazing thing, almost magical in their ability to satisfy billions of diverse needs. Entrepreneurship? Great! But jobs – going off on a fixed schedule to perform fixed functions for somebody else day after day at a wage – aren't good for body, soul, family, or society.

Intuitively, wordlessly, people knew it in 1955. They knew it in 1946. They really knew it when Ned Ludd and friends were smashing the machines of the early Industrial Revolution (though the Luddites may not have understood exactly why they needed to do what they did).

Jobs suck. Corporate employment sucks. A life crammed into 9-to-5 boxes sucks. Gray cubicles are nothing but an update on William Blake's "dark satanic mills." Granted, the cubicles are more bright and airy; but they"re different in degree rather than in kind from the mills of the Industrial Revolution. Both cubicles and dark mills signify working on other people's terms, for other people's goals, at other people's sufferance. Neither type of work usually results in us owning the fruits of our labors or having the satisfaction of creating something from start to finish with our own hands. Neither allows us to work at our own pace, or the pace of the seasons. Neither allows us access to our families, friends, or communities when we need them or they need us. Both isolate work from every other part of our life...

We've made wage-slavery so much a part of our culture that it probably doesn't even occur to most people that there's something unnatural about separating work from the rest of our lives. Or about spending our

entire working lives producing things in which we can often take only minimal personal pride – or no pride at all.

Reminds me of a quote from Albert Jay Nock:

> Our natural resources, while much depleted, are still great; our population is very thin, running something like twenty or twenty-five to the square mile; and some millions of this population are at the moment "unemployed," and likely to remain so because no one will or can "give them work." The point is not that men generally submit to this state of things, or that they accept it as inevitable, but that they see nothing irregular or anomalous about it because of their fixed idea that work is something to be given.

One especially interesting comment in Wolfe's article is her assessment of the failure of telecommuting to materialize on anything near the scale it was expected to ten or fifteen years ago:

> Although computer-based "knowledge work" hasn't enabled millions of us to leave the corporate world and work at home (as, again, it was supposed to), that's more a problem of corporate power psychology than of technology. Our bosses fear to "let" us work permanently at home; after all, we might take 20-minute coffee breaks, instead of 10!

That was a great deal of the motivation behind creating the factory system in the first place: not because it was a more efficient form of production (there were forms of new technology that could have made labor much more productive in the context of the household labor or putting-out system), but because it put the capitalist in direct control of the production process and promoted the

social control of labor. The same motive persists for maintaining the factory's successor, the cubicle system–even when abolishing it would be far more efficient in terms of everything but work-discipline. See, for example, Stephen Marglin's article "What Do Bosses Do?"

Wolfe concludes:

> And we can begin to consider: What types of technology let us live more independently, and what types of independence still enable us to take advantage of life-enhancing technologies while keeping ourselves out of the life-degrading job trap?
>
> Take a job and you've sold part of yourself to a master. You've cut yourself off from the real fruits of your own efforts.
>
> When you own your own work, you own your own life. It's a goal worthy of a lot of sacrifice. And a lot of deep thought.
>
> Like Merle Travis and Ned Ludd, anybody who begins to come up with a serious plan that starts cutting the underpinnings from the state-corporate power structure can expect to be treated as Public Enemy Number One.

The chief obstacle to the process?

> government and its heavily favored and subsidized corporations and financial markets...

She can probably expect that FBI agent to show up any minute now.

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