

Does Work Really Work?

L. Susan Brown

One of the first questions people often ask when they are introduced to one another in our society is, “what do you do?” This is more than just polite small talk — it is an indication of the immense importance work has for us. Work gives us a place in the world; it is our identity, it defines us; and, ultimately, it confines us. Witness the psychic dislocation when we lose our jobs, when we are fired, laid off, forced to retire, or when we fail to get the job we applied for in the first place. An unemployed person is defined not in positive but in negative terms: to be unemployed is to lack work. To lack work is to be socially and economically marginalized. To answer “nothing” to the question “what do you do?” is emotionally difficult and socially unacceptable. Most unemployed people would rather answer such a question with vague replies like “I’m between contracts” or “I have a few resumes out and the prospects look promising” than admit outright that they do not work. For to not work in our society is to lack social significance — it is to be a nothing, because nothing is what you do.

Those who *do* work (and they are becoming less numerous as our economies slowly disintegrate) are something — they are teachers, nurses, doctors, factory workers, machinists, dental assistants, coaches, librarians, secretaries, bus drivers, and so on. They have identities defined by what they do. They are considered normal productive members of our society. Legally, their work is considered to be subject to an employment contract, which, if not explicitly laid out at the beginning of employment, is implicitly understood to be part of the relationship between employee and employer. The employment contract is based on the idea that it is possible for a fair exchange to occur between an employee who trades her/his skills and labour for wages supplied by the employer. Such an idea presupposes that a person’s skills and labour are not inseparable from them, but are rather separate attributes that can be treated like property to be bought and sold. The employment contract assumes that a machinist or an exotic dancer, for instance, have the capacity to separate out from themselves the particular elements that are required by the employer and are then able to enter into an agreement with the employer to exchange only those attributes for money. The machinist is able to sell technical skills while the exotic dancer is able to sell sexual appeal, and, according to the employment contract, they both do so without selling themselves as people. Political scientists and economists refer to such attributes as “property in the person,” and speak about a person’s ability to contract out labour power in the form of property in the person.

In our society, then, work is defined as the act by which an employee contracts out her or his labour power as property in the person to an employer for fair monetary compensation. This way of describing work, of understanding it as a fair exchange between two equals, hides the real relationship between employer and employee: that of domination and subordination. For if the truth behind the employment contract were widely known, workers in our society would refuse to work, because they would see that it is impossible for human individuals to truly separate out labour power from themselves. “Property in the person” doesn’t really exist as something that an individual can simply sell as a separate thing. Machinists cannot just detach from themselves the specific skills needed by an employer; those skills are part of an organic whole that cannot be disengaged from the entire person; similarly, sex appeal is an intrinsic part of exotic dancers, and it is incomprehensible how such a constitutive, intangible characteristic could be severed from the dancers themselves. A dancer has to be totally present in order to dance, just like a machinist must be totally present in order to work; neither can just send their discrete skills to do the work for them. Whether machinist, dancer, teacher, secretary, or pharmacist, it is not only one’s skills that are being sold to an employer, it is also one’s very being. When employees contract out their labour power as property in the person to employers, what is really happening is that employees are selling their own self determination, their own wills, their own freedom. In short, they are, during their hours of employment, slaves.

What is a slave? A slave is commonly regarded as a person who is the legal property of another and is bound to absolute obedience. The legal lie that is created when we speak of a worker’s capacity to sell property in the person without alienating her or his will allows us to maintain the false distinction between a worker and a slave. A worker must work according to the will of another. A worker must obey the boss, or ultimately lose the job. The control the employer has over the employee at work is absolute. There is, in the end, no negotiation — you do it the boss’ way or you hit the highway. It is ludicrous to believe that it is possible to separate out and sell “property in the person” while maintaining human integrity. To sell one’s labour power on the market is to enter into a relationship of subordination with one’s employer — it is to become a slave to the employer/master. The only major differences between a slave and a worker is that a worker is only a slave at work while a slave is a slave twenty-four hours a day, and slaves know that they are slaves, while most workers do not think of themselves in such terms.

Carole Pateman points out the implications of the employment contract in her book *The Sexual Contract*:

Capacities or labour power cannot be used without the worker using his will, his understanding and experience, to put them into effect. The use of labour power requires the presence of its “owner,” and it remains as mere potential until he acts in the manner necessary to put it into use, or agrees or is compelled so to act; that is, the worker must labour. To contract for the use of labour power is a waste of resources unless it can be used in the way in which the new owner requires. The fiction “labour power” cannot be used; what is required is that the worker labours as demanded. The employment contract must, therefore, create a relationship of command and obedience between employer and worker... In short, the contract in which the worker allegedly sells his labour power is a contract in which, since he cannot be separated from his capacities, he sells command over the use of his body and himself. To obtain the right to the use of another is to be a (civil) master.¹

¹ Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), pp. 150–151.

Terms like “master” and “slave” are not often used when describing the employment contract within capitalist market relations; however, this does not mean that such terms don’t apply. By avoiding such terms and instead insisting that the employment contract is fair, equitable and based on the worker’s freedom to sell his or her labour power, the system itself appears fair, equitable and free. One problem with misidentifying the true nature of the employee/employer relationship is that workers experience work as slavery at the same time that they buy into it ideologically.

No matter what kind of job a worker does, whether manual or mental, well paid or poorly paid, the nature of the employment contract is that the worker must, in the end, obey the employer. The employer is always right. The worker is told how to work, where to work, when to work, and what to work on. This applies to university professors and machinists, to lawyers and carpet cleaners: when you are an employee, you lose your right to self-determination. This loss of freedom is felt keenly, which is why many workers dream of starting their own businesses, being their own bosses, being self-employed. Most will never realize their dreams, however, and instead are condemned to sell their souls for money. The dream doesn’t disappear, however, and the uneasiness, unhappiness, and meaninglessness of their jobs gnaws away at them even as they defend the system under which they exploitedly toil.

It doesn’t have to be this way. There is nothing sacred about the employment contract that protects it from being challenged, that entrenches it eternally as a form of economic organization. We can understand our own unhappiness as workers not as a psychological problem that demands Prozac, but rather as a human response to domination. We can envision a better way of working, and we can do so now, today, in our own lives. By doing so, we can chisel away at the wage slavery system; we can undermine it and replace it with freer ways of working.

What would a better way of work look like? It would more resemble what we call play than work. That is not to say that it would be easy, as play can be difficult and challenging, like we often see in the sports we do for fun. It would be self-directed, self-desired, and freely chosen. This means that it would have to be disentangled from the wage system, for as soon as one is paid one becomes subservient to whoever is doing the paying. As Alexander Berkman noted: “labour and its products must be exchanged without price, without profit, freely according to necessity.”² Work would be done because it was desired, not because it was forced. Sounds impossible? Not at all. This kind of work is done now, already, by most of us on a daily basis. It is the sort of activity we choose to do after our eight or ten hours of slaving for someone else in the paid workplace. It is experienced every time we do something worthwhile for no pay, every time we change a diaper, umpire a kids’ baseball game, run a race, give blood, volunteer to sit on a committee, counsel a friend, write a newsletter, bake a meal, or do a favour. We take part in this underground free economy when we coach, tutor, teach, build, dance, baby-sit, write a poem, or program a computer without getting paid. We must endeavor to enlarge these areas of free work to encompass more and more of our time, while simultaneously trying to change the structures of domination in the paid work-place as much as we possibly can.

Barter, while superficially appearing as a challenge to the wage system, is still bound by the same relationships of domination. To say that I will paint your whole house if you will cook my meals for a month places each of us into a situation of relinquishing our own self-determination for the duration of the exchange. For I must paint your house to your satisfaction and you must

² Alexander Berkman, *ABC of Anarchism* (London: Freedom Press, 1977), p. 20.

make my meals to my satisfaction, thereby destroying for each of us the self-directed, creative spontaneity necessary for the free expression of will: Barter also conjures up the problem of figuring out how much of my time is worth how much of your time, that is, what the value of our work is, in order that the exchange is Fair and equal. Alexander Berkman posed this problem as the question, “why not give each according to the value of his work?”, to which he answers,

Because there is no way by which value can be measured... Value is what a thing is worth... What a thing is worth no one can really tell. Political economists generally claim that the value of a commodity is the amount of labour required to produce it, of “socially necessary labour,” as Marx says. But evidently it is not a just standard of measurement. Suppose the carpenter worked three hours to make a kitchen chair, while the surgeon took only half an hour to perform an operation that saved your life. If the amount of labour used determines value, then the chair is worth more than your life. Obvious nonsense, of course. Even if you should count in the years of study and practice the surgeon needed to make him capable of performing the operation, how are you going to decide what “an hour of operating” is worth? The carpenter and mason also had to be trained before they could do their work properly, but you don’t figure in those years of apprenticeship when you contract for some work with them. Besides, there is also to be considered the particular ability and aptitude that every worker, writer, artist or physician must exercise in his labours. That is a purely individual personal factor. How are you going to estimate its value?

That is why value cannot be determined. The same thing may be worth a lot to one person while it is worth nothing or very little to another. It may be worth much or little even to the same person, at different times. A diamond, a painting, a book may be worth a great deal to one man and very little to another. A loaf of bread will be worth a great deal to you when you are hungry, and much less when you are not. Therefore the real value of a thing cannot be ascertained if it is an unknown quantity.³

In a barter system, for an exchange to be fair, the value of the exchanged goods and services must be equal. However, value is unknowable, therefore barter falls apart on practical grounds.

Increasing the amount of free work in our lives requires that we be conscious of the corrupting effects of money and barter. Thus, baby-sit your friend’s children not for money, but because you want to do so. Teach someone how to speak a second language, or edit someone’s essay, or coach a running team for the simple pleasure of taking part in the activity itself. Celebrate giving and helping as play, without expecting anything in return. Do these things because you want to, not because you have to.

This is not to say that we should do away with obligations, but only that such obligations should be self-assumed. We must take on free work in a responsible matter, or else our dream of a better world will degenerate into chaos. Robert Graham outlines the characteristics of self-assumed obligations:

Self-assumed obligations are not ‘binding’ in the same sense that laws or commands are. A law or command is binding in the sense that failure to comply with it will normally attract the application of some sort of coercive sanction by authority promulgating the law or making the command. The binding character of law is not internal to the concept of law itself but dependent on external factors, such as the legitimacy of the authority implementing and enforcing it. A promise, unlike a law, is

³ Berkman, p. 19.

*not enforced by the person making it. The content of the obligation is defined by the person assuming it, not by an external authority.*⁴

To promise, then, is to oblige oneself to see through an activity, but the fulfillment of the obligation is up to the person who made the promise in the first place, and nonfulfillment carries no external sanction besides, perhaps, disappointment (and the risk that others will avoid interacting with someone who habitually breaks her or his promises). Free work, therefore, is a combination of voluntary play and self-assumed obligations, of doing what you desire to do and co-operating with others. It is forsaking the almighty dollar for the sheer enjoyment of creation and recreation. Bob Black lyrically calls for the abolition of work, which “doesn’t mean that we have to stop doing things. It does mean creating a new way of life based on play... By ‘play’ I mean also festivity, creativity, conviviality, commensuality, and maybe even art. There is more to play than child’s play, as worthy as that is. I call for a collective adventure in generalized joy and freely interdependent exuberance.”⁵

We must increase the amount of free work in our lives by doing what we want, alone and with others, whether high art or mundane maintenance. We need to tear ourselves away from thinking in strict exchange terms: I will do this for you if you will do that for me. Even outside our formal work hours, the philosophy of contract and exchange permeates our ways of interacting with others. This is evident when we do a favour for someone – more often than not, people feel uncomfortable unless they can return the favour in some way, give tit for tat. We must resist this sense of having to exchange favours. Instead, we need to be and act in ways that affirm our own desires and inclinations. This does not mean being lazy or slothful (although at times we may need to be so), but rather calls for self-discipline. Free work actually demands a great deal of self-discipline, as there is no external force making us work, but only our own internal desire to partake in an activity that motivates our participation.

While we move towards a freer world by consciously affirming free work outside the marketplace, we can also make a difference during those hours when we are paid to work. Being conscious of the fact that when we are selling our labour we are actually selling ourselves gives us self-awareness. Such self-awareness is empowering, as the first step to changing one’s condition is understanding the true nature of that condition. Through this understanding, we can develop strategies for challenging the slave wage system. For instance, every time we ignore the boss and do what we want, we create a mini-revolution in the workplace. Every time we sneak a moment of pleasure at work, we damage the system of wage slavery. Every time we undermine the hierarchical structure of decision-making in the workplace, we gain a taste of our own self-worth. These challenges can come from below or from above: those of us who achieve a measure of power in the workplace can institute structural changes that empower those below, drawing from principles like consensus decision-making and decentralization. For instance, as teachers we can introduce students to the idea of consensus by using such a method to make major class room decisions. Those of us who head up committees or task forces can advocate institutional structures, policies and constitutions that decentralize power. Of course, the wage system is inherently corrupt and unreformable; however, we can make it more bearable while at the same time trying to destroy it.

⁴ Robert Graham, *The Role of Contract in Anarchist Ideology*, in *For Anarchism: History, Theory, and Practice*, edited by David Goodway (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 168.

⁵ Bob Black, *The Abolition of Work and Other Essays* (Port Townsend: Loompanics), p. 17.

And destroy it we must. If one's identity is based on work, and work is based on the employment contract, and the employment contract is a falsehood, then our very identities have at their foundation a lie. In addition, the labour market is moving towards an ever-increasing exploitative form of work: it is predicted that by the year 2000, fifty percent of the labour force will be engaged in temp work — work which is even less self-directed than permanent full-time jobs. Bob Black has it right when he proclaims that “no one should ever work.”⁶ Who knows what kinds of creative activity would be unleashed if only we were free to do what we desired? What sorts of social organizations would we fashion if we were not stifled day in and day out by drudgery? For example, what would a woman's day look like if we abolished the wage system and replaced it with free and voluntary activity? Bob Black argues that “by abolishing wage-labor and achieving full unemployment we undermine the sexual division of labor;”⁷ which is the linchpin of modern sexism. What would a world look like that encouraged people to be creative and self-directed, that celebrated enjoyment and fulfillment? What would be the consequences of living in a world where, if you met someone new and were asked what you did, you could joyfully reply “this, that and the other thing” instead of “nothing?” Such is the world we deserve.

⁶ Black, p. 33.

⁷ Black, p. 29–30.

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