The Mythology of Work

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How Capitalism Persists Despite Itself

Peter Fleming

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Introduction
Once Upon a Time, Man Invented Work ...

Once upon a time, in some faraway corner of that universe which is dispersed into countless solar systems, there was a planet upon which clever animals invented 'work'. Slowly, work lost its association with survival and self-preservation and became a painful and meaningless ritual acted out for its own sake. Taking on a hue of endlessness and inescapability, this curious invention consumed almost every part of the clever beast's lives. Its constant presence kept the order; held certain divisions in place; lavished the few at the top with untold riches. Wonderful discoveries that might have made life easier for its inhabitants – like a device called 'email' – were twisted into the opposite, scattering dread and unhappiness everywhere. Life-support conditions on the planet became increasingly intolerable as the availability of actual work began to disappear. Strangely, this made the leaders celebrate it even more. The situation was clearly out of hand. Would these poor creatures ever rebel?

Readers of Nietzsche will recognize the paragraph above, echoing his attempt to temper the self-centredness of modern man and the arrogant belief in eternal 'knowledge'. The parable places this conceit in proper historical context and demonstrates the limited specificity of a system that appears universal. This book represents my attempt to do the same with the notion of work. But if 'man' was difficult to dislodge from the throne of infinity then doing the same with 'work' in the present era feels an almost impossible task. And I suggest that this bearing of impossibility is only a recent achievement. Following the postmodern historization of everything during the 1980s and 1990s, work strangely remained one of the few concepts that retained a sense of preordained immutableness – perhaps more so *following* the postmodern turn. This may have something to do with the close sympathies that postmodern relativism enjoyed with the neoliberal capitalist project. Whilst gender, race, sexuality and all other manner of identity positions were deemed 'up for grabs', capitalism

was silently ushered in as the ultimate ontological horizon of social life. It was not that work was beyond question. Rather it was not worthy of questioning. After all, is it not a rather boring notion to be excessively concerned with? And let's face it, don't we actually *need* work in order to remain distinct from the dark lands of economic backwardness and cultural stasis?

It is no exaggeration to suggest that work has become one of the new false universals of our time. This book seeks to understand why this is so and what we might do about it, since this is by no means a natural state of affairs. But it is easy to forget that given the way work has been implicated in so many social activities we engage in today (from paying the bills to education, to family matters, to choosing a life-long romantic partner for some, and so forth). Work and 'living' more generally are so inextricably entwined that it might seem that questioning the idea of work is a little like questioning 'life itself'. For don't we all have to work to live? No, not really. It is a social construct like any other – but the ubiquity it has attained over the last 20 years is quite astonishing. The patent dysfunctions of building a world around our jobs (or lack thereof if we are unemployed) are now becoming clear: not only permanent existential dread, which we have crafted as a way of life in order to tolerate the intolerable, but also the psychical and social damage that so much work has precipitated. Moreover, this trend is not contradicted by the fact that over half the global population eligible for work are currently unemployed. I shall argue that neoliberal rationality has created a neat ideological symbiosis between this strict 'no alternative' attitude we have towards paid employment and its manufactured scarcity (i.e. unemployment). And this serves an important class function under conditions of extreme inequality.

So how and why do many jobs feel so all-encompassing? To put it crudely, why are we working so much today and having difficulty in seeing a life beyond work in both personal and political terms? Of course, the bills have to be paid. But conventional wisdom presents a number of other answers, all of which I suggest are problematic. For example, perhaps the desire to make more money is to blame. Where this explanation falls down is that many organizations don't increase our rewards if we spend more time in the office. And once a certain level of material wealth is obtained, we tend to work for other reasons. What about the fear of unemployment, especially in times of economic crisis and uncertainty? There might be something to this. But marathon-like displays of work are also observed in occupations that are relatively secure and unthreatened by cuts. Perhaps we work so

much because we simply love our jobs. Unfortunately, 'love' is not a word used by most of the global workforce when describing their occupations. A recent survey (discussed further in Chapter 1) reveals that only about 13 per cent of the global workforce considered themselves 'engaged' by their jobs. The remaining 87 per cent feel deeply alienated. What about iPhones and email? Mobile technology comes closer to accounting for our work-obsessed culture. Smart phones and laptops mean that we are always contactable and this facilities the creeping encroachment of work over our lives. But this explanation is not completely convincing since there is nothing inherent in mobile technology that *forces* us to check our emails at 5 a.m. There must be some other social pressure behind it.

These typical accounts of contemporary work tend to overlook its fetishistic character. When we focus on the notion of work, we ought to see it as being only the concrete personification of a broader process. That process is, of course, capitalism. The accumulation of capital – in all its variants, including financial or fictitious capital – involves the use of a labour process that takes a variety of organizational forms. That labour process is in turn built around exploitation and class relations (i.e. who owns and controls the means of production). What we call work is the social embodiment and ritualistic calculus of that exploitation process. One reason that the ideology of work has got away with its recent exponential growth, becoming a 'way of life', is that it is still confused with survival and ineluctable necessity. This is one of the great ruses of neoliberal reason: it is able to impose an artificial regime based upon the pretext of organic self-preservation. And who can argue with that? I hope to demonstrate in the following pages that our workers' society has little to do with material subsistence, although that doesn't mean our jobs are any less real in terms of the influence and sway work holds over vast numbers of people around the world.

The way work exploits us in post-industrial societies has taken on some specific attributes that this book aims to explore in more depth. Neoliberal class relations are distinct in that they transform exploitation into something that strongly resembles *subsidization*. We work, pay taxes, take care of the bills and commuting costs for one single reason: not to 'survive' but so that the governing elite gains its privileges for nothing. Our labour is designed to provide freedom to the rich. Our work exists in order to subsidize the costs of their existence. For example, when I pay my taxes as a middle-class worker (which, counter to the neoliberal ideology of a minimalist state, is more oppressive than ever under this system), the

state is able to provide 'tax relief' to the corporate oligarchy. When I pay exorbitant fees for my education, this frees up cash for the ruling class to enjoy their world gratis. And so on. In this sense, work is no longer about 'earning' an income but closer to a rentier logic of extraction, whereby our struggle to make ends meet forms an outward payment structure that has no return benefit. And that structure is class based, of course. The more the neoliberal elite desires complete exemption from the social systems we are forced to participate in, the more we have to work. And because neoliberal capitalism entails such extreme inequalities of wealth distribution, work must become an inexorable way of life for most of us, rather than something we do among other things.

It has recently been stated that almost half of working people are economically insecure in Western capitalist societies. In the large cities of the world, the first hour of the working day is simply paying for that day's commute. All of this might sound like a banal fact, but it is actually quite shocking since work was once promoted as an exclusive vehicle for avoiding insecurity. Today it is the chief method for promulgating precarity. Full-time employment is one of the few things about you that predicts the likelihood that you will someday face true impoverishment. Big banks have an algorithm that uses the proxy of work to make these predictions on a daily basis since overdraft and financial indebtedness is their central source of profit. The calculation goes like this: if you work, then you probably need to commute; that means you must expend a specified proportion of your income on the capacity to work itself, which will often require some kind of credit, and this credit can be correlated with accommodation costs (since it is less expensive to commute than to live close to the workplace). That relationship allows the bank to make a rough calculation of the type of mortgage or rental arrangement in place, and from there they can delineate your family status, number of children, and future education costs. And so on. The neoliberal state adores this situation because workers are its prime source of economic subsidization (i.e. the transfer of wealth from you to the rich, and also to the underclass who would rebel without your cash) and the raw material of a different kind of ideological self-vindication. Insecurity itself becomes an *ideology*; let's call this the ideology of work, a class-tale that exceeds its own concrete social consequences. And this is why the negative is now integral to the new propaganda. Your enemy outsider status is the norm – everyone's exception is the norm. This is the only way it could ever be in a society that actively advocates the freedoms of socialism for an elite and

nasty dog-eat-dog capitalism for the rest. Perhaps this also highlights the underlying meaning of a society in which it looks as if work is done simply for the sake of it. This mythological status means that work is experienced as a sort of cultural ritual that is ultimately pointless. But it actually fulfils a specific class relation that is not accidental, but economically strategic and intentional. In short, we are no longer living in the 1950s. Nor the 1990s. Or the 2000s. Welcome to the desert of a rebirthed *pre-modernity*, the new social constellation of advanced capitalism.

Two interesting implications follow. First, the universalization of the ideology of work makes it difficult to challenge. This has been an extremely effective weapon for the ruling class, because the notion of work takes on near ontological qualities. And as I mentioned above, how can we question or reject that? It would be like rebuffing 'life itself'. This allows the subsidization process to be firmly entrenched and difficult to avoid. It is for this reason too that neoliberal apologists despise the social common – be it shareware, cooperatives and so forth – since it short-circuits the cross-subsidization structure of the late-capitalist order. When we engage in self-help another world emerges which is eminently milder, more realistic and happier. And secondly, much of the work we conduct comes to look rather purposeless and without objective merit. We feel trapped in a self-referential malaise of 'empty labour' (Paulsen, 2014). This ritualistic purposelessness is not orchestrated merely for ideological reasons. It also plays an important economic or class function. The future becomes a reflection of the broken present that everyone can see but do little about. The false totality of capitalist relations morphs into a fetish of its own apparent irreplaceability. Of course, this is all imaginary, but a *concrete imaginary* nevertheless with very real effects and consequences.

The labour of subsidization that has become the key motif of exploitation under neoliberal capitalism has both a vertical and a horizontal trajectory. Our productive labour – and given work's ritualistic aspect described already, a good deal of it isn't 'productive' – follows an upward movement of subsidization to the ruling elite. However, this also necessitates a horizontal and closely related form of exploitation. We not only pay for the neoliberal oligarchy directly but also indirectly as the template of work spreads out across the social body. For example, as the neoliberal state cuts housing welfare, working families and loved ones pick up the bill instead. The social commons stands in to cushion the blow caused by the subsidization economy, which today often takes the form of a massive reservoir of personal debt. Indeed, debt is the ultimate instrument of

horizontal subsidization, for it frees dominant groups from the direct social costs of their predatory activities.

Perhaps this structure also accounts for why the boundaries between work and non-work once so important for the reproduction of capitalism have slowly been dismantled over the last 20 years. Many of us no longer check in and out as our parents and grandparents once did. Work is a way of life, not only for symbolic (or cultural) reasons but also for practical reasons. With the streamlining of organizations (to save costs) and the increasingly chaotic nature of many jobs that are structured around 'free market' principles (e.g., competitive individualism, performance incentives, etc.), we begin to bear the full material costs of an employment system that is totally dysfunctional. And much of this occurs outside formal office hours: preparing for a meeting at the weekend, receiving a call from the boss at 11 p.m., paying for things vital to the job (uniforms, dental care, etc.) off our own bat. The neoliberal dream of turning us all into our own individual micro-enterprises – or what I will call in this book the 'I, Job' function – appears to have succeeded. But of course, here is the downside. Taking on capitalism's structural weaknesses as our own entails a serious price. The crisis of economic reason is lived as an internal social/existential crisis.

This facet of the post-industrial subsidization economy is wonderfully captured in the British TV comedy, *Peep Show*, starring David Mitchell and Robert Webb as Mark and 'Jez'. The comedy conveys the post-Blair years of social dejection and pointless work, all with a touch of absurdity added to the mix. In one episode, the otherwise happily unemployed Jez lands what he thinks might be his dream job when he meets Ben, an arrogant geek who sells music merchandize on the Web. Jez is rewarded with the job after sitting by Ben's side as he lies in a deep coma in hospital (Jez was really only there because he had designs on Ben's beautiful girlfriend). What is interesting about Jez is that he displays a healthy feat of work. But this time it is different. Because Ben is so relaxed and unconcerned about when the workday begins and the job is free from the clocking-in system typical of his previous forays into paid employment, Jez boasts that in his new role, 'work never starts'. The boundaries between labour and private life are fluid and almost non-existent. Jez aims to relish this informality. However, things turn out very differently:

> **Mark**: Jez, It's 12 p.m. on a Saturday and you're up, you've been out. Are you tripping?

Jez: Ben rang at 7 a.m. and wanted me to go into the office.

Mark: But I thought 'work never starts'?

Jez: Yeah, well, apparently work never starts and work never stops [holds up mobile phone]: it's got me by the blackberries! Turning it off is a sackable offense. If I go to a funeral, I can switch it on to vibrate. Plus, it turns out that the website is only really about the 'merch'.

Mark: The 'merch'?

Jez: Merchandize. Ben says I am all about the 'merch'. Cut me and I bleed 'merch'. I can't believe I had him at my mercy in the hospital and I let him go. If I'd known he was such an arsehole I would have given his tube a waggle … there was not even anyone at the office. Just me and the servers. After a while I started to pretend to be a robot and then … I sort of couldn't remember if I was a robot or not and so I had to get out of there.

Humour aside, this exchange nicely expresses some interesting dynamics concerning the 'social factory' of neoliberal capitalism. So-called non-work time is a resource to be used up, especially with the help of mobile technology. This is what gives late capitalism a strange sense of permanence – we are never not at work. Even if we are not being formally paid, that is no longer an excuse for deserting one's role. The time of labour curves back on itself, with only the happy occasion of a funeral partially exempting you from the injunction always to be on call. Moreover, this relationship to one's job functions to transform the body into an observable commodity form. As Jez points out, he is the 'merch' and he must fully identify with the product; not only in terms of liking or living it – this is nothing to do with commitment – but of sacrificing oneself for it. The metaphor of blood is very significant here. Your personal fortunes are but a mirror image of how much you are willing to be taken over by the immaterial labour process.

It is also telling that when Jez arrived at the office, he just sat there surrounded by mainframe servers. The intent of Ben's order was not related to productivity, but to obedience. This is the real cause of the 'empty labour' that defines so many jobs today – not mindless boredom but egregious displays of subordination that have little bearing on actual economic output. Moreover, we can observe that the authority relationship between Jez and Ben has a very strong informal flavour. Popular management pundits would like us to believe that this makes work more pleasant.

They even suggest that organizations ought to design their offices after warehouse apartments, to mimic the creativity, comradery and ethos of people driven by a labour of love. But workplace informality has a dark side; namely, the potential for authoritarianism to take on a rather sadistic and perverse quality. Informality and power do not go well together. Under such circumstances we are not only paying for the elite's freedoms, but being callously toyed with to boot. Hence Jez's rancour.

And herein lies the problem with anti-work arguments that evoke Parkinson's Law. The idea behind the law is simple. If we are given eight hours to perform a task, it usually takes eight hours to do so successfully. If we are only given three hours to do *the same* task, it typically takes three hours to do so successfully. Therefore, we could spend much less time on the job whilst maintaining the same level of productivity achieved by the 40-hour work week. But there is hitch with this rationale. Capitalism doesn't operate by presenting us with finite tasks. Instead, many jobs are characterized by forever multiplying demands – this is why we are never 'done' with our work. Now we are getting to the heart of Jez's complaint. The time spent at work is structured by a certain type of display, particularly one's protracted submission. The neoliberal theatre of subordination is only partially interested in measurable productiveness. The informalization of the employment relationship reveals this quite clearly.

Other criticisms of contemporary management, including my own, have pointed out how neoliberalism aims to enlist the entire subjective personality of the worker, warts and all. Hence the recent focus on 'authenticity' and the 'just be yourself' philosophy in contemporary corporate jargon, whereby managers seek to tap the vast wealth of social knowhow and vested intuition that isn't easy to prescribe in formal workplace settings. In doing so, creativity and innovation are successfully wedded to self-exploitation. The evidence suggests that this trend has certainly been important, especially regarding self-managing teams, autonomy and so forth. But I would say that the focus on 'the subject' actually camouflages a more significant force indicative of capitalism today: namely, *rationalization*. For all the talk about individuality, difference, personal authenticity and plural identities, late capitalism is extremely one-dimensional, revolving almost singularly around questions of efficiency, utility and input–output effectiveness. And society doesn't function very well when organized exclusively on these principles: it bends and groans under the pressure as faceless technocrats further rationalize our worlds so that our bodies absorb the costs of an unworkable system.

Such rationalization does not contradict my earlier point concerning the primacy of gratuitous obedience over real economic efficiency. Indeed, the two trends operate in tandem, with some rather bizarre consequences.

Financialization and shareholder capitalism perhaps represents the apogee of rationalized capitalism. Here, the numerical monetary logic of pure accumulation truly creates an inversion of ends and means that is shocking. Whatever it takes to increase shareholder value – firing staff, plundering the natural environment, creating extremely volatile property-market bubbles – must be pursued in a single-minded fashion, even if it *harms* the organization in question. Like all forms of hyper-rationalization, shareholder capitalism fosters a mentality that is generally antisocial and sometimes diabolical when observed from an outside perspective. For example, a large funeral home corporation in the United Kingdom recently had to break some bad news to its shareholders. Dividends will be less than expected because the winter was rather mild. Therefore, fewer elderly people died. The valuable ends of providing funeral home services now become a mere means for profit maximization. The more deaths, the more money made, which is now the end that matters. One may even imagine the firm's managing directors eventually hoping for a harsh winter (as energy firms clearly do), perhaps even encouraging a speculative market around future weather patterns (as Enron notoriously did) and so forth.

We can observe a similar shareholder rationalism depleting city accommodation in the large centres of the capitalist West, something that is directly linked to the reproduction of the global workforce. Affordable and decent housing ought to be a basic entitlement. But it is not in a city like London, which is caught in an out-of-control frenzy of corporatization. Now property is a mere means to enhance the profits of large construction firms. As a result, it is no surprise that London is now considered one of the least liveable cities in Europe according to a recent 'liveability index' (see Economist Intelligence Unit, 2014), especially for a workforce that is dwelling in almost Victorian levels of deprivation (the 1800s blight of 'rickets' has recently made a return in England). For most of its citizens, a small plastic rectangle that we 'never leave home without' is the only thing that stands between them and the burgeoning under-proletariat. For sure, bankers need to be forever banished for (a) causing the current mess we are in and (b) having the audacity to continue to make excessive profits from the very socio-economic crisis they created. But construction firms are not far behind them in this respect.

This peculiar money-only focus entails a cultural logic too. All forms of rationality invariably seep into the biosphere and contaminate the way we appreciate the world. We are truly Weber's heirs. If we went back only 20 or 30 years, we would be astounded by the sheer non-utility that made up good parts of society, which to us today look incomprehensibly wasteful, irrational and non-transparent: tariffs in automobile industries that were never profitable in a 'free market' sense; jobs maintained to keep people in employment, and for no other reason; national sports teams that were still amateur and unremunerated; universities free of league tables and regimented performance assessment exercises. Even at the level of everyday culture and aesthetics, our currently conditioned perspective would view the formalities of the early 1970s as alien, meandering and uneconomical. Neoliberalism represents the reign of technocrats, and this has changed the way we see ourselves and others. In Marcuse's brilliant 1941 essay, 'Some Social Implications of Modern Technology', he focuses on this ideological aspect of rationalization, which has been amplified to the nth degree today. According to him, 'efficiency here called for integral unification and simplification, and for the removal of all "waste", the avoidance of all detours, it called for radical coordination' (Marcuse, 1941/1982: 65).

This is an important facet of how our overly contractualized lives around work are organized today and why it seems so inevitable and inescapable. Our very perceptions have been colonized by the technocrat – the fascist inside us. For some, even their own redundancy appears 'reasonable' if the economy is slowing down. They understand that this fate must be so. More importantly, this rationalization makes any other activity that does not fit the template of strict efficiency seem bizarre, especially behaviour that signals a degree of deviation or non-observance:

> The decisive point is that this attitude – which dissolves all actions into a sequence of semi-spontaneous reactions to prescribed mechanical norms – is not only perfectly rational but also perfectly reasonable. All protest is senseless, and the individual who would insist in his freedom of action would become a crank … It is a rational apparatus, combining utmost expediency with utmost convenience, saving time and energy, removing waste, adapting all means to ends. (Marcuse, 1941/1982: 66)

So, we have the worst of both worlds. Sadistic informality and punitive rationalization. For this reason, the tattle about 'play', 'well-being' and