Workforce

Our Daily Bread:
Some Thoughts on Earning a Crust

Edited by Anthony Morgan

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Anthony Morgan / Introduction

This collection touches upon some crucial questions related to work in contemporary Western societies. Work has become a big issue once again, with buzzwords like "neoliberalism", "precarity", and "flexibility" all hinting at progressive erosions of traditional forms of job security, e.g. fixed salaries, fixed hours, paid holiday, pension schemes etc. The net effect is a profound feeling of *insecurity*. Those with high status jobs seem to be working too hard, driving themselves simply for the sake being driven, while those who are unemployed suffer the horror of anonymous time stretching out endlessly before them, resulting in various kinds of mental and physical afflictions. Somewhere in between, normal working life carries on, albeit with its contours constantly shifting, seemingly in the direction of reduced stability, autonomy, and enjoyment. Hanging over many current jobs is the spectre of their inevitable obsolescence – the slowly unfolding fate of the Blockbuster video employee has now become increasingly democratized.

Doubtless the working world will change in ways that we currently struggle to imagine, and this collection generally avoids speculation about what this may involve. Instead, the contributors try and capture what is central to our working lives as they are lived at the moment. For the most part, the picture is pretty bleak. In contrast to the dominant political equation of work with virtue and purpose, what we find instead are stories of stress, fatigue, meaninglessness, resentment, victimization, and emptiness. The daily grind has increasingly colonized our minds as well as our bodies.

I don't think I need to say anything else as the essays below have plenty to say. The structure is pretty straightforward: the first section ("Work") tries to offer an overview of certain dominant conceptions of work; the second section ("Working Lives") gives a variety of more intimate accounts of what it is like to be working; finally, the third section ("Identities After Work"), offers some visions of what life beyond the totalizing presence of work may look like. The collection ends with a poem that hints at the creative joys that work at its best is always capable of generating. We should of course always strive to generate working lives that are creative, meaningful, and autonomous; how this is to be achieved is a different matter, and one best left to more practical thinkers than me. Let's hope that this collection can inspire such thinking.

Work

Work / Toby Lloyd // The Modern Conception of Work / Elizabeth Robson // Work in a Free Society / Nicholas Smith

Toby Lloyd / Work

[wurk]

noun
1. exertion or effort directed to produce or accomplish something; labour; toil.

2. productive or operative activity.

3. employment, as in some form of industry, especially as a means of earning one's livelihood: to look for work.

4. one's place of employment: Don't phone him at work.

adjective

6. of, for, or concerning work: work clothes.

7. shaped and planed; working.

verb (used without object)

8. to do work; labour.

9. to be employed, especially as a means of earning one's livelihood: He hasn't worked for six weeks.

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On meeting someone for the first time and discovering their name, the next question, if not, "where are you from?" will probably be "what do you do?" Which is reasonable enough, but their answer is likely to become the thing that defines that person in your mind from then on: *Paul the teacher, Sarah the solicitor, John the receptionist, Sam the cleaner or Chloe the che*f. This labelling process doesn't seem unfair when we are expected to prioritise our job (*Don't phone him at work*) above the other elements that make up our lives, even if they mean more to us.

Many believe that a strong work ethic gives value to your life and hard work helps to build character [*David the politician*], and that anyone can make something of themselves if they just pull up their boot straps and put in some hard graft (*earning one's livelihood: to look for work*). This may be true for the numerous people that have trained for many years and spent considerable amounts of money to be able to achieve their career goals [*Helen the Doctor*]. But for many of us, the jobs we do are not the thing that gives meaning to our lives [*Tim the Paper Stock Sales Executive, Randall the Video Store Clerk*], instead valuing the activity that happens away from the 9 to 5 (or 10pm to 6am) schedule where they can become: *Nicola the drummer, Les the singer, Luke the sculptor, Richard the Dad and Vicki the dancer.*

For legions of people, being defined by their occupation is a depressing thought. It reflects the fact that their job may be banal and pointless whilst also probably an absolute necessity for them to afford an existence – let alone cover the cost of the things that actually make their lives bearable. But the alternative to work is poverty and being shunned as work-shy or a skiver (*He hasn't worked for six weeks*).

From my experience, most jobs are tolerable as long as you get on with the people you work with. If shop/warehouse/café/sweatshop/office morale is high, it is amazing what you can put up with: the daily monotony, the repetitive tasks, the irritating customers, the humiliating uniforms, empty company core-values, the long commute. All of these aggravations become infinitely more bearable when you can share them with a group of people who all treat each other like human beings. This rapport can be similar to being part of a football or volleyball team, rambling club, playing in a band or other pointless activities which have no financial benefits.

In contrast, the most unpleasant working environments I have experienced were dominated by incompetent managers who considered those below them as plebs, consistently blaming them for their own mistakes and assuming credit for successes largely achieved, in spite of, rather than due to, their involvement. Under these conditions, simple tasks become arduous and work soon becomes toil.

Outside of the work setting, it is incredible how much energy we are prepared to invest into an activity we enjoy, even if we are not receiving any financial incentive for our labour. Maybe instead of putting all of our time, energy and enthusiasm into our soulless jobs for someone else's profit, we should focus our energies on the people around us and form stronger relationships with them. Whether they are our neighbours who we never speak to; or the people we share our commute to work with every day without acknowledging; or even the people with even

shitter jobs than us, who serve the coffee and prepare the sandwiches we need to get through the day. We need to start rethinking how we treat each other and make use of our time, because in the not too distant future we will all be made redundant. All our jobs will be automated, and only a small number of highly trained technicians will be needed to service the machines. With all this spare time on our hands we will need better ways of identifying each other than what we used to do for money.

I had better stop daydreaming and get back to work (*productive or operative activity*).

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The Modern Conception of Work / Elizabeth Robson

There is no shortage of debates these days on the future of work. And we all instantly understand the tensions that underlie the debates: increased automation within ever broader categories of work threatens to render human work to a greater or lesser degree obsolete. This debate, however, rarely calls into question the general conception of work with which it operates, namely the rather narrow conception of work as "gainful employment". As the social historian Andrea Komlosy has argued in her book *Work: The Last 1,000 Years*, this modern conception of work is Eurocentric, reductionist, and exclusionary.

It may seem strange to call this conception of work "modern" as we are frequently told that the ancient Greeks (to name but one prominent example) *despised work*, preferring the contemplative life to the drudgery associated with paid labour. This suggests that something like the modern distinction between gainful employment and alternative ways to pass one's time (such as contemplative inactivity) has always existed. (And of course it is always worth remembering that the Greek vision of the *vita contemplativa* relied upon all the tedious but necessary work being undertaken by those of a lesser status, e.g. women, barbarians, etc.)

What may be peculiarly modern, then, is the status accorded to work, such that the very activity that was traditionally considered the mark of a slave has been elevated to the central element of our self-identity. Such is the centrality of work in our lives that talk of the obsolescence of human labour can leave us feeling fearful. After all, where does life's meaning lie if not in work?

Acknowledging the historical and geographical contingency of our modern conception of work can help us to overcome the binary reactions of hope ("Hurrah, I will be able to sit around all day today nothing!") and fear ("What the hell will I do with all that time on my hands!?") generated by the future of work debate.

Central to the movement to redefine and enlarge our conception of work are the perspectives of feminist thinkers and activists. Within the Eurocentric narrative of work, we find both the progressive praise of work as an activity grounded in, for example, service to the divine or to one's fellow citizens or even to oneself (as a form of self-actualization), alongside an increasing focus on work

as "a targeted, market-oriented, remunerated activity" (Komlosy) to the exclusion of those forms of work which do not create economic value, such as domestic labour, child-rearing, etc. With the status afforded to paid work in the public sphere, these private/domestic forms of labour were pushed out of the sphere of work, and, by implication, the sphere of value, recognition, and approval.

This situation inevitably placed the feminist movement in a bind, as Komlosy explains: "By demanding equal rights, [the emerging women's movements] almost inevitably accepted the definition of work as developed from the male perspective, bringing them into conflict with the other side of their identity as wives and mothers." As a result, other currents of feminist thought subsequently tried to reclaim "a conception of work which elevated the creation, care for and preservation of human life as the epitome of actualization" (Komlosy) in opposition to more instrumental and alienated market-driven conceptions.

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To jump forward to the present day, we can see highly influential new forms of feminist thinking emerging that have become increasingly compatible with neoliberal political and economic agendas. While many would refuse to take Ivanka Trump's recent book *Women Who Work* seriously, it has in fact been argued that her vision is a crystallization (albeit a rather thinly intellectualized one) of certain emerging themes in what Catherine Rottenberg has termed "the neoliberal feminist paradigm." No longer is the emphasis upon ensuring the possibility of equality, justice and emancipation for *all* women, but rather it is on ensuring the flourishing of a tiny minority of "aspirational" women. The radical exclusion of the vast majority of women who participate in the labour force is justified (in true neoliberal fashion) by the hard work of those women who are ultimately responsible for their own success. In line with the individualistic self-help paradigm which also plays a large part in shaping Trump's vision, success is "limited only by one's hunger, drive, passion, and execution."

Within this trajectory, we can see how the feminist embrace of the historically male-dominated and Eurocentric conception of work which had previously excluded women from its domain on the grounds of their "natural" predisposition towards domestic labour has ended up endorsing it in its purest form (the hyper-competitive ideology of neoliberalism) to justify new forms of female exclusion on the grounds of their failure to try hard enough.

Given the majority of women in low-paying, precarious, and unstable working environments, the net result of this neoliberal feminist paradigm is to leave these workers haunted by a nagging sense of personal shame as they are increasingly led to believe that what they may have perceived as social or structural injustices are in fact results of their own personal inadequacies, their own poor choices. Perhaps one key difference is that whereas precariousness, instability, low status and low pay have always been characteristic of much *female* work, these descriptors are increasingly appropriate in relation to most forms of work *irrespective of gender*. We can see why it is crucial to think afresh about our modern conception of work, and its role both in feminist politics and in global politics more generally.

Such a renewed conception must be rooted in a critical engagement with many of the binary distinctions characteristic of our modern conception of work, for example, between the private (domestic) and the public or between the economic and the cultural (socio-political). With a greater appreciation of the fact that gainful employment is but one currently dominant model of work dependent upon a complex interplay of historical, geographic, economic and technological factors, and thus contingent and surmountable, we can look afresh at the debate about our future obsolescence as workers. We will always be fundamentally working beings; a truth that any adequate conception of work should reflect.

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What is it to think progressively about work? From what philosophical standpoint do the great moral challenges presented by work come most clearly into view?

We can say, generally, that progressive thought aims at freedom. To think progressively about work, then, is to think about it in a way that brings into view the opportunities for freedom it affords and the obstacles to freedom it presents. The great moral challenges presented by work then appear as challenges in relation to the realization of freedom. So how are we to conceive of work in that relation?

I want to distinguish two ways of answering this question; two rival philosophical standpoints from which to think progressively about work. The first, which goes back at least to Thomas Paine and John Stuart Mill, I'll call the "libertarian" view. The second, which goes back to Hegel and Marx, I'll call the "social" view.

Libertarianism about work starts from an easily shared intuition about what it means to be free: you are free when you able to do as you choose. I am free, on this view, if I am at liberty to say no to some options and yes to others, and conversely, I am unfree when I have no choice in the matter, when there is no choice to make or no options to choose from. Freedom, on this view, has no specific aim or end other than whatever it is an individual wants to do, have or be. Since I am free, on this view, when no one stops me from doing, being or having what I want, or coerces me into doing, being or having something I don't want, this can be called a negative conception of freedom.

Freedom understood this way includes the freedom to choose and pursue *a conception of the good life*. It is important to include this because it is a sign of a free society that people do not live out the same conception of the good, but many. There is no fact of the matter when it comes to the good life, and left to themselves, given the choice, individuals will forge their own good for themselves. Libertarians are what we might call sceptics about the good: they deny that there are any generally valid answers to the question of what it is to live well or to flourish.

So it is up to each individual to decide for herself how to lead the good life. Not being forced to pursue a conception of the good decided by someone else is thus an essential ingredient of freedom. It is also an essential ingredient *of justice*. For the good of each individual is not just a matter for the individual to decide upon for herself, it is each individual's *equal right* to pursue the conception they choose. In a just society, each individual will have this right protected. Moreover, no individual will be systematically disadvantaged in the exercise of that right. Justice is a matter of securing maximal scope for individual freedoms while leaving no one systematically *disadvantaged* in the exercise of their freedom.

If we take this standard of freedom and justice and apply it to contemporary society, how does it fare? For the progressive libertarian it fares very badly, and this mainly because of the way in which society distributes and rewards work.

The way the system is set up, most people work not because they choose to, but because they *have no option*. Work is a necessity for them, something they have to do in order to survive. If it were not for the wage that work brings, and the means of subsistence purchasing power gives access to, most people wouldn't do it. In most cases, work is done out of necessity, not out of choice; and those with the choice, namely those with independent sources of income (real estate owners, lottery winners etc.), typically choose something else instead.

If we are serious about creating a free society, the libertarian reasons, each individual should have the real choice, or should be granted the "real freedom", to enter the labour market or not. No one should ever be coerced into work. Furthermore, those who do choose to work should not be systematically advantaged relative to those who choose not to work. Recall that for the libertarian, no conception of the good is inherently higher than another. So those whose conception of the good does not involve paid work are entitled to equal rights, and an equal initial share of social resources, to those whose conception of the good does involve working.

On this view, then, work in a free society is a choice that individuals have the power to make. It is, above all, in exercising that power of choice that an individual can be said to be really free. Such a society is also fair or just in maximising freedom without bias towards any one conception of the good, which in relation to work means not only granting the freedom to work or not *to all*, but also non-discrimination between those who opt for work and those who don't in the social distribution of resources.

What can be done to bring about such a free society? The key measure for libertarians is the introduction of an unconditional basic income. A reduction in the standard number of working hours is another popular demand. To those who complain that such measures are merely utopian, libertarians about work can point to the increasing pace of automation, to technological advances that can be expected at once to increase wealth and to wipe out the need for repetitive, unpleasant work. Those with an eye on technological developments can see a world without laborious work emerging on the horizon, and it is this horizon that should be orienting us in our thinking about how to think progressively about work.

Libertarianism about work thus combines 1) a negative conception of freedom with 2) scepticism about the good, 3) a rights-based commitment to distributive justice, and 4) a technological optimism that buffers it against the charge of mere utopianism. The society in which individuals are really free, and equally so, is within reach, so long as 1) the proper distributive measures are in place around income and 2) technology is allowed to develop to take the burden out of work.

This vision of work in a free society has become so popular it would not be an exaggeration to call it the orthodoxy amongst progressives about work. It informs the visions of the future of best-selling authors like Rutger Bregman, Yuval Noah Harari, Paul Mason, and George Monbiot, to name but a few. But libertarianism is not the only standpoint available from which to criticize the contemporary world of work and to imagine a better one. Let us turn now to the "social" understanding of what work in a free society might mean.

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This view starts off with dissatisfaction about the negative conception of freedom. It is true that in many circumstances "being free" to do something means having a choice in the matter. But there are also circumstances in which it is not choice as such that makes for freedom, but the ability to *identify* with something or someone. To be unfree, in such circumstances, is to be at odds with oneself, to find oneself defined in an alien way, a way that one cannot embrace or take as one's own. A free person, by contrast, is someone who is "at home" in their world, even if they did not choose many of the things that make up this world. It is the fate of every human being, after all, to have their power of choice limited by some circumstance: the natural endowments

they are born with, habits acquired in childhood, social forces that shape them through the course of their lives, personal tragedies, and so on. Freedom in such matters is not so much a matter of making choices out of them, but of coming to see the limits of choice as acceptable.

So while increasing your options is one road to freedom, it is not the only one, and maybe not the main one. On this alternative view, finding yourself is the key to freedom, and this inevitably means some acknowledgment of your limits, of your dependence on something external. Since it is only in relationship to some "other" that the self can ultimately obtain its gains in freedom, this can be called a *relational* view of freedom. On this view, a free society is more than just an aggregate of individuals each choosing for themselves their own conception of the good, where to fit in with others, and whether to fit in or not. It is a society made up of individuals who are aware of their dependence on each other and can find themselves in – are "at home" with – the contributions they make to the common good.

The social view does not have the same scruples as libertarianism when it comes to invoking such a notion of the common good. The question of what makes us flourish may be hard to answer, and there may be no single answer that everyone would agree on. But that doesn't entail scepticism about the good. Empirical psychology tells us that there are better and worse places to look in our pursuits of happiness: we are more likely to find it in friendship, civil social interaction, and activity that gives us a sense of purpose, for instance, than we are in making lots of money, comparing ourselves and competing with others, or spending time on our own doing nothing.

There are myriad ways – by no means all of which are conscious or chosen – in which our identity and flourishing is bound up with work. Effective work provides an individual with a sense of their own power, of their agency or capacity to bring something about, not just in fantasy but also in reality. In modern societies at least, the recognition one obtains for the work one does is a crucial source of self-esteem, and without such sources no one can maintain a healthy identity. Work is also an important vehicle for enlarging one's sense of self: for many people, it provides the main point of social contact outside the familial sphere; and for some, it makes concrete their sense of contributing to society and belonging to it.

To acknowledge the importance of work in shaping identity is not the same as endorsing the "work ethic", at least

as that is commonly conceived, or endorsing the social valuation of particular types of work. Still less is it to say that work on its own makes people happy, or that it necessarily contributes to happiness. Work shapes identity for better or worse. And it is above all this fact – the identity-shaping power of work – rather than the external goods associated with work (most notably income) that the alternative to the libertarian view of work takes as its starting point for thinking about what work in a free society might mean.

Given what we have just said about freedom, it follows that work in a free society will have the character of a contribution to society which the individual can consciously identify with or embrace. Work will be free, in this sense, if the worker is "at home" with it; or otherwise put, if the worker is able to "find herself" in her role as *this* contributor to society. The role of being a contributor will not, in such a society, be conceived as something to opt in or out of. Rather it will be something the individual has a free relation to in being able to appropriate it or call it her own.

The practical challenge is to create conditions of work that make such a relation available to everyone. Technology has a role here, but it is not as prominent as it is in libertarianism about work. Of more significance is the culture that pervades working activity, and in particular, the presence of democratic norms.

How might the culture of work be changed so as to give fuller expression to relational freedom and to institute democratic norms? First, we need to replace a *managerial ethos* obsessed with targets, external interests (especially of shareholders), and the evaluation of individual performance within the work organization, with one committed to genuine cooperation. Second, the *unions* should be given a stronger say in work organizations. This is needed to ensure both that the management of work is in a meaningful sense the self-management of those who do the work, and to redress the power imbalance that inevitably shapes the employer-employee relation. These two measures are vital if we are to provide greater work security, improve work-life imbalance, make work less stressful, establish relationships of mutual recognition and respect at work, and to ensure that working activity is not so meaningless that it is impossible to engage with it or express oneself in it in some way.

However we need to acknowledge that some kinds of activity may have to be done that fail to meet those conditions. We thus need a third measure, namely to *share*

such activity fairly. In a free and just society, we should all be doing our fair share of the burdensome work that benefits other people without contributing to the individual worker's flourishing by developing their capacities, enabling self-expression, and so on. Above all, this means ending expectations that only certain types of people should be doing such work, i.e. the gendered and racialised character of such work.

The contrast with the more familiar libertarian "post-work" view should now be clear. We have seen that libertarianism is committed to a negative conception of freedom, scepticism about the good, a distributive model of justice, and an optimism about the future based on technological progress. These views can seem self-evident to progressives about work. But the "social" view I have presented challenges these assumptions. It replaces a negative conception of freedom with a relational one; it rejects scepticism about the good in favour of an empirically informed attitude towards the sources of human flourishing; it puts contribution rather than income-distribution at the centre of its account of justice; and its hope for the future is based more on the untapped power of democratic norms than technological prowess.

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Working Lives

Gents / Nathan Cutler // The Harms of Work / Anthony Lloyd // The Second Shift of Art / Harry Weeks // Untitled / Jarsdell Solutions LTD // Working Tirelessly for the Common Good / Stevie Ronnie // Bullshit Jobs, Meaninglessness, and Identity / Eva Selenko // Feminising the Platform Economy / Al James and Jennie Temple

PIRTEK

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The Harms of Work / Anthony Lloyd

Work is a central part of our lives. The majority of us have to work for a living. Karl Marx suggested that labour was intrinsic to humans, that we were labouring creatures able to adapt our environment to meet our needs. Max Weber argued that our modern "work ethic" stemmed from what he called the "elective affinity" between Calvinism and the emergent capitalist economy. That work ethic is still with us and evident in the way society views the unemployed. For some, work is a liberating, fulfilling and enjoyable activity that brings rewards and meaning to lives. For many, work is a necessity that provides an income and a way to pay bills or engage in other, perhaps more meaningful activity. For many still, work is inherently harmful and damaging to their physical and emotional well-being.

Many around the world continue to labour under dangerous and unsafe conditions – from miners to military personnel, from factory workers in Bangladesh to office workers in China. We see the exploitation of men, women and children through human trafficking for the purposes of illegal labour. In the deindustrialised West, we also see the colonisation of the workplace by the dominant political-economic ideology of neoliberalism, increasingly frayed around the edges and unable to deliver on its promises but nonetheless infusing modern workplaces and raising questions about harm. In this piece, I look at workplace harms associated with neoliberal forms of management and governance within the service economy, focusing on those things increasingly absent in the workplace: stability, security, ethical responsibility, and protection.

In short, neoliberalism is an ideology bound to the values of competition, individualism and profitability. At an organisational level, this often manifests in a culture of efficiency, productivity and competitive advantage, all measured through performance management and targets. Within the service economy of retail, call centres, food services, delivery driving, couriers, and bar staff, ensuring competitive advantage and productivity requires reduced labour costs and "flexible" forms of work. Flexibility has become a key feature of contemporary work, with its advantages for employees promoted enthusiastically. Work when you want, work around your other commitments. But what does "flexibility" look like? Temporary contracts to cover periods of peak demand; short-term or part-time hours; zero-hour contracts; "gig economy" configurations; reliance on overtime; just-in-time production that requires

shift changes at short notice; shift patterns outside the traditional 9-5. In order to compete within saturated consumer markets, employers have to keep costs to a minimum and maximise profit; this results in reducing labour costs by only paying for what they absolutely need. Minimising permanent contracts, offering part-time hours, employing "independent contractors", paying the National Minimum Wage, using zero-hour contracts, maximising temporary and short-term contacts help ensure this.

What does this mean for the worker? The reversal of "flexibility" is stability. Flexible working arrangements are undoubtedly beneficial for some. Guy Standing's influential book *The Precariat* recognised the "grinners", retirees and students who could enjoy the flexible, part-time hours associated with precarious work. However, for many (the "groaners") there are commitments, bills, rent or mortgages, and families. The absence of stability is problematic.

I interviewed a young retail worker, Rachel, who admitted that she could save some of her wages when overtime was available but unforeseen cuts to overtime were not uncommon and left her relying on savings to get through the month. Another, Sophie, found the two shifts a week on her fast food zero-hour contract were insufficient to cover her bills so had to take a second job working behind a bar. We supposedly live in a fluid world of constant change and motion, yet at heart we often crave and require stability. Waiting for the phone to ring offering shifts for next week, wondering what will happen when a temporary contract ends after Christmas, seeing overtime cut and shifts reduced to contracted, part-time hours offers little stability or a firm platform upon which to plan a life. The absence of something can have probabilistic causal tendencies in the same way that the presence of something can too. The absence of a welfare state would have causal effects on poverty levels or health inequalities. The absence of stability in working life can have a causal and harmful effect on the objective reality of our lives: unable to plan, unable to enjoy the trappings of consumer culture, unable to pay bills.

If the objective conditions of employment can be considered somehow harmful, so can the working conditions within contemporary service economy workplaces. This stems from the imperatives noted earlier: efficiency, productivity, targets, and performance management, all designed to ensure competition and profitability. Management and organisational cultures are infused with this language

and create working conditions that can have harmful consequences for the physical and mental well-being of employees. From Amazon's warehouses and the reports of electronic monitoring, constant motion, and devices counting down to deadlines for stock-picking, to the technology-driven work process and absence of autonomy in the call centre, to the pressure to make sales and deploy emotional labour in retail, working conditions within the service economy can have detrimental effects. I interviewed Daniel, who had worked in call centres, retail, and supermarket distribution. He was diagnosed with stress-induced depression while working in retail after management pressure for sales spilled over into bullying. When he moved into supermarket distribution, the demand to make "good time" in stock-picking resulted in two workplace accidents, one of which left him unable to work and reliant on painkillers. He was eventually fired for being unable to perform his duties.

At the level of emotional well-being, most of the people I have interviewed reported tears and stress, burnout and exhaustion. The combination of these kinds of working conditions and conditions of employment create an absence of protection, leaving workers vulnerable and isolated. Neoliberalism values the individual above the collective; workplaces embody this ethos in both practice and policy. Call centres often employ a "sacrificial" HR strategy, acknowledging that demands for high productivity can burn out the employee. Rather than factor in support for employee well-being, the deliberate strategy is to work them harder, allow them to burn out and leave, and then replace them. The responsibility for well-being rests with the employee, not the employer. This is particularly the case within the gig economy where workers are not even seen as employees.

Within retail this was also evident in management attitudes towards rotas and shift changes. Jessica was at college and could not drive, yet her circumstances were not taken into account by her retail employer. She was given shifts she often could not work but management insisted it was Jessica's responsibility to swap shifts with a co-worker. If she could not swap, she had to work. If she did not show up, it could lead to dismissal. The absence of protection is harmful both in terms of damaging physical and emotional well-being but also through removing any safety net or feeling of security. When the employer places all responsibility on the employee, interactions become precarious.

This is also true when we consider targets. Targets have become an increasingly common aspect of most labour markets and occupations, from health care and education, to criminal justice and the service economy. Unfortunately, the measurement of performance through targets serves to ensure that workplace cultures can become infused with a focus on the target and nothing else. Targets create competition, which in itself is not necessarily harmful, but when weaved into a culture of instability and insecurity, adds an extra dimension that can lead to harmful outcomes.

Abbie worked in retail banking and found her career progression intimately connected to targets and performance management. Her customer interactions were graded through satisfaction surveys, and the scores from these surveys counted towards her bonus. If she was ranked as "good", it counted negatively and her score only just reached 50%. The customer might think that their feedback was positive but in fact it counted *against* Abbie. In her branch, bonuses were a zero-sum game with only one "top performer" in store. Abbie had to compete with her co-workers for the highest bonus. This hardly fosters feelings of support and mutuality among employees. In a vivid example of satisfaction surveys and targets reaching the level of absurdity, James, a car salesman, described coaching customers to say the right things in the survey to ensure he hit his targets and received his bonus. Such interactions are emptied of any true meaning, and become solely about the measurement and the salesperson's bonus. Within retail stores, the failure to hit targets was seen as a reflection of poor performance by employees, often without consideration of other factors such as the weather or poor footfall.

Contacts reported numerous examples of management bullying, often packaged as "motivation" to hit targets and make sales. Daniel's experience in retail was that managers were not interested in his strong sales figures and target attainment but instead singled him out for systematic abuse. His co-workers failed to recognise it as bullying because it occurred in a culture and atmosphere of management pressure. Jade worked in a coffee shop and suffered abuse at the hands of a management-led clique. In keeping with the shift in responsibility noted above, Jade saw this as a reflection of her own behaviour and performance – what have I done? Unable to cope with her treatment, she eventually left.

The values of neoliberalism are not just imposed top-down upon resisting subjects labouring in difficult and harmful conditions. The subject, the individual worker, actively solicits the values of a dominant ideology in order to make sense of the world they live in. We are all, to one extent or another, self-interested, competitive individuals; when this manifests at its most extreme, we see an absence of ethical responsibility for the other. How else can we explain the evidence of bullying, emotional violence, target-grabbing, and competition within the service economy? Service economy workplaces utilise flexible working patterns, strategies of efficiency, productivity, and competition, as well as monitoring employees through targets and performance management, *and many workers play the game to maximise their share of the spoils.*

The competitive environment of neoliberal workplaces culminates in target-driven sales staff "stealing sales" from temporary co-workers in order to maximise their bonuses, hit their targets, and protect their position. Temporary colleagues who need strong performance indicators to stand any chance of earning a permanent contract are harmed by colleagues who appear entitled to act in this way. Those who have actively solicited the competitive, instrumental values of neoliberalism are emboldened to act, to undertake activity that will maximise their rewards, regardless of any harm it might cause to others.

If harms occur at work, and the absence of stability, protection or ethical responsibility for each other are indicative of these harms, it is important to ask questions about the nature of harm. Evidence above indicates that this might be "an absence of opportunities for flourishing". Our potential is stifled by these absences. The absence of stability in conditions of employment, the absence of protection in working conditions, the absence of ethical responsibility for the other all negate human flourishing. In a liberal society, we focus on individual freedom more than any conception of a "good life". Aristotle asked fundamental questions about what constitutes "the good", and in order to alleviate the harms of work we could do worse than think about what a good life should or could look like today.

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One of the great shortcomings of modern and contemporary art history has been the lack of attention paid to the labour that supports artistic practice. Even over the past decade or so, when there has been a heightened focus on questions of labour and the so-called "dark matter" of the art world, this has largely been limited to discussions of *artistic* labour – that is, the labour that goes into the production of artworks directly, as well as the more performative labour associated with being an artist. What is lost, even in such moments of attentiveness to the intersections of art and labour, is labour occurring beyond the field of art that facilitates the artist's functioning as an artist. Given how widely discussed the prevalence of un- or under-paid work in the arts has become, it would seem logical to then question how artists might sustain themselves in an economy of such low returns. And yet, that question is rarely asked.

But this is a vital question for art history. The history of art should always be rooted in the history of art production, but too often there has been a total disregard for the question of how artists are able to produce the work they do, which invariably inflects the work that they produce. There are of course instances where there is a direct relation between this supplemental or supporting labour and art practice. California-based performance art group The Waitresses produced performances in the late-70s which were informed by and were about their experience as waitresses, while Shona Macnaughton's 2010 video *Adverts for the Workplace* = 48p documents performances the artist undertook whilst at her day-job as a cleaner for a holiday lettings company. However, even in less clear-cut examples, the "second shift" of artists in economies beyond the art field dictates access to studio space, the amount of time artists might be able to devote to their art practice, their frame of mind once they've finished an 8-hour shift and enter the studio, their understandings of labour relations and organisation, and so on. These are crucial factors informing the production of artworks and should be treated as such even though they might shatter the myth of the apparently autonomous labour of the artist existing at some degree of remove from the drudgeries of day-to-day life, a myth which is as persistent as it is discredited.

The idea of the "second shift" emerges out of American sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild's examinations of the relationships between work and family life in the 1980s. Hochschild, reaching a similar conclusion to the Marxist-feminists of the 1970s associated with the Wages for Housework movement, found that "[m]ost women work one shift at the office or factory and a 'second shift' at home." And it is arguably, and unsurprisingly, in feminist art and art history that we find the richest reflections on how work beyond the art field might impact on art production and art practice. Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* replays the labour of the household in performative form, while Mierle Laderman Ukeles's now belatedly celebrated maintenance art drew attention to the reproductive work that society had allotted to her as woman, as well as the hidden (non-artistic) labour that goes into supporting the functioning of art institutions. In a society which still expects a singular answer to the question "and what do you do?" (despite the proliferation of portfolio careers and multiple precarious jobs), feminism has long been aware that no one commits their entire labouring capacity to one form of labour. Rather, we all perform a variety of labours which interweave and mutually modulate one another.

The necessity of factoring in the second shifts that support art production in any discussion of art has been highlighted recently by three interrelated developments. Firstly, at least in the Scottish context I know best, considerable attention has been paid in recent years to the economies of the artist-led sector. Whilst Glasgow-based gallery Transmission's founding constitution in 1983 explicitly prioritised that committee members should go unpaid, there have been recent clamours to rectify what is perceived widely now to be an anachronism that has been replicated across a good deal of the rest of Scotland's artist-led spaces. Whilst welfare and benefits might have facilitated unpaid work in the arts in the 1980s, such possibilities are not presented to today's committee members, who have spoken publicly of the difficulties associated with undertaking the labour of running a space (which in itself is often seen as eating into the time one can devote to one's own practice) when you have to do so in between shifts outside of the art economy.

Secondly, and relatedly, is the question of inequality. Whilst we are witnessing an upswing in projects proclaiming a commitment to diversification, democratisation and decolonisation in the arts, the cultural economy is as exclusive and monocultural as it has ever been. The recent 'Panic!' report by Orian Brook, David O'Brien and Mark Taylor has caused considerable waves within the art field for its diagnosis of a level of inequality in culture which does not map onto the field's meritocratic and democratic ideals. Crucial to this is the prevalence of un- or under-paid labour which acts as a gatekeeper, presenting a boundary

for access to work in culture for those from working-class backgrounds which simply does not exist in the same way for those entering the sector with greater levels of capital. Who is it then, in the example of artist-led spaces, that is able to take on the level of unpaid work that is demanded of a committee member? For a field so outwardly committed to the interruption of the reproduction of inequalities, this is a very concrete example of the ways in which the structures of the art field simply reinforce this reproduction.

Thirdly, labour more broadly is changing. Nick Srnicek argues that we have entered a period of "platform capitalism" in which "the digital economy is becoming a hegemonic model: cities are to become smart, businesses must be disruptive, workers are to become flexible." The gig or platform economy has normalised precarity, indeterminate employment status, 24/7 capitalism and portfolio careers, and has entrenched the neoliberal subject (homo oeconomicus, as Michel Foucault names it) further in its self-entrepreneurial ways. This has two clear relationships to the economies of art. First, it mirrors the economy of art in all the respects mentioned above. The artist is in many ways the prototypical gig worker. Second, the gig economy has increasingly emerged as a source of employment well-matched to the demands of work in the art field. If committee membership of an artist-led space requires flexibility and uneven devotions of time and resources in the service of running a space, then the employment that fits around this work and offsets the lack of income derived from work in the art field must share similar characteristics. Deliveroo, Airbnb and People Per Hour are becoming new shadow players in art's idiosyncratic economies, and artists and other cultural producers are becoming a significant source of labour for these platforms.

These factors combine to accentuate the need to relate the second shift to the first when thinking about contemporary art practice and production. Discussions of artistic labour cannot be limited to considering the working practices of artists only once they "enter the studio". If we are more cognisant now, thanks to Marxist-feminist social reproduction theory (see, for example, the work of Silvia Federici), of the ways in which reproduction and production mutually reinforce one another in capitalist economies, then we must transplant this lesson into the field of art, and consider seriously the question of how artists reproduce themselves (by earning money for their own subsistence) in order that they may be able to conduct their art production.

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When we talk of "white men" we are describing an institution. "White men" is an institution. By saying this, what am I saying? An institution typically refers to a persistent structure or mechanism of social order governing the behaviour of a set of individuals within a given community. So when I am saying that "white men" is an institution I am referring not only to what has already been instituted or built but the mechanisms that ensure the persistence of that structure. A building is shaped by a series of regulative norms. "White men" refers also to conduct; it is not simply who is there, who is here, who is given a place at the table, but how bodies are occupied once they have arrived; behaviour as bond.

Sara Ahmed, 'White Men'

Feminist Killjoys, 4 November 2014
www.feministkilljoys.com/2014/11/04/white-men

Working Tirelessly for the Common Good / Stevie Ronnie

From an outside perspective, life as a freelance artist must seem like a glamorous career – endless hours in the studio musing over the latest masterpiece without any boss to worry about. The truth, or at least the truth for the vast majority of us, fails to live up to this expectation. From a personal perspective, most of my time is spent chasing down commissions, meetings with clients, attending interviews, submitting my work for exhibitions or writing funding bids for projects that more often than not don't ever see the light of day. All of this is done without pay, but it is an expected and necessary part of my day-to-day life. The time we actually get to make art is rare and precious. This is far from an easy life and all of the artists around me that I see making a good go of it are dedicated, highly skilled, and motivated people. Yes, you need to have a flair for making art but to earn a living from it you need to be able to present the right ideas in the right way to the right people. This might all seem a little negative, but I wouldn't have it any other way. I love my job and feel that the arts have an overwhelmingly positive effect on society as a whole. We artists might not be the greatest generators of financial capital but we contribute in other ways: through our creativity, our ideas, our imagination, and our art's ability to heal the mind. Making and engaging with art can both directly and indirectly remind people of what it is to be human, something that seems lacking in today's fractured society.

In recent years, all of this work has been taking place against the backdrop of ever deeper cuts to funding in the arts from all directions. There was never much to share around but now there is even less and the prospects facing younger artists who are trying to carve out a career for themselves look bleak. Commissions, residencies and funding are becoming insanely competitive so those with little or no experience are forced to work for free, often on the promise of exposure or some future fame that will likely never come to fruition. Art which is not immediately commercially viable is viewed suspiciously by many, and artists are often portrayed as an unnecessary drain on the public purse. Art has become the luxury we can't afford as we head along the path of the US, where a career as an artist is the acceptance of abject poverty for all but those who can find a home in academia or the most privileged few.

The impending policy that is set to make things even harder for UK artists is the roll-out of Universal Credit. The system is not designed with any consideration for the reality of life as a freelance artist. As with many self-employed workers, our income is sporadic, arriving in unpredictable intervals across each year. Many of us earn below the minimum wage and look set to be deemed as "not in gainful employment" by the Universal Credit system. The tax credit system was flexible enough to take our circumstances into account and has been a lifeline for artists, particularly as the money has dried up as a result of the austerity agenda. My wife is also a freelance artist, and when the Universal Credit letter drops through the door we look set to drop out of the system altogether, despite having relatively successful careers and three young children to support.

Artist's Union England has arrived at a critical time for the future of artists in our society. The problems and uncertainty that we are facing are not unique to the arts, and unionising is giving us a chance to add our voice to the voices of other workers in other sectors. Surely there must be strength in our collective numbers? What is society without those of us who work tirelessly not only for financial gain but also for the common good?

Stevie Ronnie is a freelance writer, artist, tutor and digital consultant. He is a founder director of Book Apothecary CIC and works with many arts organisations, communities, schools and other artists to produce creative works in a range of different disciplines.

"Hell is a collection of individuals who are spending the bulk of their time working on a task they don't like and are not especially good at." (David Graeber)

Imagine the following scenario: you are a well-educated person in a reputable job with an appealing title, earning a comfortable salary in a large, well-known organisation. There is only one catch: you secretly realise that your job is completely and utterly pointless, that it is actually a scam.

This describes the heart of what the anthropologist David Graeber has called, rather crudely, "bullshit jobs". In his bestselling 2018 book, Graeber defines bullshit jobs as "a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case". Examples of people working bullshit jobs are, according to Graeber: receptionists that are only there to staff a front desk that no one ever visits; IT people whose only task is to find work-arounds for other peoples' programming mistakes; or strategic managers who oversee a team of other highly-independent and self-sufficient managers.

Graeber's pithy phrase has certainly generated a lot of media attention, but how widespread actually is this phenomenon? It is certainly difficult to say how many jobs are "objectively bullshit" or whether jobs are now objectively more bullshit than a few decades ago. What is known, however, is that many people report that they experience meaninglessness in their working lives. According to a poll conducted by YouGov in 2015, 37 per cent of all surveyed Britons felt that their job failed to make a meaningful contribution to the world. A recent survey amongst American professionals found that nine out of ten employees would be willing to give up part of their salary in return for more meaningful employment.

Being trapped in a bullshit job comes with serious effects. First, the experience of meaninglessness questions the fundamental conception that life should be purposeful. Second, people in bullshit jobs also report an element of "falseness": they know that what they are doing is irrelevant and even deceitful, but at the same time they are required to convince others that the opposite is true. These two experiences are augmented by a feeling of powerlessness

– people in bullshit jobs often report that they cannot leave their current job situation or make it more meaningful. This creates a particularly toxic psychological combination.

How Meaningless Undermines Identity

Experiencing meaning is an essential aspect of identity. Identities can give meaning to the one's existence and the wider environment. By knowing who one is, it is easier to explain what is going on in one's immediate environment, to know how to feel, how to behave and what to value. Identities create a sense of order and structure, reducing ambiguity and uncertainty, and thereby provide meaning. Meaning connects experiences, people, places and objects with each other in predictable ways. It creates a coherent narrative that turns the chaos of existence and experience into order. A clear understanding of who one is helps with that.

Meaningful activities also lie at the heart of the experience of eudemonic happiness, which is often equated with psychological wellbeing. Eudemonic happiness has often been described as the highest achievable good of human agency. Engaging in a kind of virtuous activity that is in line with one's true potential induces such a state. In other words, situations in which we experience high meaningfulness are situations in which we can be our true selves.
Good work, that is, work that creates a sense of purpose, self-realisation and growth, or work that enables positive relations with others and a positive experience of self-mastery, has been found to enable eudemonic happiness. In short, meaningful work can achieve eudemonic happiness and a feeling of connectedness to the true self. The opposite, however, is true for meaningless work.

When an individual experiences meaninglessness, their understanding of themselves will be affected. The experience of meaninglessness questions the fundamental conception that life should be purposeful. It disconfirms and undermines a person's identity. If identity can give meaning, and meaning identity, then the reverse is true as well. Meaninglessness would signal that the present identity is not "right" for the situation.

People tend to compensate for undermined identity in various ways. One way is to take up a more extreme position in regard to others (at least in laboratory experiments). An effect of boredom (which often goes hand-in-hand with meaninglessness), for example, is that people exhibit more

in-group favouritism and intergroup discrimination. This could mean that employees in bullshit jobs might try to find a positive experience in their situation by overplaying differences with people who are without employment, for example.

Another way of coping with undermined identity is nostalgia. It appears that dwelling on the past can facilitate identity continuity. In other words, someone who finds themselves in a meaningless job might become nostalgic about previous occupations they held in order to cope with the present situation. Given the risks of nostalgia (resistance to change, reduced acceptance of minorities) this might have serious implications for the development of new, inclusive and collective identities.

Of course, what is meaningless to one person might not be so to another. Some people manage to craft meaning out of what seem to be meaningless activities to others. Graeber gives an example of a young graduate, Eric, who describes that what frustrated him was that he saw no way how he could construe meaning in his meaningless job; his job remained utterly purposeless to him. This impossibility of crafting meaning out of a job situation eventually lead him to quit the role, as "it was not for him". Eric's colleagues, on the other hand, succeeded in finding a sense of purpose in their (objectively meaningless) job situations, Graeber explains. For example, they managed to view their work as a stepping stone towards professional advancement, which still fitted with their current and aspired identity. As a result, they were less affected than Eric by their work's inherent meaninglessness.

How Falseness Undermines Community

Aside from meaninglessness, the experience of falseness also characterises bullshit jobs, according to Graeber. People are aware that their jobs ought not to exist in the first place, that the products they are selling have no use for their clients or customers, or that the services they are providing are not actually necessary. At its extreme, people in bullshit jobs feel that they are scamming their customers. Their employer, however, has a different opinion, or at least expects employees to pretend otherwise. The enforced falseness and pretence creates a number of psychological conflicts, including cognitive dissonance. People know that what they are doing is a scam, which conflicts with their self-understanding as a professional and ethical person. Being required to sell useless products undermines a person's

professional self-understanding. People in bullshit jobs do not subscribe to scamming others – it is the employer, the organisation or the system that does that. Such employees are not even "living their own lie", but instead experience an immense conflict between what they are required to do and what they think would be the right thing to do.

Perceiving that one's own work is not only without purpose, but may actually be deceitful, opposes not only own professional values, it makes it difficult to explain and justify to others what one does and why one should deserve payment for what is perceived as scamming others. In other words, the kind of social interaction that is crucial for identity verification is thus rendered more complicated or even impossible. An example might be someone who works as a risk analyst in a highly reputable financial company, but whose responsibility is limited to dragging numbers from one spreadsheet to another. Justifying a high salary towards outsiders who potentially earn less for doing more is experienced as difficult and challenges the sense of self that is connected to employment.

Bullshit Jobs: What to Do?

In sum, bullshit jobs are likely to entail psychological risks – they are likely to undermine people's experience of meaningfulness, their understanding of themselves, and obstruct the development of positive professional identities.

Interestingly, it is particularly in situations where meaning or sense-making collapse and in which identity is undermined, that identity becomes especially salient to us. In an everyday, normal job situation one is rarely aware of one's ethical values or self-understanding as a professional, as there are more important things to deal with. In a meaningless and false work situation, however, those fundamental self-understandings suddenly come to the foreground simply by way of contrast. It is also in these situations that we will engage in more identity redefinition.

What might potential remedies look like? Entrapment is difficult to change. Meaning, however, can be found in many places, including other activities. Graeber describes how some workers used the Internet at work to create another side business. No one noticed that they spent less time on the "work" to which they had been assigned (often because one of the conditions of bullshit jobs is that one has to spend much of the time pretending to be busy

working when there is in fact nothing to do!). Others opted for part-time work, spending the other half of the day in a lower paid but more meaningful job.

In general, human beings are quite creative and resilient when dealing with collapses of meaning and identity disruption. The identity disruption might actually encourage us to bring our situation closer in line with our "true selves" again. We can also customise our identity, for example, by broadening our self-concept or developing a more nuanced understanding of our work situation. The risky effects of nostalgia aside, a robust and positive past identity can help us to develop effective strategies to deal with and get out of a meaningless situation successfully.

What is certain is that we cannot do this on our own. There may be ways of tackling meaninglessness and the proliferation of bullshit jobs, but they require a level of enterprise and ambition that not all of those trapped in purposeless work might be able to muster. We depend on a psychologically safe and supportive social environment that assists us to maintain or redesign, or even re-establish, our sense of identity in a positive way. Learning more about bullshit jobs and how people deal with them would be a first step towards developing this environment.

Note
This piece is an abridged and modified extract of a conference briefing document Dr Selenko wrote for the Cumberland Lodge's Working Identities conference in March 2019. All rights remain with Cumberland Lodge. Download the full document here: http://bit.ly/CL_workingidentities

Dr Eva Selenko is a senior lecturer in Work Psychology at Loughborough University. She researches and publishes on the effects of modern work situations on identity. Eva feels incredibly lucky to work her dream job and would like to know more how people in bullshit jobs cope. Get in touch via email e.selenko@lboro.ac.uk or tweet @EvaSelenko

Feminising the Platform Economy / Al James and Jennie Temple

Recent years have seen a rapid growth in interest amongst academics, labour activists, policy makers, and media commentators in the dramatic, digital transformations of work, employment and labour relations that have accompanied the extraordinary growth of on-demand labour and gig work in the so-called "platform economy". Underpinning these transformations, the internet is used to unbundle production and value creation from formal employment, with online labour markets and algorithms used to manage and motivate work carried out beyond the spatial and temporal boundaries of "typical" workplaces. Other monikers include the collaborative / gig / on-demand / and peer-to-peer economy. Whatever the label used, commentators are particularly excited about the possibilities of online work platforms for enabling workers from a wide range of backgrounds to access new forms of "flexible" work that fit around personal life commitments. Indeed, these new forms of platform work and gig income opportunities are now recognised across multiple sectors (notably in professional services, household services, personal transport, last mile logistics). Recent estimates suggest that over 70 million people worldwide now use online work platforms to access work opportunities, with the peer-to-peer economy in the EU worth an estimated €28 billion.

Crucially however, the quality of those online on-demand work opportunities is also prompting growing criticism around attendant working conditions, wage levels, and distributions of income and wealth. With reference to a range of online work platforms (Uber, TaskRabbit, Upwork, Amazon MTurk, Helpling), critical work has identified: the "dark side" of platform economy labour relations for workers who have limited legal protection as self-employed "independent contractors" on for-profit platforms; how digital platforms and clickwork are potentially crowding out old jobs rather than creating new ones; and how digital on-demand work is reinforcing stubborn labour market inequalities, re-inscribed through customer reputational reviews and the digital platform algorithms which route jobs out and set the terms under which digital workers labour. These critiques find expression in a range of provocative terms including "sharewashing", "crowdfleecing", and the "share the scraps economy".

Yet within this critical research agenda, women remain strangely marginalised – despite them representing 52% of

the UK workers who access online work platforms weekly. Consequently, we know very little about the everyday work lives of female gig workers; and their experiences of using online work platforms to help reconcile work, home and family, and to negotiate better labour market outcomes relative to "mainstream" employers. Part of the problem is that, because many of these women engage in gig work carried out within their own homes, they are less visible than the likes of Deliveroo and Uber workers whose much studied gig labours are commonly seen across our towns and cities. Over the last 2 years, I [AJ] have sought to address this major blind spot by documenting the lived experiences of female returners with young families juggling gig work with the messy and fleshy everyday activities of family and household care, in ways that potentially disrupt (versus reinforce) stubborn gendered labour market inequalities.

52 interviews later, my work has engaged with women using a range of popular online jobs platforms in the UK (PeoplePerHour, UpWork, Fiverr, Elance, TaskRabbit, Copify, Freelancer) to access paid gigs in white-collar desk work (including communications, marketing, business development, HR, office support, web design, graphics). The interviews offer some vivid insights into the contradictions and hardships experienced by these women in relation to wage precarity, 'management' by algorithms, work-life conflict, and health and safety, as they seek to negotiate better work lives via digital work platforms. By way of introduction to this work, some short interview excerpts are included here. The interviews have identified a series of hardships that many women face working online. Inspired by these interviews, the study also includes a series of artist renderings of women's digital work-lives, produced by Jennie Temple. Some of these images are also included here. Many more are at http://geoworklives.com

> "I started using Upwork probably just after I had my daughter (who is nine months old) during my maternity leave. I told my employer I didn't want to go back to work because weighing everything up I didn't want to pay somebody to look after my daughter so I could go back to work, it just didn't make sense in my view. So I decided to start doing the online freelancing work. It does take quite a long time to build up your reputation on the site and earn enough money to make a living. Most people would look at it as a step down."
>
> "Rather than being a set 9-5 job, with the platforms, you can bid, and you can do the work, an hour in the evening or two hours or whatever you need to do. Most of the time it's when [my daughter]'s in bed, I can go and do the work whilst she's asleep and have the monitor with me, so I can keep an eye on her while I'm working."
>
> "I completely juggle it. At the moment until September I don't have any days where I don't have one of the children with me, the nursery schedules don't overlap. So I work in the evenings a lot, I work at weekends a lot when my husband is around to help a bit. You know, two and four-year olds need a lot of attention, they are not easy to sort out. The children usually go to bed at seven and then I will sit with laptop to about eleven."
>
> "In the evenings when the children are in bed and it's a lot quieter, I can sit and trawl through the lists of jobs. And then make my applications and proposals then, but again, doing it that way you probably do miss out on a lot of jobs that are posted during the day that people have sat and applied for and they have disappeared, and you don't know that. It's very tricky. I would say that I am at a disadvantage at not being able to sit in front of a computer all day and catch these jobs as soon as they are posted."
>
> "I think it's just the nature of online work, people expect instant replies, people expect you to be online all the time working from home and that is one of the disadvantages. Having that kind of separation is quite difficult. So I do lots at night-time, I get up early and do bits in the morning. Yeah, I think you just have to be prepared for that because it's kind of the nature of the beast, really."
>
> "It's very detrimental if you get a couple of bad feedbacks. You know, that then restricts you applying for other work for months ahead until you can build up your good feedback again. It's like a credit rating."
>
> "It's hard not to take feedback personally. I think that because everything is remote and virtual people don't even really realise necessarily that they are talking to an actual person… it just says in this big, angry red box you have not got this project or something like that. If you could characterise what rejection looks like on screen, it's that. The first time I got one of those I was like, ouch, that's brutal."

"I wasn't well last year with some problems with my spine, which was causing numbness, and pins and needles through my fingers, which obviously for a typist isn't ideal. I was really struggling to type during those times, because it was literally causing me pain. So I had a couple of months where I was very limited with what I did because of the pain I was in. It has a massive impact if I don't work on the overall family. And you don't get paid for sickness, most things you have just got to put up with and deal with. It took a while to get ourselves straight again."

"My biggest problem was getting people to pay me on time. Some of my biggest corporate clients, they sometimes pay three or four months late and I have no recourse but to keep chasing them. So it's obviously really annoying, a waste of my time and it's hard to manage your budget."

"I actually had a customer last year… He knew I had a child. He'd always be calling and I wouldn't answer. Then I'd get emails straightaway, "Are you not interested? Shall we not pay you this month?" I found that very uncomfortable. Also, he was a man, he had my address because my invoices were there and I didn't feel safe. For a few days I was living in paranoia that he was going to send me a letter or he was going to turn up here. That's awful. No one should have to feel like that."

In combination, these personal testimonies directly challenge celebratory claims surrounding online work platforms as a means for empowering women and female returners in relation to work-life balance, "flexible" working, and economic opportunity. It is important that scholars and activists make visible these largely invisible, home-based female workers and give them a voice. Likewise, to expose gendered constraints on women's abilities to compete on online work platforms. In response, the next phase of this research explores the kinds of improvements that women would like to see platform developers make in order to reduce the hardships they face.

Al James is a Labour Geographer at Newcastle University with research interests in digital work futures, gender and families. This short introductory piece draws on a research project funded by the British Academy. You can find more information about this project and its key findings at http://geoworklives.com Email: al.james@ncl.ac.uk

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Identities After Work

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There's No Pecking Order In Poo / Andrew Wilson

Baked by the sun and surrounded by clay and crickets there rests a sack full of communally shit-stained toilet paper. It's getting pretty full as I add today's batch, before weighing it down with a heavy stone on a solid wall. The modest plumbing here at Casita de Colores is unable to digest toilet tissue so we have been hoarding it at the bottom of the garden.

In total we are 15, activists, artists, journalists, charity workers, from many corners of Europe. Casita de Colores is located in Eroles, a Catalonian hamlet with a fluctuating population of 20-25 people. We are here in response to a provocation to think deeply about the refugee situation, the most important moral and humanitarian crises we face today.

Within the first few days, I find myself consecutively cleaning the bathrooms and carrying the used toilet tissue out and into the back yard. Amidst the sessions for learning, we check-in with one another and share domestic responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning, gardening, and taking out the used toilet tissue. I empty the vessel into the black sack, occasionally catching a glimpse of its content and peeling away any "clingers" refusing to depart. As I do so I think about shit, about sanitation, about waste, and about the un-wanted in general.

What comes to mind when we think of waste? We tend to define waste as a material substance, or by-product to be eliminated or discarded as useless or not required. The urban dictionary refers to American musician and composer Frank Zappa as a "waster" for supposedly squandering his musical genius in the pursuit of satire. Yet, if we look at the etymology of "waste" we see that it emerges from the same Latin root as "vast", meaning a literal space, immense and enormous.

It might seem absurd to embark on a two-week residency, intended to better understand the international and humanitarian refugee crises, by pondering waste – as instigated by a domestic duty concerning shit. But if we aspire to think radically as a species, as the residency title suggests, if we agree that we need to think widely, dig deeper and look systemically at the structures and mental models that sustain our beliefs, then I'd invite you to ponder our societal contempt of shit, of waste and the unwanted as a humble starting point.

For three consecutive years I organised a season of cinema designed to unpick our shared understanding of mental health. These screenings took place at a small cinema with a capacity of approximately 77 seats, with room for people to sit on the floor and up the aisle if necessary. Aware that stigma, the social disapproval of a person or their characteristics associated with mental health, is recognised widely as more damaging than the psychological experiences, I attempted to ignore the clinical and diagnostic language as much as possible. The screenings would focus less upon the privatised individual, but rather on the surrounding social, cultural and political context.

In October 2014 as part of this season we screened Kenny, a mockumentary about a Melbourne plumber who works for a portable toilet rental company. Despite his hard-working manner and shameless optimism Kenny Smyth, the film's protagonist, is constantly belittled by pretty much everyone: employment contractors, his ex-wife, his brother, etc. Kenny literally organises, moves and, in many cases, handles other people's shit for a living. In one scene Kenny's father refers to him as a "glorified turd burglar". Poo-related humour and one-liners are plentiful in this Australian comedy, often laugh-out-loud funny, but it tickles us, I'd argue, with a profound perceptiveness – before the opening credits the screen proclaims that: "None are less visible than those we decide not to see."

We arrived at Casita de Colores days after the EU in-out referendum in the UK. Many of us felt broken by the relentless negativity we witnessed first-hand, yet somehow plugged in and mesmerised by the tragic-comedy politics that followed. The deeply, perhaps intentionally, confused issue of immigration was central to how many people ultimately decided to vote. "Britain first" and "Britain is full" became popular slogans, rekindling the "charity starts at home" rhetoric, and resulting in a 500% increase in racial attacks. Second and third generation British citizens were absurdly being told to "go home".

When we think of identity in racist attacks, it is perhaps obvious to state that the external has a leading role in shaping the victim's identity. Yet, we don't often think of identity as being like this. More often it feels as though identity is something that wells up inside each of us, as individuals, as something that is absolutely ours. Social theorist and political activist Stuart Hall suggests otherwise: "Identity is the product of, and endless ongoing conversation with, everybody around you … you are (partly)

how they see you."

If the dominant culture happens to blame immigration for growing inequality and public spending cuts, as is the current political trend in the UK, and your skin tone doesn't resemble either Phil Mitchell or Winston Churchill, you are likely to be targeted by racial abuse. If you have been diagnosed with PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), anxiety or depression, in a society whose mainstream persistently misrepresents mental health, you are more likely to be seen as violent or a danger to yourself or other people. In a society which diminishes the role of the menial, yet necessary, tasks of the working class, you run the risk of being dismissed by your father as "a glorified turd burglar". Who you are is shaped by how your society sees you.

It may seem small and insignificant to travel to a small Catalonian hamlet to live collectively and think deeply about the humanitarian/migrant crises, but, as John Holloway points out, this is the story of many, many people, of millions, perhaps billions. However small or insignificant our actions might seem, we are not alone. The question then may be: How can we knit these many, many people together? What are the unifying factors and where do we begin?

Consider the following scene from Kenny:

EMPLOYEE: "Kenny, I just got to talk to you about something. I been here for 12 months, he's been here for 2 weeks. And, honestly, he's constantly telling me what to do. He is really starting to piss me off. I mean Is there a hierarchy here or something?"

KENNY: "No mate, no, there is no hierarchy. We're all shit kickers here, mate. There is no pecking order in poo."

As physicist and human systems ecologist David Korowicz observes, before morality, before art, before religions, science, before politics and nations, the ecological and thermodynamic foundations of our species are to eat, drink, shit and fuck. We create racial, political and social tensions but fundamentally our foundations are shared and they are very, very basic: we're all shit kickers here, mate.

It might sound crude but perhaps these primal activities, surrounded by taboo, swept under the carpet and largely hidden from public gaze in western public life are fundamental to a radical rethinking of our species.

You can have utopia, so the dictum goes, but somebody, somewhere still has to clean up the shit. This is how we think of waste, of shit, of the so-called undignified foundations of our species. We choose not to see them and we create social boundaries and discriminatory tensions to keep them at bay from a privileged few.

Perhaps now, given the deplorable scale of our global humanitarian and ecological crises, it is time to strip bare the western myths of political and societal othering and begin to think radically, not as individuals or nations, but as a species. And perhaps peeling away each other's shit stained toilet paper in a small Catalonian hamlet is a good a place as any to start.

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My early plans to be an intellectual were built around a vision of myself sat in a wingback chair surrounded by books in antique shelves (in my more extravagant versions I smoke a pipe). Occasionally I'd look out of the window onto some campus greenery, have a big thought, write it down and later talk about it and answer questions about it. Obviously this vision was way off the mark, getting paid for deep thinking simply a mirage. We are ceaselessly told that this shattering of the intellectual dream is the fault of the "neo-liberal agenda" tearing through higher education. And this predicament is especially acute in the arts, humanities, or social sciences where full-time or permanent positions are vanishingly rare. Early career researchers face semester-long contracts, three hours of teaching a week etc.; precarity is the new buzz word. I comfort myself with the thought that the dream life I imagined was never really a possibility, except for a few independently wealthy people.

In fact, the more I think about how difficult and dangerous work (/life) has been for the vast majority of human existence, the more comforted I am. My grandparent's generation had a rough time of it: coalmines, shipyards, washing laundry by hand etc. My Gran left school as a child and worked in the pork shop until her sixties, while my Granda worked as a delivery boy for pennies before serving his time at the yards as a moulder (putting in a solid 45 years there in conditions I would later hear described as "Dickensian"). So when I think about my worst jobs, my minimum wage, zero-hour contract jobs, I bear my grandparent's experience in mind (particularly my Granda's, as my Gran took great pride in her role as matriarch (which was a lot of work) and loved the pork shop where she chatted to people all day and got soldiers' spare rations during the war).

One can only conclude, then, that if things were shit then and things are shit now, there can only have been one brief sliver in history, one single generation, when things were OK, when if you were smart you probably could end up with a job which would change your material conditions considerably, when even if you weren't the most academically gifted, the cost of living was such that you could get by pretty well on the wages of the jobs you could get. We are told that there were a lot of jobs then too: a brief post-war period when the welfare state did its thing and you could start with nothing and end up pretty well off (or at least financially secure).

Those days are gone and many of us speculate as to the direction in which we're heading (consolidation of global wealth into ever fewer hands seems the most likely guess). I entirely support critiques of and resistance to the structures which perpetuate the gross inequalities we see – globally, nationally, and regionally. But at the same time there seems some unwillingness to address the other side of advanced capitalism's hegemony: the subjectivities it produces. In the Western world, people are working hard in paid employment (really hard in many cases) to live the lives they want. But there is little attention given to challenging the desires driving this frenzy of hard work – desires for nice things, for international holidays, for houses in better neighbourhoods, for expensive phones, for new clothes[1]. In this sense it's not about how shit work has got but how good life has got, and how good we know it can be.

The standard of living has greatly improved since my grandparent's childhood, partly because of the availability of mass produced goods made in the developing world. Bobbing along on the consumerist bandwagon that has made the whole world and its goodies seem within reach is a major contributor to global inequality (to say nothing of how it's destroying the planet, the results of which are disproportionately felt by the by poorest populations). My grandparents wanted and expected a lot less and they owned a lot less stuff. Simply put, if work is a problem that is inextricably bound up with alienation and exploitation, if we are willing to want less (specifically of the stuff that can be purchased) we can work less. Yet challenging desire seems to be off the cards.

In what might be described as bad faith, people don't always want to acknowledge that they even have choices (although I accept that sometimes the options are such that it doesn't feel like a choice). But you can, for example, choose to live in a shared house beyond young adulthood or you can live in a worse (cheaper) neighbourhood or you can buy a crappier car or use public transport or a bike. Or you can choose not to have kids because you know that it is going to make you worse off financially. We seem to work outwards from the point of our desires, in an attempt to satisfy them, rather than starting from how much we value not working in alienating and exploitative jobs, and all that it brings. A few people I know do manage this – they tend to be artists.

Given the right-wing tendency towards "responsibilization" built on a myth of the individual I reject wholeheartedly, I can understand the left's hesitancy to participate in this

kind of reasoning, lest we inadvertently blame the poor for their circumstances. But surely the left can say something about this dimension of life too – about values, about consumerism, about masses of working people swallowing whole the idea that if they work hard they can get the stuff, and the stuff can make them happy or make their lives worth living. If we can take a different starting point there is plenty else to say about work, other than critique it from an abstract or highly intellectualized Marxist or post-Marxist perspective.

Current discourses on work are overwhelmingly framed by questions of political economy, but I think there is another more philosophical facet that is worth exploring as it comes to bear on these kinds of questions. Work doesn't just give us money, it gives us something to do and can be bound up deeply with our identities. Many people go stir-crazy when they retire, and start working again soon afterwards. Work provides the scaffolding for central parts of our subjectivity. It was in the dark cold yards of 1940s Tyneside that my Granda made his dearest friends, and it remains the case for many that going to work is the principle way in which "society" is experienced.

There are other philosophical conversations to be had too, such as the morality of our lifestyle choices (owning homes, having kids) or the nature of subjectivity in a world that is free of the necessity to work. Work is tangled up with almost every aspect of contemporary life, and to pull at the threads is to essentially unravel a crisis of meaning. What are we actually doing here? What's the point of existing simply to chase after good feelings? Social liberals by definition aren't really up for telling people what to do, but the space liberalism has opened up for individual exploration (free from religious dogma and the weight of tradition) seems to have been pretty successfully appropriated by capitalists who are more than happy to tell you what you need (and guess what, they sell it too).

Until we can work this out for ourselves, until we can critically engage with the sources of meaning and value in our lives, we will be at the behest of people trying to sell it to us. And that will require us to work for money. Our desires are bound up with capitalism, and this is true even of what seem like the most the most primal and "natural" desires, such as having children. For those of us born into an advanced capitalist economy, the more pressing "work" might be to opt out, not with any action, but by engaging more deeply with our own sources of meaning, and working from there to figure out what our relationship with

work should/can be. What I'm proposing is not a political solution to the problems facing the workers of the world. But given that work sits at the nexus of so much in our lives, how we orient ourselves to it at this basic level is likely to have wide-ranging implications.

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[1] This is not an analysis easily applied to the poorest, even in the UK. But it's there in elements of the working classes and obviously the middle classes (who might be characterised by precisely this kind of mentality).

There are some popular photographic images of Bertrand Russell that come to mind when we hear his name. In them Russell smiles directly at us, primarily through his eyes. A pipe, of course, is in view. The pipe conveys a certain leisurely way of thinking. He is calm and kindly. Gone is the young genius of that philosophical revolution we associate with quick brilliance and abstraction. The assurance remains but now in the form of wisdom about the human condition. It is that wiser Russell who turned in 1932 (aged 60, though not yet two-thirds way through his life) to write his famous essay, "In Praise of Idleness."

It is hard not to imagine that Russell's contemporaries would have been startled at the essay's theme, at least if their knowledge of the man was limited to the sheer volume his literary output, rather than the languid demeanour. After all, Russell was a ferocious worker himself, managing to write a book or two virtually every year over the preceding two decades. He was civically active too. The interest in "idleness" was, though, perfectly sincere.

Russell's essay has endured as a contribution to the question of how we might turn from a work ethic driven labour and towards more meaningful pursuits. One might speculate that it has a persuasive force that more developed notions of leisure or idleness tend to lack. Russell describes productive human activities with a kind of dry irony that brings their apparent absurdity into focus. And he speaks from the point of view of humanity, yet with a kind of inside knowledge of those who believe that it is a good and noble thing that some, though not necessarily themselves, should be tasked with honest toil.

Russell's essay offers its readers a powerful set of criticisms of "the belief that work is virtuous". Those criticisms prove effective on their own terms. They are far from impeded by their author's aristocratically benevolent persona, speaking on behalf of a more equal world where class will have no advantage. The essay is aimed at the widest readership possible. It is chatty and effortless, and its objectives are not always precise or aligned. A number of tensions come into view. Unpicking them helps us to determine what we think Russell means. That is also an opportunity for us to find where we stand on idleness, and see whether we too would like to speak in praise of it.

Like most other champions of idleness or laziness, Russell is

very clear that his vision of things does not wish to defend exploitative idlers. These latter include land-owners who take in rents whilst doing nothing themselves. There is therefore an implied egalitarianism in his position. No moral case for idleness can succeed if it permits an unfair share of the burden of work. Indeed, the essay rings with a humane concern for the exploited, for the enslavement of workers.

The case for idleness can take two main forms. There is, what we might call, the *reformist* version. That version asks us to think about reducing the demands made by work on our time and energy in order to free us for the benefits of leisure. A contrasting purist version is not reformist, but *abolitionist*. This one welcomes idleness as the possible destruction of the greatest obstacle to human happiness. That obstacle is the obsession we have with making something of ourselves, of "tending the self", of egoism in all its forms. Another dimension of the idleness question is whether it is prompted by a worry about excessive work, and less about the positive virtues of idleness. But equally there may be positive even utopian temptations which give priority to idleness in discussions. And finally, there is the question of what the good of idleness supposedly is: in what sense is it better than the regime it corrects?

Each of these considerations can intersect. They cannot all be held with equal strength, given the various ways they may effectively deny each other. In Russell's essay all are given some expression. A dominant perspective, however, eventually emerges from the melee of claims.

Near the beginning of the essay, Russell expresses the wry hope that his essay should lead "to a campaign to induce good young men to do nothing". The time has arrived for fundamental change. The advent of mechanization has made possible a dramatic new freedom from work. (John Maynard Keynes had, just a few years earlier, set out a similar proposition in his "Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren.") What, though, is that freedom? Perhaps it is his gift for rhetoric that sees Russell begin with the option most likely to hold his audience captive. He initially connects the freedom of doing nothing with "laziness". That seems to point in the direction of the giddying abolitionist version of idleness. Truly lazy individuals would not care what the world makes of them, or if they did their preference for their own ease would always be the winning motivation. But Russell is not actually quite so radical. He tends in the main to push things in the reformist direction. Overall we find little enough talk of laziness and idleness, and more

about the practices of leisure.

The reformist position is naturally more aligned with a socially productive case for leisure. Once a luxury confined to the exploiting classes, our new world can hope to see an equitable distribution of leisure. And this is a good thing since leisure, Russell notes, "is essential to civilization". In this respect the good of leisure is indexed to the basic good of civilization (one which is not itself placed in question). Russell's "idleness" lies unsurprisingly near to the classical Greek notion of leisure or "*scholé*." *Scholé* is the opportunity for contemplation dedicated to improving one's life and community. The Roman authors spoke in similar ways of "*otium*," the negation of which – *negotium* – is the tawdry world of business. Both "*scholé*" and "*otium*" refer to a space of freedom where we can be most truly human. That is gained when we situate ourselves outside the demands of everyday busyness.

The question of what we truly are is addressed in terms of what things are best for us. Russell gives some outline to his view of the matter with the declaration that our leisure time should not "necessarily be spent in pure frivolity". For this, it turns out, some education will be required. *Scholé* finds its way – as it does in language – towards the concept "school". Notably, Russell was himself a committed educationalist. With Dora Black, and just a few years prior to "In Praise of Idleness," he founded a quite anti-traditional school. The usual hierarchies and structures – still prevalent in university studies, Russell believed – formed no part of the classroom experience.

Education helps us to be the best version of ourselves by equipping us with "tastes which would enable" the intelligent use of leisure. Russell occasionally nods favourably towards light-hearted pursuits, but he is more fundamentally drawn to the example of those innovators who in a certain kind of idleness – in *otium*, we might say – "cultivated the arts and discovered the sciences; it wrote the books, invented the philosophies, and refined social relations". Without this "leisure class, mankind would never have emerged from barbarism". Greater leisure opens up a space where there can be none of "the frayed nerves, weariness, and dyspepsia" that go with overwork. And with more energy at our disposal we will regain the capacity for civilizing activities and turn away from the "passive and vapid" amusements that are designed for exhausted people.

Russell, then, is no abolitionist. His programme for idleness

is, rather, one geared towards a kind of enlightened leisure. The essay is not pure classicism, though. It reverberates with feeling for the toiling and beleaguered masses. Equality is never subordinate to economic progress. Leisure is to be arranged for and enjoyed by all. In hope, more than anything else, he maintains that an egalitarian leisure can be at least as intellectually productive as its earlier socially stratified variety. Civilization, in the end, must be protected. It is for this reason that Russell, ultimately, writes not in praise of idleness but of its domesticated relative, leisure.

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Ethics and the "Faculty of Indifference" / Josh Cohen

The human being today is conceived above all as a working being. The virtue of work is preached across politics, commerce and culture, and enacted by policies on welfare, education, retirement and disability in liberal democratic governments across the world.

In a culture whose highest values are productivity and purpose, we are enjoined not simply to earn a living, but to pursue a vocation; not to rest content with merely doing a job, but to find one in which we can invest our deepest passions. Dutiful tolerance of the demands of work is not enough; we must *believe* in the work we do. We might acknowledge that work is liable at times to induce boredom and frustration, but only in the service of overcoming such delinquent feelings.

The equation of work with virtue, and sloth with vice is of course a very venerable one. The two Testaments of the Bible abound with prickly reproaches to the non-working, warning repeatedly of the poverty and early grave awaiting those who persist in idle ways. This became the foundation of a Western morality of work that identified sloth as not merely one sin among others, but the gateway to all sin, eroding the inner discipline and vigilance required to resist temptation.

In his seminal 1905 essay, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber showed the evolution of this valorization of work into the idea of work as the ultimate horizon of our lives, to be loved and cared for as a divine gift. The various Protestant movements that emerged from the Reformation infused the secular order of work and wealth with a new spirituality. The key word in the Protestant lexicon is "calling" (*Beruf*), which transforms work from pragmatic means of survival to a sacred end in itself.

Weber quotes the Puritan minister Richard Baxter's injunction to his flock to "Keep up a high esteem of Time; and be every day more careful that you lose none of your Time, than you are that you lose none of your Gold or Silver." Time must be kept on a tight leash, lest we find ourselves straying, meandering or idling into some detour with no discernible profit or purpose. The Protestant work ethic, writes Weber, asserts that "*only* action, not idleness and indulgence, serves to increase God's glory."

When management gurus today proclaim the joys and virtues of work, they're unlikely to invoke the increase of God's glory. But the sanctification of work, its equation with the highest human value, has fully survived the secularization of our culture and language. A love of work continues to be promoted as the highest good, the primary source of individual and social responsibility, discipline and temperance.

It follows that if work is performed in the absence of belief, it will quickly be swept up in a spirit of indifference and lassitude. Think of the famously enigmatic response of Melville's scrivener (legal copyist) Bartleby to his boss's request to copy a document: "I would prefer not to". To prefer not to is neither to affirm nor to refuse. Expressing neither inclination nor opinion, it intimates Bartleby's removal to a zone of indifference, where the obligation to judge, choose or decide is suspended indifferently. It is the perfect formula for the anticipation of his inertial collapse. Melville's story is thus an exemplary illustration of the link between indifference and worklessness. Bartleby "doesn't work" in more ways than one; his lethargy corrodes the will to work both in the narrow sense of waged labour, and in the broader sense of functionality.

If the Protestant ethic's equation of work with the highest good is correct, then Bartleby's sabotage of productivity stands condemned as profoundly unethical. This is surely why medieval scholastics fingered sloth as the beginning of all evil. There is no ethical content in detachment from all values, principles and positions, in scepticism towards all propositions for the good.

But what if that Protestant equation is wrong? Is there a case for an ethics of non-work? The great French writer and cultural theorist Roland Barthes hints at such a possibility in his late seminar on what he calls The Neutral, an orientation to life that, as he puts it "baffles the paradigm". The neutral is not some bland median point between political or ethical extremes. It is the refusal of a stance of belief, of ethics understood as a positive set of criteria for determining the good. But it also hints at the possibility of what we might call a groundless ethics.

Barthes' seminar enlists many different literary, philosophical, and devotional systems and practices, ancient and modern, in support of his notion of the neutral. But the most insistent and emblematic figure in the book is Pyrrho, the founding figure of philosophical scepticism, born around the fourth century BCE. We know of Pyrrho's

life and teachings only through the second- and third-hand transmissions of later writers.

On his travels through the East with Alexander the Great, Pyrrho encountered Indian mystics and philosophers, who had a transformative effect on his thinking. They steered his mind towards an ongoing quest for *ataraxia* or unconcern, a state of indifference towards the world inferred from the essential unknowability of all things.

Pyrrhonism's basic premise is that there is no reliable measure for natural or moral truth; the air a young person finds mild will make an old person feel cold, the act one individual considers wicked another considers virtuous. Pyrrho extrapolated from this condition of cosmic undecidability that we may as well allow ourselves to be blown willy-nilly by the winds of chance, as no positive action or state of being is preferable to any other, including existence itself.

This is hardly a viable programme for life, a point recognised by the medic and philosopher Sextus Empiricus 500 years later. Sextus sought to codify scepticism as a body of thought, adapting Pyrrho's thinking to the ordinary demands of daily life. While still oriented towards the ataraxia achieved by suspending all judgements and definitive claims to truth, Sextus recognised the pragmatic requirement to act in accordance with "guidance by nature, necessitation by feelings, handing down of laws and customs, and teaching of kinds of expertise." We may not be able to know which truth to live by, but we can make rules as if we did.

Scepticism's appeal today, in a culture that encourages the narcissistic drip-feed of preferences and opinions, lies in its stance of reticence, its wariness of mouthing off. In our social media landscape, opinion threatens to become the currency and substance of our selfhood. The positions we publicize have become a way of affirming the reality of our existence.

"The Neutral", wrote Barthes, "…is good for nothing, and certainly not for advocating a position, an identity." But how then could the absence of a positive ethical content be the basis for an ethics? A provisional response to this question is to be found in the work of the mid-twentieth century Romanian philosopher (or, perhaps more accurately, anti-philosopher) E. M. Cioran.

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Cioran was developing his caustic aphoristic philosophy of despair during the 1930s as a scholarship student at the University of Berlin. His stance of weary disgust at the morality and culture of the West coalesced with admiration for Hitler and Mussolini, as well as a qualified admiration for Romania's home-grown far-right movement, the Iron Guard.

Cioran eventually renounced and repented his support for the Iron Guard, and his writing from the late forties onwards is characterized by a deep antipathy, rooted in these earlier catastrophic political affiliations, towards the febrile extremism of such movements. In 1941 he left Romania for Paris, never to return and publishing thereafter only in French.

It's no coincidence, then, that Cioran's first published book in French, *Précis de décomposition or A Short History of Decay*, opens by lamenting the tendency of human beings towards a blind love of their ideas and beliefs. The fanatic cannot contain his beliefs inside the restricted sphere of his private commitments, but "unduly forces other men to love his god, eager to exterminate them if they refuse."

Ideas, suggests Cioran, should be the object of a neutral and indifferent curiosity. They become dangerous when caught in the grip of personal enthusiasm. "Once man loses his *faculty of indifference*", he writes, "he becomes a potential murderer; once he transforms his idea into a god the consequences are incalculable."

In speaking of indifference as a *faculty* rather than a passing mood, Cioran implies that it is a structural dimension of the human being, a kind of spiritual counterweight to the faculty of belief and action. This faculty manifests itself above all in the so-called vices of "doubt and sloth", without which we become the prey of fanaticism:

> Only the sceptics (or idlers or aesthetes) escape, because they *propose* nothing, because they – humanity's true benefactors – undermine fanaticism's purposes, analyse its frenzy. I feel safer with a Pyrrho than with a Saint Paul, for a jesting wisdom is gentler than an unbridled sanctity.

The Sceptic stance, as Cioran interprets it, is a quiet resistance to the conception of the human as a propositional animal, a being defined by his proclaimed beliefs and public actions. To recognise a faculty of indifference is to insist on the human being as irreducible to these twin badges of identity. Doubt and sloth protect us from the terrors of

unbridled sanctity.

The other great feature of this faculty is an impulse to frivolity. Frivolity is the fruit of the hard-won discovery of the impossibility of knowing or believing with certainty. It is a kind of rigorous superficiality (whose great representative in Anglophone literature would surely be Oscar Wilde), a cultivation of artifice and play as an orientation to life. Frivolity is the universal solvent in which the violent pretensions of absolute conviction dissolve, and as such "the most effective antidote to the disease of being what one is."

Doubt, sloth and frivolity are the unholy trinity of virtues to be ranged against all philosophies of the Absolute. In a sly allusion to the most famed and uncompromising conception of the Absolute in philosophy, Cioran invokes Hegel's famous phrase, "Sunday of Life". In Hegel, the Sunday of Life is how life might appear in the wake of the quiet, humble renunciation of self-interest. Cioran's aphorism, "The Sundays of Life", imagines how the world might look under such conditions:

> In a world of inaction, the idle would be the only ones not to be murderers. But they do not belong to humanity, and, sweat not being their strong point, they love without suffering the consequences of Life and of Sin. Doing neither good nor evil, they disdain – spectators of the human convulsion – the weeks of time, the efforts which asphyxiate consciousness.

The refusal to do neither good nor evil, however, is animated by a paradox, for Cioran hints that it isn't precisely neutral ethically. The avoidance of moral action is not a suspension or rejection of the good so much as a means of preserving it, as he suggests in an aphorism provocatively entitled "Theory of Goodness".

The aphorism begins with an echo of Ivan Karamazov's famous warning that if there is no God, everything is permitted. "What keeps you from committing any and every crime" if there is "no ultimate criterion nor irrevocable principle, and no god?" asks an anonymous questioner. The interlocutor's response is worth quotation in full:

> I find in myself as much evil as in anyone, but detesting action – mother of all the vices – I am the cause of no one's suffering. Harmless, without greed, and without enough energy or indecency to affront others, I leave the world as I found it. To take revenge presupposes a constant vigilance and a systematic mind, a costly continuity, whereas the indifference of forgiveness and contempt renders the hours pleasantly empty. All ethics represent a danger for goodness; only negligence rescues it. Having chosen the phlegm of the imbecile and the apathy of the angel, I have excluded myself from actions and, since goodness is incompatible with life, I have decomposed myself in order to be good.

Cioran here brings into focus a rigorously paradoxical ethics. It is the indifferent, listless sloth who preserves the good by declining to speak or act in its name, to make any claim to represent it in either person or behaviour. There could hardly be a starker contrast with the Protestant equation of the good with work, or indeed of the more venerable insistence on the vita activa as the prime source and vehicle of the good.

In Cioran's conception, life can never provide a passage to the good, insofar as to live is to act. Suicide, as he repeatedly points out, offers no solution; for all its apparent nihilism, the expenditure of energy and totality of conviction suicide requires shows its not so secret affinity to the realm of action and belief. What the "Theory of the Good" fragment offers instead is "decomposition", a state in which my sensible presence in the world is so minimal as to be almost imperceptible; is this not the Sceptic goal of ataraxia, a state of unconcern which harms, disturbs or intrudes on no one, myself included?

It's easy to look askance at Cioran's encomium to apathy and see in it a profound abrogation of responsibility in the face of all the urgent ethical demands of our time, not least the environmental crisis which threatens the very future of the world. But isn't Cioran offering the lineaments of a new relationship to the world when he proclaims an imperative to leave it as he found it? Doesn't the renunciation of one's own energetic resources make less of a demand on the energetic resources of the world?

Then again, the haste to infer the practical consequences of Cioran's thinking would surely be a symptom of the malaise he's diagnosing. If something like an ethics of inactivity were to exist, it couldn't take the form of a programme of action. Its value would rather be in putting in question those ethical norms we take for granted – not least the assumption that the good person believes and does the right things.

Josh Cohen is professor of modern literary theory at Goldsmiths and a practicing psychoanalyst. His latest book Not Working: Why We Have to Stop *was published in January by Granta.*

Afterword

Pronounced with a soft ‘g’
/ Siân Hutchings

First I dance to meet you.

Then I bow my head and my torso.

I greet you with my front limbs and push myself forward, embracing your company.

I carve into you, making myself a home that will later bury me.

I will caress you in this life and you will caress me in another.

As I dance with you, you push under my skin and we become symbiotic.

Are you aware that you have been other shells, other vessels and other skins?

You are not a you, you are a they. Later you will become us.

Siân Hutchings is an artist whose work aims to highlight how we can navigate experience through a multitude of senses rather than just relying on the western dominant sense of the eye.

About

Our Daily Bread: Some Thoughts on Earning a Crust is *publication that was released as part of the* Workforce *exhibition that opened on March 15th, 2019 at* The NewBridge Project: Gateshead

Workforce *is a group exhibition curated by Lucas Ferguson-Sharp featuring new work by Jarsdell Solutions LTD, Samuel Barry, Siân Hutchings, Anthony Morgan and Joseph Shaw.*

The exhibition is the first part in a series of events that engage with contemporary labour issues. Workforce reacts to the changing landscape of labour, current trends away from equality and diversity in the workplace, as well as the impacts of employment on our identity and personal self-worth. Latent within the exhibition is each artist's own relationship to work, their personal experiences as employees and how their practice fits within larger conversation about obstacles facing today's workers.

Lucas Ferguson-Sharp is a researcher and curator currently based in Newcastle Upon Tyne. Lucas has taken a socially engaged approach to his practice that has explored a range of subjects from North-East artist Norman Cornish to the social history of the Barras Market in Glasgow. More can be learnt about his work at LucasFSharp.com