

Play As Rebellion

Where did All the Fun Go?

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In his 1985 essay; *The Abolition of Work*, Bob Black proposes, like Johan Huizinga and Paul Lafargue before him, that idleness and play, rather than a sort of unproductive form of slovenly idolatry is perhaps the most heightened form of individual and collective expression. Black argues that the issues with corporate oligarchic capitalism on one end and state oligarchic capitalism under the guise of totalitarian collectivism on the other hand is that both disregard the importance of leisure in the productive, intellectual and spiritual lives of the people.

With an emphasis on work by both the far right, the far left, as well as within the more centrist/reformist elements of these systems, we are left with no alternative way of theorizing individual and collective worth and value. In both systems, corporate authoritarianism and state authoritarianism, human dignity is reduced to the labour theory of value, wherein even intellectual, artistic and imaginative pursuits are rendered as commodities. This is not to say, however that Marxist analysis is incorrect, indeed, Marxism is perhaps at its best when it illuminates the level of exploitation of workers by their corporate or statist leaders. However, the solutions offered by “really existing socialism” as well as those offered by radical free-market solutions do not offer a paradigmatic shift away from the modelling of human labour as a measure of value. The difference as explained by Black is that “work” is always involuntary, whereas play is by its nature voluntary. Rather than the expectation of a monetary reward for one’s labour, the reward is the experience itself. This is, according to Black contrary to the modern workplace in corporatized America, and indeed, he surmises that the freedom to pursue leisure in the then-deStalinized eastern block was perhaps closer to his vision of a hypothetical “State of Leisure”:

“The officials who push them around are answerable only to higher-ups, public or private. Either way, dissent and disobedience are punished. Informers report regularly to the authorities. All this is supposed to be a very bad thing. And so it is, although it is nothing but a description of the modern workplace. The liberals and conservatives and libertarians who lament totalitarianism are phonies and hypocrites. There is more freedom in any moderately deStalinized dictatorship than there is in the ordinary American workplace.”

In fact, in the years since Black wrote *The Abolition of Work*, we have seen an increasing centralization of authority in mid-size to large corporations. Human Resources departments have become larger and more integrated into corporate schema, under the pretense that they serve the workers’ interest. To a certain degree, this is true, but only within the parameters that the

interest of the human resources of the company align with the best interests of the company leadership, who are not so much beholden to the well being of their workers as they are to the well being of their company, which in essence boils down to its fiscal performance. Is an HR dossier or “file” any different than the file on a subject under surveillance? Black goes on:

“Their aptitude for autonomy is so atrophied that their fear of freedom is among their few rationally grounded phobias. Their obedience training at work carries over into the families they start, thus reproducing the system in more ways than one, and into politics, culture and everything else. Once you drain the vitality from people at work, they’ll likely submit to hierarchy and expertise in everything. They’re used to it.”

This theory of stratified hierarchy can be found in Foucault, who infamously compared public schools in France to prisons. The methodology at play in the workplace is the same. The impact of attuning workers to a hierarchy has two main impacts: 1) to increase performance anxiety in order to keep workers complacent and questioning their job performance/stability and 2) extrapolate this anxiety and scale it to the organization as a whole to create suspicion among the lower-level workers and destabilize their ability to cogently work together beyond the basic needs of their employer (for instance, to deter talks of unionization or even genuine friendship between co-workers). Is it any real wonder that the social lives of people are declining at a faster rate than at any other time in history?

According to Joe Cartwright of City Observatory, the social realm in the United States is in a position of “rapid disintegration” as big business pushes its way into areas that were once the purview of community groups, churches and volunteer organizations in order to ply consumers with the need for a busy life scheduled at the discretion of corporations. Socrates warned us of this present condition in 350 B.C. when he stated:

“Beware the barrenness of a busy life.”

In this way, it is true that although seemingly full of content and plans, a busy life is ultimately a placation of the hierarchy indoctrinated within us since birth. It sublimates our whims and desires into a sort of religious zeal for so-called productivity at the service of profit margins. Non-profit organizations too suffer from this emphasis on profitability and the exploitation of its workers for the end goal of fiscal solvency. Even in our “free time”, we are organized into consumer groups, operating at the service of global conglomerates’ pursuit of growth and profit. Is it simply coincidence that totalitarian socialism reared its head when Marx himself was unable to divorce himself of this theory that the only way to extricate humanity from this exploitative system was to pursue infinite productivity, but by means of the workers’ control of their own chains? Marx said:

“the realm of freedom does not commence until the point is passed where labor under the compulsion of necessity and external utility is required”

This realm of freedom is inherently the freedom from work, however one need not push capitalism to its breaking point of efficiency and productivity to reach this goal. We could simply stop working. It’s not a radical idea. It is perhaps the ultimate question, or as Heidegger would call it, the question of “unconcealment”. How do we unconceal a world free from hierarchy and labour in service of ever growing productivity? I believe, like Bob Black and Paul Lafargue, that it begins with the abolition of work. However, despite Black’s criticism of Marx not arriving at the final conclusion of the abolition of work as the ultimate freedom that he desired, Black also suffers from the shortsightedness that despite his solution being implicit in the experience of humanity, he lacks the foundations of what a world without work would actually look like. He is

right in his assertion that the very action of play would provide the basis for this world without work, however the solution, one could argue is that play itself must be revolutionized as a form of rebellion. For, is there nothing more revelatory than experiencing an event for the sake of 'being-there', as Heidegger would suggest?

Again, this is not a new idea. In fact, the idea that play or leisure can be used as a means of liberation has existed perhaps as long as human civilization. The Egyptians developed, in the year 3100 BC, the game *Senet*. Played on a game board reminiscent of checkers, it was designed to represent the Ancient Egyptian religious myth of the soul's journey to the afterlife. Games are played not so much as a diversion, as commonly believed, but are rather a sort of narratological apotheosis, allowing an individual to temporarily displace themselves physically; psychically, temporally and spiritually from their regular day to day experience. In effect, play constitutes a sort of structured form of taoist meditation. Guy Debord in *Society of the Spectacle*, reinforces this understanding of leisure:

"Reality considered partially unfolds, in its own general unity, as a pseudo-world apart, an object of mere contemplation."

In essence, consciousness itself is a "game". We are constantly suspended within a cognitive game with ourselves. This is where a society founded on play could elevate the intrinsic realities about our own nature to the forefront of community. Debord speaks about how the images of spectacle themselves constitute an "instrument of collective unification". He cautions however, that the freedom of libidinal spectacle can also lead to the capture of this spirit by those wishing to use it as a form of social coercion and control. This is why, more than ever it is imperative that we must play rather than spectate. Play implies interaction and involvement, whereas spectacle is restrained itself to a form of passivity, thus restraining human ability to the level of lethargic consumer rather than the possibility of creativity. Debord was aware that passive spectacle is the mediator of human social relations in our current era, if we view social interaction and a life of play as a form of protest against passivity, we can further understand the ways in which this revelation of play as rebellion has been purposefully suppressed by those who seek to relegate the masses to producers and consumers of fiscal profiteering.

"The spectacle inherits all the weaknesses of the Western philosophical project which undertook to comprehend activity in terms of the categories of seeing; furthermore, it is based on the incessant spread of the precise technical rationality which grew out of this thought. The spectacle does not realize philosophy, it philosophizes reality. The concrete life of everyone has been degraded into a speculative universe."

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