

Against Self-Work

A critique of care as a form of labor

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Life as a Form of Work

”It is worth asking, do we presume to attack the mega-structures of State and Capital without changing the relations between ourselves and the tasks that go along with this — questioning the dominant concepts of time and rhythm, of survival and life, of symbol and reality?” - Social War, Antisocial Tension

In *Bædan 2: A Queer Journal of Heresy* the writers discuss a popular anthropological theory that people in pre-civilization spent very few hours of the day doing work. The writers in *Bædan* go on to push against this notion and argue that the effort necessary to survive was just a part of life and wasn't conceptualized as work. Work and play may have had very little distinction, if any. Yet today capitalism's indoctrination of work runs deep as it attempts to impose itself on every living creature in hopes of its perpetuation. One of its forms of latching onto life that I find increasingly discomfoting is the concept of Self-Work.

Today, the use of self-work may be easily recognizable; it has come to be associated with putting energy into processing trauma, complicated emotions, difficult situations, insecurities and mistakes often as an effort to change. It seems to me though that when intertwining these important practices with the idea of work — a concept created by and forced onto people — capitalism finds a way to live on. It's as if putting in a few hours guarantees results and that work makes things better. Yet work is that very structure that gives a home to so much stress, trauma and thrives by stifling the joy in life.

Work is static. It's rigid, forced, and inherently wrought with imbalanced power dynamics. On the other hand, introspection and a conversation with oneself or another person is every intangible possibility; it takes no shape or form, it's alive. The same can be said about healing and the same for brokenness. They overlap, there's no clear end and beginning but an enmeshing kind of like being in a body of water and every passing wave made up from parts of all of it.

The Self as an Occupation

I was having a conversation around self-work with a friend who brought up the ways in which early and late stage capitalism operate. In early stage capitalism, people who were employed as wage workers clocked in and out of work, and in this way their waged work didn't follow them home. Yet in late stage capitalism, work seeks one out at every moment — from all the unpaid hours of labor it tends to rack up, to the stress of instability that may follow one after they leave their place of work. Work even then bleeds into how one conceptualizes the navigation of emotional terrain; the self becoming its own occupation.

Self-work, too, seemingly comes with a sort of clocking in/out of its own or having a time and place in which it's done. In conversation around my or others' need for growth, it's often said that one just needs to do the work, as though it simply requires sitting down and getting to it. To me this implies the ways one could benefit from changing only calls for one to go to work — and the disconcerting assumption that work is something we all inherently know how to do. This has been made true for many people through a lifetime of being forced into waged labor, but it seems to be a way of capitalism normalizing work as natural to life.

Emotional Capital and Emotional Labor

The concept of self-work itself leads us along a slippery slope in the name of progress and bettering oneself or, even more alarming, accumulating *emotional capital*. This last concept, of being “rich in emotional capital,” has been explained by psychologist Paul Thagard as “high in self-esteem, self-regulation, emotional energy, attachment, resilience, agreeableness, and optimism.”

This idea of emotional accumulation diminishes the way that processing trauma, mistakes, and insecurities are a lifelong process. Equating personal growth to a measurable concept feels deeply incorrect to actual lived experience. There are times I’ll enter tricky situations with more confidence and maturity than a year before but there are also times I’ll fuck up more than I ever have. Often I have to learn the same thing over and over again, sometimes with years in between. This is because there’s no linear way in which one grows. There’s no exhaustible amount of work that can be done on oneself because there’s no quantity of one’s potential to change. Personally, I’m not moving towards some accumulation of goodness, I’m moving through life as it hits me in waves.

There’s also this concept of “emotional labor” and its current use. The term itself originates from jobs that involve foregoing one’s own needs and feelings in order to perform good customer service. The first time it was used was in 1983 by an American sociologist Arlie Hochschild and was explained as to “induce or suppress feelings in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others.” This kind of suppression of emotion in order to serve others and not be reprimanded remains true, yet outside of the service industry it has come to be a self-imposed job around navigating difficult emotions and topics. On occasion people even get paid for what they deem to be emotional labor outside of the workplace — I’ve known people to pay their friends money after listening to one another and processing trauma together.

Does that not make you also ask, “What The Fuck?” Capitalism is a system that seeks to commodify everything, even emotional intimacy. It’s true that trauma and conflict are in no way easy to navigate and do require deep levels of energy and care; it can often be the last thing one wants to do. Yet watching personal relationships and the beautiful amorphous thing that is friendship getting forced into the category of labor and work is gut wrenching. If we’re friends, I’ll be there for you when I can. That may not be all the time, but I’d rather operate mutually than pretend money has any value when it comes to being emotionally intimate with one another. Replicating systems of control is the opposite of any project I wish for and especially not something I want interpersonally.

As it’s said in *Against the Logic of Submission*, “the conscious desire for total freedom requires a transformation of ourselves and our relationships in the context of revolutionary struggle.” I want to resist thinking of navigating emotions as a form of work because I want my friends and I to be as free of it as we can be. Life until the pandemic had been unending waged labor for so many people; some got a break while others (“essential workers”) never stopped working and even got called heroes for doing so. Before the citywide shutdown I’d been working three jobs and still barely making enough to pay rent. For all these reasons, it seems likely that transforming

relationships in the context of revolutionary struggle could look like refusing to normalize work as a positive emotional project.

Self-Care and Self-Destruction

A final piece in the realm of self-work that I want to address is self-care. It's another one of those vague yet pointed terms used to elicit a meaningful individual practice. While caring for oneself is vital, in the mainstream this often looks solely like lighting candles and taking a bath or whatever else has been commonly referred to as a way to self-soothe. Yet in *For All We Care: Reconsidering Self-Care*, while they offer a completely different framework around what self-care could mean, they mention property destruction, fighting, and calling out one's abusers as alternatives to taking care of oneself.

In the company of dominant ideas of self-care and self-work there seems to be a replication of the dichotomies projected by capitalism again: life means either down-time, time spent away from work recuperating, or work, time spent away from down-time. These are harmful dualities to instill as they reinforce that life is as dimensionless as capitalism says it is.

Another reason I'm interested in removing work as a framework for emotional practices is because it brings up a slew of negative associations. Yet diving into myself, while not always pleasant, isn't something I was to consider similarly. In *For All We Care*, they point out how one's approach to care is "a question of what relationship we establish to our challenges and our anguish." What is I welcomed the shit I didn't want to deal with, ran right up and swam into it? Could caring for oneself and others also mean welcoming the pain of transformation?

The importance of this in terms of a greater anti-capitalist project is highlighted in *Self-Destruction* where they write "to abolish the system that created us — it means altering our lives beyond recognition. There are no guarantees in this undertaking; it takes self-destructive abandon." To self-destruct is to transform, to rearrange and change form. It's a risk that could mean the destruction of what one hates outside of themselves too, to the rid of those things once and for all.

What Words Can Do To Us

It could be that my issues with self-work are mistakenly semantic and less so intrinsic to wider conceptualizations of changing oneself. Even if that's the case, I still feel the need to push against the possibility that language and capitalism are taking advantage of this wordplay. Work is my enemy, linguistically and actually, and I don't want to use it when I mean being in touch with myself. Work is the very structure that fragments me in half — it doesn't lead me to be wiser or more whole.

Moreover, I'm not interested in telling people what to do — if you want to call your own process of healing “work,” or if the term “emotional labor” feels important to you, great. My tension lies with the weaponization and internalization of capitalism that have the potential to accompany them, as well as what these concepts take from life.

In *All the Terrible Things We Do to Each Other* they say, “what ties us together is not language — remember, it's the activity between us that gives us language,” which makes me wonder what happens when the opposite becomes true, and language succeeds in dominating one's activities? What happens when someone classifies ripping into the dark parts of themselves as a form of work and it becomes so? What if the concept of work was removed as intrinsic to life? Would anything change? Would life feel different?

If the activity between us can give us language, I want to explore the ways of relating to each other and consider what activity between others and I are creating opportunities for certain things to be said. In relating to each other as a task and obligation, we may actually find that “work” is the term that makes the most sense. Yet in searching for new ways of connecting with another, in part by removing work as essential to relationships with oneself and others, what language could our desires unearth?

Less Work More Revenge

As most of the world finds itself in the midst of unprecedented mass unemployment and as many decide not to return to work, what better time to barrel an internal form of revolt against the capitalist machine? Let's consider the possibilities of action that could come from pushing against the framework of existence as a job and continue one's revolt beyond work — to not only desire less or no work but also more play. To reference *Against the Logic of Submission* again:

“If joy and wonder, and a beautiful, indomitable existence are what we want, we need to try to achieve this here and now in rebellious defiance against all domination, eradicating the logic of submission from our lives, our relationships and our revolutionary struggle — for the destruction of politics and the creation of life without measure.”

Work intends to take everything from those under its crushing and unbearable weight. It has transformed life to revolve around transaction. But another world is possible and it asks those in work's grip to act on their hatred for it, to not return, to revolt, to rid any practice of care with its name.

That being said, many don't have a choice to not return to work, or maybe even love and care about the work they do, but that doesn't mean moves can't be made against it from within if one wants. Sabotage to expensive equipment, revenge on abusive management, co-workers and customers, poor customer service, theft of resources and other modes of rebellion against places of work are all understandable responses to being forced into a lifetime of waged labor. As they say in *Self-Destruction*, “let's make our despair into a transformative force.”

To those currently working, those who aren't but will eventually, those who will never return, those running scams, stealing, sharing, squatting, and whatever else can be thought of to get by — solidarity to all raging under capitalism until its end. Here's to making moves to abandon care as a form of work or work as a concept at all, to fighting to reclaim and re-imagine what work has taken from this wild ride of being alive.

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