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# No Future for the Workplace

Bob Black

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The best future for the workplace, as for the battlefield, is none at all. With belated notice taken of a crisis in the workplace, the consultants surge forth with faddish reforms whose common denominator is that they excite little interest in the workplace itself. Done to — not won by — the workers, they are very much business as usual for business. They may raise productivity temporarily till the novelty wears off, but tinkering with the who, what, when and where of work doesn't touch the source of the malaise: *why* work?

Changing the place of work to the home is like emigrating from Romania to Ethiopia in search of a better life. Flextime is for professionals who, as the office joke goes, can work any sixty hours a week they like. It is not for the service sector where the greatest numbers toil; it will not do for fry cooks to flex their prerogatives at the lunch hour nor bus drivers at rush hour. Job enrichment is part pep rally, part pain-killer — uplift and aspirin. Even workers' control, which most American managers find unthinkable, is only self-managed servitude, like letting prisoners elect their own guards.

For Western employers as for outgoing Eastern European dictators, *glasnost* and *perestroika* are too little and too late. Measures

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<https://archive.org/details/BlackFriendlyFire>.

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that would have been applauded by 19th century socialist and anarchist militants (indeed, that's whom they were cribbed from by the consultants) at best meet now with sullen indifference, and at worst are taken as signs of weakness. Especially for American bosses, relatively backward in management style as in other ways, concessions would only arouse expectations they cannot fulfill and yet remain in charge. The democracy movements worldwide have swept away the small fry. The only enemy is the common enemy. The workplace is the last bastion of authoritarian coercion. Disenchantment with work runs as deeply here as disenchantment with Communism in the East. Indeed many were not all that enchanted to begin with. Why did they submit? Why do we? We have no choice. There is far more evidence of a revolt against work than there had been of a revolt against Communism. Were it otherwise, there would be no market for tranquilizers like job redesign or job enrichment. The worker at work, as to a tragic extent off the job, is passive-aggressive. Not for him the collective solidarity heroics of labor's past. But absenteeism, job-jumping, theft of goods and services, self-sedation with drink or drugs, and effort so perfunctory it may cross the line to count as sabotage — these are how the little fish emulate the big fish who market junk bonds and loot S & L's. What if there was a general strike — and it proved permanent because it made no demands, it was *already* the satisfaction of all demands? There was a time the unions could have thwarted anything like that, but they don't count any more.

The future belongs to the zerowork movement, should one well up, unless its object is impossible because work is inevitable. Do not even the consultants and the techno-futurologists at their most fantastic take work for granted? Indeed they do, which is reason enough to be sceptical. They never yet foresaw a future that came to pass. They prophesied moving sidewalks and single family air-cars, not computers and recombinant DNA. Their American Century was Japanese before it was half over. Futurologists are always wrong because they are only extrapolators, the limit of their vision

is more of the same — although history (the record of previous futures) is replete with discontinuities, with surprises like Eastern Europe. Attend to the utopians instead. Since they believe life could be different, what they say just might be true. "Work," referring to what workers do, should not be confused with exertion; play can be more strenuous than work. Work is compulsory production, something done for some other reason than the satisfaction of doing it. That other reason might be violence (slavery), dearth (employment) or an internalized compulsion (the Calvinist's "calling," the Buddhist's "right livelihood," the Syndicalist's "duty to serve the People"). Unlike the play impulse, none of these motives maximizes our productive potential; work is not very productive although output is its only justification. Enter the consultants with their toys.

Although it does not have to be, play can be productive, so forced labor may not be necessary. When we work we produce without pleasure so as to consume without creating — containers drained and filled, drained and filled, like the locks of a canal. Job enrichment? The phrase implies a prior condition of job impoverishment which debunks the myth of work as a source of wealth. Work devalues life by appropriating something so priceless it cannot be bought back no matter how high the GNP is.

*Life* enrichment, on the other hand, consists of the suppression of many jobs and the recreation, in every sense, of the others as activities intrinsically enjoyable — if not to every one for any length of time, then for some people, at some times, in some circumstances. Work standardizes people as it does products, but since people by nature strive to produce themselves, work wastes effort lost to conflict and stress. Play is pluralistic, bringing *into play* the full panoply of talents and passions submerged by work and anaesthetized by leisure. The work-world frowns on job-jumping, the play-oriented or *ludic* life encourages hobby-hopping. As their work-conditioning wears off, more and more people will feel more and more aptitudes and appetites unfolding like the colorful wings

of a brand-new butterfly, and the ludic mode of production will be the more firmly consolidated.

You say you love your job? Fine. Keep doing it. Your sort will help to tide us over during the transition. We feel sorry for you, but we respect your choice as much as we suspect it's rooted in refusal to admit your present prodigious efforts made life (especially yours) no better, they only made life seem to go by faster. You were coping in your own way: you were trying to get it over with.

With the abolition of work the economy is, in effect, abolished. Complementing play as a mode of production is *the gift* as a system of distribution. Replacing today's Teamsters hauling freight will be Welcome Wagons visiting friends and bearing gifts. Why go to the trouble to buy and sell? Too much paperwork. Too much *work*.

Although the consultants are inept as reformists they might make magnificent revolutionaries. They rethink work, whereas workers want to think about anything but. But they must rethink their own jobs first. For them to transfer their loyalties to the workers might not be too difficult — it's expedient to join the winning side — but they will find it harder to acknowledge that in the end the experts on work are the workers who do it. Especially the workers who refuse to.