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The Manifesto of the Happily Unemployed

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2018

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... and what do you do for a living?

Until now the Happy Unemployed have always been reluctant to begin with theory. They have always far preferred to gain publicity through action, malefaction, and above all inaction. In this respect what is about to follow breaks with previous principles. Furthermore, we cannot present any conclusive research results for the field of happy unemployment as none exists yet. A few explanations are needed nonetheless because the rumors that have already helped the Happy Unemployed to achieve a clandestine fame are not free from misunderstandings. In fact, misunderstandings surround even rather fundamental issues, namely happiness and unemployment too. Firstly, as soon as anyone mentions the word happiness, suspicion is immediately aroused. Happiness is middle class. Happiness is irresponsible. Happiness is un-German. And anyway—the refrain goes—how can anyone be happy faced with poverty, violence and the bread rolls that cost 67 Pfennigs these days even though there's nothing but air inside. In his book *The Situation is Serious but not Hopeless: The Pursuit of Unhappiness*

Paul Watzlawick provides a most convincing description of this kind of attitude:

What if we were not involved in the original incident? What if we can't be blamed of any complicity? There's no doubt about it that would make us out and out victims. And just let anyone try to call our victim status into question or even dare to expect that we do something about it. Whatever God, the world, fate, nature, chromosomes and hormones, society, our parents, our relatives, the police, our teachers, our doctors, our bosses or—most of all—our friends have done to us is so heinous that the mere suggestion that it might be possible to do something about it is an insult in itself. Besides, this is not a scientific argument.

In order to address this whole issue we would have to advance into the morass of psychology and of course we want to avoid this at all costs. People also have other arguments against happiness ready at hand. For example, it is said that totalitarianism is about wanting to make people happy against their will. But unhappy workers and job-seekers don't need to lose any additional sleep about this. The Happy Unemployed do not have the slightest intention of forcing anyone to be happy against their will. The word *happiness* is of course a cue for all kinds of quacks who want to extol the virtues of their miracle cures. But the Happy Unemployed have no miracle cures to offer. The Happy Unemployed's programme is similar to Lautremont's. In 1868 he formulated his objective in the following manner:

Up to now unhappiness has been described to arouse fear and compassion. Now I am going to describe happiness to arouse the opposite.

And now to come to the point. We all know that unemployment cannot be abolished. If a company is doing badly, there are job cuts, if it is doing well, money is invested in automation—and this also means job cuts. In the past a workforce was called for because there was work. Now work is desperately called for because there is a workforce and no one

This leaves the happy unemployed with plenty of space to experiment and we call this project the *search for unidentified resources*. As you may have grasped by now, our life of leisure is very ambitious, it is theoretical and practical, serious and playful, local and international (in Europe alone there are already twenty million virtual happy unemployed). One day you will be able to say with pride: I was around when the whole things was just getting off the ground.

Just to cite one example: A few years ago sociologists made a study of the life of the inhabitants of a slum area of Dakar, in Senegal. They discovered that the income of an average family of twelve was actually seven times higher than their official income. It's not that these people can perform miracles and have discovered a way of turning a single bank note into seven. Instead they make the most of their meager means by making it circulate more intensively. It is impossible to live in Africa without belonging to a group, a clan, or a circle of friends. Within these networks money permanently circulates according to a precisely laid down system that regulates the giving of gifts, donations, investments, loans, and repayments. Because the possibilities of getting more substantial sums of money are accumulated in the family, it has at its disposal a sum of money that far exceeds its scarce resources. Moreover this circulation of money is only one element of that reciprocal economy. In addition, repair jobs, maintenance and installation jobs, home made shoes and clothes, collectively prepared food, metalwork and carpentry jobs, child raising and sick-care duties are bartered. And of course the celebrations that bind the group together mustn't be forgotten. Money doesn't play a role in any of these activities. That's why it is impossible to measure any standard of living using Western criteria.

Just imagine that the same system was in place here. People on income support would then have 3,500 marks a month at their disposal. This wouldn't solve all of their problems, but it would certainly help a bit. And on top of this they would profit from things that money cannot buy. The question: how much money do I need to live properly, is inadequate. Anyone without a social network will never have enough money to fill their existential vacuum. People living on income support in this part of the world admittedly have a considerable handicap because they don't have a clan or any traditions to fall back on. On the other hand they also have an advantage: their living conditions are not as harsh as those in Africa.

knows what to do with these workers because machines are faster, better, and cheaper. Mankind has always dreamed of automation. Two thousand three hundred years ago Aristotle, clearly one of the Happy Unemployed, said:

If every tool could perform its own work when ordered [...]if thus shuttles wove and quills played harps of themselves, master craftsmen would have no need of assistants and masters no need of slaves.

Now this dream has been fulfilled, yet everyone experiences it as a nightmare because social change hasn't kept pace with technological change. This process is irreversible. Workers aren't going to take over again from robots and machines. And any work that still requires the involvement of human beings has already been farmed out to the inhumane sweat shops of the Third World or is being carried out here by underpaid immigrants. Only the reintroduction of slavery could bring this downward spiral to an end.

Everyone knows that it's true, but no one dares to say it. Officially it's a "campaign against unemployed," but really it's a campaign against the unemployed. For this purpose, statistics are being manipulated, pseudo jobs are being created, and people are being harassed. On top of that—and because such measures alone can't do away with the problem—there is all sorts of moralizing. It is said the unemployed have only got themselves to blame for the situation in which they find themselves. The jobless are simply turned into "jobseekers" just to force reality to fit with the propaganda. The Happy Unemployed say out loud what everyone else already knows.

"Unemployment" is a poor word, a term with negative connotations, the other said of the coin to employment. An unemployed person is nothing more than a worker without work. But that doesn't tell us anything about the person as a poet, a traveler, a seeker, or a breathing human being. In public people are only allowed to mention the shortage of jobs. Only in private, away from the journalists, sociologists, and other snoop-

ers, do they dare to be honest: “I’ve just lost my job. It’s brilliant! I’ve finally got the time to go to parties every night, I don’t need to eat food out of the microwave any more and I can shag as much and as long as I like.” Isn’t it about time that the gulf between private truths and public lies was bridged? We are told that now would not be an opportune moment to criticize employment, that it would be just the kind of provocation that the stiflingly respectable middle classes have been waiting for. Twenty years ago workers were in a position to call into question their own work and the whole concept of work. Today they have to feign satisfaction just because they have a job and the unemployed have to feign dissatisfaction just because they don’t. The critique of work has, as a result, simply petered out. The Happy Unemployed just laugh at such an infantile form of blackmail.

In a world where the work ethic has disappeared, the fear of unemployment is the best way of encouraging more bootlicking. One Schimilinsky, management consultant for the abolition of absenteeism, made this quite plain:

Stable owners also consider which horse they are going to put out to grass and which they’re going to send to the knacker’s yard. Businesses that want to survive in today’s world businesses have to be similarly ruthless from time to time. Too much kindness can spell the end for a firm. My advice to my customers is to tackle the problem with an iron hand in a kid glove. We live in an age in which workers see jobs being cut all around them. No one wants to make a bad impression. Firms are increasingly exploiting this insecurity to significantly cut the number of working hours lost because of absenteeism.

(Der Spiegel 32/1996)

The creation of a biotope suitable for the Happy Unemployed would improve the workers’ situation, too. People would be less afraid of becoming unemployed and they would find it easier to pluck up the courage to voice their opposition. Maybe one day the balance of power might even tip in favor

the so-called Third World, a depressing chain of famine, dictatorship, war, and disease. But we shouldn’t forget that existing alongside this (mostly imported) misery there is another social reality: an intensive communal life based upon pre-capitalist traditions. Western society appears almost dead in comparison. In the non-Western world the work of the white man is despised because it knows no end—quite unlike, for instance, that of those Somalia craftsmen who blow their profits on an annual celebration. The lower the gross national product, the greater is the capacity of people for celebration. The ethnologist Serge Latouche said in *In the Wake of the Affluent Society: An Exploration of Post-Development*—

The poor are much richer than other people, and they themselves, think they are. Many visitors have been struck by the unbelievable joie de vivre that flourishes on the edges of African towns. It is a less deceptive indicator than those depressing objective calculations made by statistical data collection agencies that only take into account the Westernized indicators of wealth and poverty.

Of course there is always the risk of Europeans eroticizing. But as far as social life is concerned, people living there confirm the superiority of the poor South. The Egyptian Albert Cossery, for instance, writes in *Proud Beggars*:

At that moment his face mirrored all earthly woes. But he only allowed that mood to come over him from time to time to ensure that he didn’t lose faith in his dignity. For El Kordi believed that dignity could only result from unhappiness and despair. It was the reading of Western books that had damaged his spirit in this way.

The Happy Unemployed have much to learn (and to unlearn) from Africa and other non-Western cultures: Of course there’s not point in mimicking ancient social customs, but we can find inspiration there. Picasso and the Dadaists also found a refreshing source of creativity in African Art.

Whether it ultimately ends up in the goal or not, is not only down to us.

At the moment there are quite a number of initiatives against the dismantling of social provision, against neo-liberalism, etc. But the question also needs to be asked: what should we actually fight for? Definitely not for the welfare state and the full employment of yesteryear—its reintroduction is even more improbable than the reintroduction of the steam train. But the alternative could be even more dreadful. It is conceivable that the unemployed could be granted leave to grow their vegetables on the wasteland and rubbish dumps of post-modernity and to devise their own social relations as they go along. They would live under long-distance, high-tech police surveillance and be subject to callous exploitation at the hands of some mafia or other, while the well-off minority could continue to function without care or worry. The happy unemployed are looking for a way out of this dreadful alternative. It is a matter of principles.

The prevailing propaganda frequently asserts that the unemployed have been excluded from society, and numerous good people plead for their reintegration. What that in actual fact means was explained by a Unesco humanist at the Copenhagen Social Summit: “The first step to social integration is to be exploited.” Thanks but no thanks!

Three hundred years ago farmers eyed the prince’s castle with envy. Justifiably, they felt excluded from his wealth, his life of leisure, his court entertainers and courtesans. But who wants to stuff their head with his meaningless figures? Who wants to fuck his bottle-blond secretaries, drink his dodgy Bordeaux wine, and end up dying of his heart attack? We are quite happy to exclude ourselves from the dominant abstraction. We desire another kind of integration.

In poorer countries there are millions of people who are forced to live outside the cycle of the market economy. Every day the newspapers report on the terrible troubles endured by

of the workers again. “What did you say? You’re checking to see whether I’m really ill or not? Stuff that! I’d rather be one of the happy unemployed!”

Work is a matter of life and death. This is a point of view that we hold too. Bob Black, writing from North America, had this to say on the matter:

In fact, work is mass murder or genocide. Directly or indirectly, work will kill everyone who reads these words. Between 14,000 and 25,000 people are killed annually in this country on the job. Over two million are disabled. Twenty to twenty-five million are injured every year. And these figures don’t count the half million cases of occupational disease every year. Even this barely scratches the surface. What these figures don’t show is that tens of millions of people have their life spans shortened by work—which is all that homicide means after all. Consider all the doctors who work themselves to death in their 50s. Consider all the workaholics! Even if you don’t get killed or crippled while actually working, you very might be while going to work, or trying to forget about work. To this augmented body-count must be added the victims of auto-industrial pollution and work-induced alcoholism and drug addiction. We kill people in the six-figure range (at least) in order to sell Big Macs and Cadillacs to the survivors!

The cobbler and the carpenter revered their craft. Shipyard workers could still watch with pride the launch of the magnificent ship build with their own hands. This feeling of doing something useful no longer exists in ninetyfive percent of jobs. The Service Sector only employs servants and computer appendages that have no cause to be proud. Even a doctor only really acts as a sales representative for the pharmaceutical companies. Who can still say that they do something useful for a living? What it comes down to these days is how much money you can earn in a job, and not what the point of it is. The sole aim of every job is to boost a company’s profits, just as every worker’s sole relationship to his work is his pay. Unemployment exists for the very reason that making money rather than

benefiting society is the ultimate objective. Full employment spells economic crisis, unemployment means a healthy market. Just consider what happens when a company announces that it is destroying x number of jobs? Stock exchange speculators praise the scheme to restore the firm to profitability, the company's stocks rise in value, and sooner or later the company's balance sheets have the profits to show for it. In this way the unemployed create more profits than their former colleagues. In fact, it would be only logical to thank the unemployed for promoting growth in a way unmatched by any other. Instead they don't get a whiff of the profit that they have created. The Happy Unemployed believe that they should be rewarded for not working.

Here we can cite the work of Kazimir Malevich, the painter of Black Square on White. In his book *Laziness—The Real human Truth*, which was written in 1921 and only published in Russia two years ago, he stated:

Money is nothing but a small piece of laziness. The more one has, the better one will be able to become acquainted with the bliss of laziness. In capitalism work is organized in such a way that it does not permit everyone equal access to laziness. The only ones who can enjoy this laziness are those who are protected by capital. The capitalist class has liberated itself from the work from which the whole of mankind has to liberate itself.

If the unemployed are unhappy, it's not because they don't have any work but because they don't have any money. So to make things clearer we shouldn't talk about being jobless but being moneyless. As we are going to see, the Happy Unemployed are offering to compensate for this shortfall by going on the hunt for unidentified resources.

If you were to count up how much money is officially spent on unemployment by taxpayers and companies, and then divide it by the number of unemployed, then you would quickly realize that there are clearly more zeros on the end of this figure than on the sums that we find in our bank accounts.

A friend has written to us, asking:

Do the Happy Unemployed aim to achieve social acceptance and consequently unconditional financial support, or do they want to revolutionize the system by means of illegal activities, for example by fiddling electricity meters? The combination of both strategies would hardly seem to be logical: I can hardly demand social acceptance and at the same time reward criminals.

Well, the Happy Unemployed are no fans of illegality. In their striving to do good they are even prepared to resort to legal means. Moreover, what is nowadays a right, was once a crime. The right to strike, for instance. And it could always be turned back into a criminal offence. Primarily, we are concerned with social acceptance. We are not appealing to the state or the authorities but to Joe Public.

We can already hear the theorists of class struggle chanting: "The whole thing is just a system for letting off steam. It is a means of confining the unemployed proletarian strata to an illusory niche where they are urged to transform those remaining life functions and thus just help to mitigate the contradictions within capitalism. The Happy Unemployed amuse themselves while the bourgeoisie carries on increasing their profits in peace. Sell-out! Sell-out!"

Every single practical step, even every single breath taken, can be accused of being an attempt to conform. And it is precisely this space to breathe that is what it is all about. The most sophisticated radical theories are not of much use, if their outcome in practical terms amounts of the message: Wait and see.

We are aware that our experiment could fail in various ways. It could, for example, end up becoming merely a joke, a fruitless prank. Or the original idea could be crushed under a ton of deadly earnestness. Another possibility is that a small group of unemployed could become so successful that they turn into happy managers and lose all contact with their original social roots. But these are all just potential risks. They are not predestined to happen. We just bring the ball into play.

Yet their ears deafened and their minds numbed by the sound of their own gabble, the economists reply: "Work proletariat, work, work so that you increase the national wealth and your own personal misery. Work so that you, having become even poorer, have even more reason to work and to be miserable."

However, we are not demanding the right to be lazy. Laziness is merely the flipside of diligence. If work is not recognized as a concept, then laziness also loses its meaning. There is no vice without virtue. In the post-Lafargue age it has become clear that the leisure time that workers are granted is often even more boring than the work they do. For that reason the solution to the whole problem is not simply a matter of reducing working hours and increasing the amount of leisure time. A short time ago in Spain there was a plan to ban the siesta under the pretext that it was putting the European market in jeopardy. We are one hundred percent behind those Spanish workers who replied that it would be better if the EU introduced the Euro-Siesta instead.

The Happy Unemployed, as should be obvious by now, do not back the advocates of short-time working who think that everything would be hunky dory if everyone could keep their job but only had to work five, three, or two hours a day. What kind of bodge job is that? Do I clockwatch when I am preparing a meal for my friends? Do I check to see how much time it is taking me to write this bloody thing? Who counts the seconds, the minutes, or the hours when they're in love?

That doesn't mean to say, however, that Happy Unemployment represents a new kind of utopia. *Utopia* means "a non-existent place." The utopian writer draws up the precise plans for an allegedly ideal society and then expects the world to pour itself into this pre-formed mold. In contrast, the happy unemployed could be said to have a *topian* approach: they seek to shape and modify places and things that are already there. They don't construct systems but instead investigate all of the possibilities for improving their environment.

Most of the money is spent not on the welfare of the unemployed, but on keeping them in check by means of all sorts of chicanery: such as making them attend pointless appointments and so-called training, retraining, and continuing education programs—which spring up from nowhere and lead nowhere—and by making them pursue sham occupations for sham wages—just in order to artificially bring down the statistics i.e. just to sustain an economic illusion.

Our first concrete proposal could be put into practice immediately. We are calling for an end to all measures implemented to keep checks on the unemployed, the closure of all statistical data collection and propaganda offices (that would be our contribution to the government savings package), and the automatic, indefinite payment of unemployment benefit plus the savings made. The latest conservative outpourings of bile accuse the unemployed of being dependent upon the state, of living off it, and of being incapable of standing on their own two feet, and so on and so forth. Now to our knowledge, the state is still in existence and is still collecting taxes. Therefore, we don't see why we should forego state support. But we don't have a state fixation. As far as we're concerned the income of the Happy Unemployed may just as well come from the private sector whether it be through sponsoring, adoption, an extra capital gains tax, or blackmail. We are not choosy.

If being unemployed makes people unhappy, it's also because the only social value that they know is work. They no longer have anything to do, they're bored, they've lost all their social contacts because work is often the only opportunity to meet people. The same goes for pensioners too, by the way. The reason for this existential misery is of course employment and not unemployment. Even when they're not doing anything else, the Happy Unemployed create new social values and develop contacts with a lot of nice people. They would even be prepared to hold reintegration courses for employees who have been given their notice.

Nevertheless, all unemployed people have a very valuable thing at their disposal: time. That could prove to be a stroke of historical fortune—a chance to lead a decent, meaningful, and happy life. You could describe our goal as reconquering time. In other words, the Happy Unemployed are active people. For that very reason they don't have any time to work.

Jacques Mesrine, once France's "Public Enemy No. 1" decided:

If I wanted a shag at 6 o'clock in the morning, I wanted to be able to take my time and not have to keep one eye on the clock. I wanted to be able to live without clocks. The invention of time-keeping introduced the first constraint into human lives. The sentences of everyday life resounded in my head: "I've got no time." "It came at the right time," "I gained time," "It lost me time." I just wanted the time to live and the only way of achieving that is by not being a slave to time. I knew how irrational my theory was and that you couldn't construct any society around it. But what kind of society was this with its nice principles and laws!"

Some people tell us that the Happy Unemployed are only out of work in the current sense of wage labor. Here we have to make it quite clear that the Happy Unemployed are not looking for wage labor, but are also not interested in slave labor. And as far as we know there are only two types of work: slave labor and wage labor. Of course there are students, artists and others puffed up with their own sense of self-importance who can't even cross the street without maintaining that they are carrying out important work. Even the so-called autonomous groups can't organize an anti-capitalist "seminar" without holding "productive debates" in "work groups." Feeble words for feeble thoughts.

The German word for work, *Arbeit* is not only infelicitous in its present sense. It has always been so. It is most probably derived from the Indo-European word *orbho* meaning "orphaned, a child put into service to carry out heavy physical work." Even a couple centuries ago the word still meant "toil,

torment, degrading occupation." In this sense the term happy unemployment is even something of a tautology.

In the Romance languages the matter is even clearer. *Travail*, *trabajo*, etc. are derived from the Latin word *tripalium*, a three-pronged torture instrument used on slaves. It was Luther who identified work as man's vocation and ethical duty in the world. He said that: "Man is born to work, just as birds are born to fly." You could ask, what's in a word? But were you to confuse the word "drink" with Coca Cola, the word "culture" with "Bob Monkhouse," or the word "activity" with "work," it would also have certain repercussions.

As soon as we start using the word "work" or the phrase "out of work," we are dealing with moral categories. This is increasingly the case. You only have to open a newspaper to realize that.

According to a social expert in Washington, there has been a shift in the power balance between two different philosophies, and now the dominant school of thought regards poverty as something resulting from moral impropriety, rather than from economic causes.

Just as was the case in the age when priests saw their monopoly on souls coming under threat, morality only serves to paper over the growing cracks between ideology and reality. Whoever tells the unemployed that they have sinned expects them to accept the validity of the category "sin" and to respond with either a "yes" or a "no." Whining attempts to arouse pity in this world at best arouse pity. Only sublime laughter can actually annul this morality.

Paul Lafargue, author of *The Right to be Lazy*, is quite clearly a historical model for the happy unemployed. He wrote:

The economists never tire of urging the workers to increase the national wealth! And yet it was one of their number, Destutt de Tracy, who said: "It is in the poor nations that people enjoy a sense of well-being. In the rich nations people are usually poor."