

From the Realm of Necessity to the Realm of Freedom

Kevin Carson

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What do we mean by "the abolition of work"?

The phrase may refer to a society in which human physical activity is literally no longer involved in producing physical means of subsistence like food, clothing and shelter. Advocates of "fully automated luxury communism" are probably close to this kind of literalism, for example. But I have no idea whether most people who refer to the abolition of work mean it in this way-and it certainly doesn't carry this meaning of necessity.

I don't use it in this way myself.

When I say "the abolition of work," what I refer to abolishing is, first of all, the distinction between purely economic or productive activity and other forms of activity like socializing or play.

And second, I mean abolition of the element of compulsion-that is, of any necessary connection between such "productive" effort and consumption of the necessities of life.

And finally, "abolition" can mean *progressive* abolition, in the sense of 1) an ongoing reduction in the share of the means of subsistence which must be obtained through effort which is undertaken only in the face of necessity, and would otherwise not be undertaken, and/or 2) an ongoing reduction in the amount of such effort as a share of total life activity.

To a large extent the distinction between "work" and other forms of activity is a social construct, reflecting the existence of political, economic and social subordination and of exploitative relationships by which subordinates are forced to devote a significant share of their efforts to serving the needs of superiors in return for being allowed to meet their own needs. In this schema "work" is activity undertaken under duress, primarily in service to ends which are not one's own, and "non-work" is activity undertaken for its own sake.

In hunter-gatherer societies, some time was devoted (as implied by the very name used to classify such societies) to the effort of procuring food. But it was a relatively modest number of hours compared to the modern work week, it was undertaken by a society of equals in which relations of compulsion or exploitation were absent, and the boundaries between food procurement and socializing or play were quite blurry. To put it in Biblical terms, even before Adam was cursed with the necessity to eat bread by the sweat of his brow, he and Eve still occupied themselves with tending the Garden whose fruits they ate.

Even in peasant societies after the agricultural revolution, before the rise of the state and of class stratification, the hours of labor required for subsistence production were fairly low compared to the present work week when no extra labor was required to feed landlords, priests, soldiers or kings. And the agricultural calendar was liberally leavened with feast days and holidays (which were mostly abolished in early modern Europe along with the Enclosure process, as a means of increasing the ratio of surplus labor to necessary labor).

And such customary societies, even if they didn't unconditionally guarantee subsistence to everyone regardless of ability to work, nevertheless had aspects roughly analogous to contemporary proposals for a Universal Basic Income. For example, up until the modern era of enclosures and land expropriations, in village societies around the world it was standard for each family to have a customarily defined number of strips assigned in each open field, and a defined right of common pasturage. Rights of common access to wood, fen and waste involved free scavenging of berries and wild game, firewood and so on. And rights of gleaning provided additional subsistence rights to those without other means of social support.

In our era the technological and social trends are towards reduced labor requirements for material output, as well as towards a blurring of the lines between "economic" and other forms of social activity. In this regard the post-modern recapitulates the pre-modern era, on a much higher technological level.

Even with existing levels of technology, eliminating the institutional pathologies of corporate capitalism — surplus labor to feed the privileged rentier classes, guard labor resulting from privilege and concentration of wealth, waste production and planned obsolescence to prevent the idle industrial capacity that naturally results from over-investment and under-consumption-would probably reduce necessary labor time to fifteen hours a week or less.

The radical cheapening and ephemeralization of production technology is rapidly removing entry barriers to small-scale production for use in the social economy. And along with this a growing share of the "means of production" is coextensive with "social capital" (workers' skills, tacit knowledge, social relationships, etc).

As the autonomists Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt put it in *Commonwealth*:

the trend toward the hegemony or prevalence of immaterial production in the processes of capitalist valorization. . . . Images, information, knowledge, affects, codes, and social relationships. . . are coming to outweigh material commodities or the material aspects of commodities in the capitalist valorization process. This means, of course, not that the production of material goods. . . is disappearing or even declining in quantity but rather that their value is increasingly dependent on and subordinated to immaterial factors and goods.

The growing significance of our social relationships and knowledge as means sources of value, coupled with the increasing affordability of physical capital, mean that it's possible for ordinary people to take their productive activity into the cooperative, informal economy and for the boundaries between work and the rest of social life to dissolve as they did to a certain extent for hunter-gatherers, cottagers before Enclosure, and the like.

As human social relationships replace the aggregation of physical capital as the main source of productivity, the withering away of material scarcity as the basis of exchange value will cause those specific forms of human activity and relationships we call economic to dissolve into the

larger category of general social relationships. Human beings will meet a growing share of their material subsistence needs through activities we would currently classify as socializing or play.

And whatever minimum of physical effort remains necessary for producing our physical subsistence needs in the near future, the element of compulsion or necessity will become less and less prominent.

Instead the remainder of necessary physical work will be split up into short bursts of a variety of kinds of self-directed effort, interwoven into the broader tapestry of the day's activities, whether it be as described by Marx in *The German Ideology*, with it being

possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic.

. . . or by Thomas "Nailer Tom" Hazzard, a New Englander of the 1780s, in his own journal:

Making bridle bits, worked a garden, dug a woodchuck out of a hole, made stone wall for cousin, planted corn, cleaned cellar, made hoe handle of bass wood, sold a kettle, brought Sister Tanner in a fish boat, made hay, went for coal, made nails at night, went huckleberrying, raked oats, plowed turnip lot, went to monthly meeting and carried Sister Tanner behind me, bought a goose, went to see town, put on new shoes, made a shingle nail tool, helped George mend a spindle for the mill, went to harbor mouth gunning, killed a Rover, hooped tubs, caught a weasel, made nails, made a shovel, went swimming, staid at home, made rudder irons, went eeling.

As Ralph Borsodi, the source of the quote (*This Ugly Civilization*), pointed out regarding Hazzard's list of activities:

The day was not divided by the clock into mutually exclusive periods of work and non-work. Most of the play had an admixture of productive labor in it — it produced game or fish, for instance, while much of the work had elements of play in it.

Of course the capitalists are doing their best to prevent this, just as they always have. To quote Negri and Hardt again:

Capitalist accumulation today is increasingly external to the production process, such that exploitation takes the form of expropriation of the common.

"Expropriation of the common," in this case, means enclosure of the social knowledge commons and human relationships that are increasingly central to production, as a source of rent.

So our struggle must center on 1) prefigurative politics and counter-institution building, to shift as much as possible of the meeting of our material needs into the cooperative social sphere under our own control, and — 2) circumventing the monopolies and artificial scarcities by which the propertied classes attempt to enclose the productivity of our social relationships, by building the kinds of "non-state spaces" James Scott wrote about in *The Art of Not Being Governed*.

Fortunately the very technological advances in low-cost means of physical production, and in networked communications, that make our cooperative social relationships so productive without the need for large accumulations of capital, also render the artificial scarcities and artificial property rights the capitalists depend on for their rents increasingly unenforceable.

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Abolish Work: A Lazy Exposition of Philosophical Ergophobia, edited by Nick Ford, published by
LBC Books, pp. 56-61.
PDF available at archive.org.

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