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Stamping Out Ownlife

Kevin Carson

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The novelist, Nigel Balchin, was once invited to address a conference on “incentives” in industry. He remarked that “Industrial psychologists must stop messing about with tricky and ingenious bonus schemes and find out why a man, after a hard day’s work, went home and enjoyed digging in his garden.”

But don’t we already know why? He enjoys going home and digging in his garden because he is free from foremen, managers and bosses. He is free from the monotony and slavery of doing the same thing day in and day out, and is in control of the whole job from start to finish. He is free to decide for himself how and when to set about it. He is responsible to himself and not to somebody else. He is working because he wants to and not because he has to. He is doing his own thing. He is his own man.

–Colin Ward, *Anarchy in Action*

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It's amazing how much continuity there is between the behaviors demanded of students by the public schools, and of employees by their employers.

Sunni Maravillosa, in a post on unschooling, quotes a critic:

“It is not suited either to all kids or all parents,” said Tom Hatch, a professor at Columbia University Teachers College in New York City. “It requires students with considerable curiosity and independence, who come up with and get interested in questions and can sustain some interest in them.”

She comments:

To simplify the idea further, today's American educational system is largely geared to spit out white-collar cogs for the corporate and bureaucratic machines. How can someone attempt to just estimate how many of those unhappy cogs would have been much better served by going to a trade school, but didn't even consider that possibility because of a lack of knowledge about their existence or because such careers tend to be looked down upon?

I have yet to see a child with anything close to normal intelligence, who hasn't yet had his or her natural inclination to explore beaten to death, who doesn't have considerable curiosity and independence. Yet when a mechanically-inclined school student takes apart a piece of equipment to see how it works instead of completing his math sheet along with the rest of the class, will that initiative be rewarded? Of course not! Most formal schooling pounds out curiosity and independence, which

they must if all students are going to fit neatly into their little curricular boxes.

As Paul Goodman wrote somewhere, one of the first lessons a schoolchild learns is that whatever independent interest or project he pursues is only a “hobby,” to be patronizingly tolerated by those in authority so long as it doesn’t interfere with his “real” learning—but to be instantly put away in favor of the important tasks assigned him by the teacher, the boss, or whatever other authority figure has assumed the right to determine the ends of his existence.

F. Gruel, in a comment to Maravillosa’s post, vividly recaptured a feeling most of us remember all too well:

I spent 13 years in government school (including kindergarten.) At third grade I had a severe dislike of my school situation. It seemed so foreign. Summer break was always a great experience. Runnin’ around, doin’ “stuff”.

When school started it was horrible. Just seeing all the, otherwise intriguing, “school supplies” at Target made me depressed. Even getting “school clothes” irritated me. Why couldn’t I wear the same shit I’ve been wearing all summer?

But most of us don’t have to remember back that far to relive the feeling. The sense of dread, of impending loss of freedom, experienced by F. Gruel at the prospect of another school year, is the same dread felt by most sane people at the loss of control experienced every time we step through the front door of our workplace. The prison doors are about to clang shut.

The transition from self-directed work to work under a boss was especially violent for those experiencing it for the first time, during the early days of the factory system. J.L. and Barbara Hammond, in *The Town Labourer*, wrote:

In the modern world most people have to adapt themselves to some kind of discipline, and to observe other' people's timetables, ...or work under other people's orders, but we have to remember that the population that was flung into the brutal rhythm of the factory had earned its living in relative freedom, and that the discipline of the early factory was particularly savage... No economist of the day, in estimating the gains or losses of factory employment, ever allowed for the strain and violence that a man suffered in his feelings when he passed from a life in which he could smoke or eat, or dig or sleep as he pleased, to one in which somebody turned the key on him, and for fourteen hours he had not even the right to whistle. It was like entering the airless and laughterless life of a prison.

The state public education systems in the United States were set up mainly to transform a largely self-employed population, used to working under their own direction, into "human resources" who would willingly take orders from a boss. The habits of cheerfully obeying teacher, of lining up on command, of eating and pissing at the sound of a bell, were precisely the habits required of factory workers.

Since then, the emphasis has changed somewhat. Now the schools inculcate the habits of bureaucratic toadyism that are desired in a white collar worker. But the principle is basically the same.

The adult who goes to work is infantilized: transformed into a bigger version of the school child whose advancement and success depend entirely on pleasing the teacher, on sucking up to authority figures in general. An anonymous GM worker expressed it beautifully in this poem, reproduced by Tom Peters in *In Search of Excellence*:

with the ringing of a cell-phone or the beeping of a pager, is simply intolerable.

In other words, introversion is simply a more intense expression of the same characteristic that the HR Nazis want to stamp out in *all* of us.

What they hope for is the same thing desired by the Party in Orwell's *1984*: a new, inhuman breed of human being who no longer distinguishes between private and public life, between mine and thine. Like the Party, they want to stamp out the last vestiges of ownlife and create a New Man who is happy to think of "home" as a shelf where he's stored when he's not doing something important, until he can again be "of service." Blanchard, while he's wishing away the TGIF mentality, might as well wish for a new kind of school child who doesn't dread the beginning of the five-day sentence on Monday morning, or the first day of school in September. If Blanchard and his ilk succeed, through some combination of conditioning, electrodes, and pharmacology, in creating a worker who doesn't look forward to getting out from under his boss so he can go home and dig in his own garden, they will have succeeded in stamping out the last vestiges of ownlife; more importantly, they will have succeeded in remaking humanity in the Party's image. What Blanchard and his ilk desire is a hive of human worker bees.

Are these men and women
Workers of the world?
or is it an overgrown nursery,
with children-goosing, slapping boys
giggling, snotty girls?

What is it about that entrance way,
those gates to the plant? Is it the
guards, the showing of your badge—the smell?...
What is it that instantaneously makes
a child out of a man?
Moments before he was a father, a husband,
an owner of property,
a voter, a lover, an adult.
When he spoke at least some listened.
Salesmen courted his favor.
Insurance men appealed to his family responsibility
and by chance the church sought his help...
But that was before he shuffled past the guard,
climbed the steps,
hung up his coat and
took his place along the line.

Going to work, like going to school, means substituting someone else's priorities and judgement for your own.

Ken Blanchard, in his foreword to *Fish!*, has expressed dismay at what he called the "TGIF mentality." He wondered what we could accomplish if we put 100% of ourselves into our work, instead of bringing only 60% of ourselves to work and leaving the rest out in our cars waiting to go home.

That's one thing he got right. We leave a lot of ourselves behind when we go to work. We leave our values, our independent judgment, and our personal priorities at the door, and become a tool in someone else's hand.

For people like Blanchard in the world of work, as for educators in the world of school, the atavistic persistence of ownlife is something to be overcome through new and better forms of human resource engineering. They are mightily offended by what Elizabeth Anderson called the separation of work from home.

However arbitrary and abusive the boss may have been on the factory floor, when work was over the workers could at least escape his tyranny (unless they lived in a factory town, where one's boss was also one's landlord and regulator of their lives through their leases). Again, in the early phase of industrialization, this was small comfort, given that nearly every waking hour was spent at work. But as workers gained the right to a shortened workday—due to legislation as well as economic growth—the separation of work from home made a big difference to workers' liberty from their employers' wills.

As long as wage labor has existed, the whole point of it has been a devil's bargain in which one sells one's life in order to live; a shift at work is a chunk of your life that you cut off and sell, so you can have the money to support yourself in your *real* life—the part you have control over. In return for the worker's submission to the bosses' authority on the job, he received sovereignty over the rest of his life in the “real world” outside of work. Under the terms of this Taylorist bargain, the worker surrendered his sense of craftsmanship and control over his own work in return for the right to express his “real” personality through consumption, in the part of his life that still belonged to him.

This fundamental distinction, one of the basic qualities that makes us human, is reflected in the saying that “every English-

man's home is his castle,” and the widespread libertarian understanding that property is the basis of freedom. “There, I take orders from you; here, in my domain, *I* control my life.”

Is it really that hard for Blanchard to understand? What sane person *wouldn't* prefer a world in which the priorities he follows are his own? In which he has *real* control—not in the artificial Fish! philosophy sense of controlling how he *reacts* to situations imposed on him by others, or “choosing his attitude,” but of actually controlling what he does, and when and how he does it, without taking orders from someone else. What sane person *wouldn't* regard his private life as his real life, and his job merely as a means for serving that end?

The Taylorist bargain is no longer good enough for our overlords. It's not enough that we take their orders and do our jobs willingly while we're at work. The fact that a part of us looks forward to leaving the prison and reentering our private domains, rejoining the 40% of ourselves that we leave in our cars at work, means that our minds don't completely belong to Big Brother.

It's significant that HR Nazis are so enamored of the Myers-Briggs personality test. As Barbara Ehrenreich suggested in a recent interview, it's probably to weed out the introverts. An introvert is someone who finds continued dealings with others to be a drain on his energy, and needs time alone in his own space, in a world under his own control, to recharge. So the distinction between work and ownlife (Blanchard's much-lamented “TGIF mentality”) is built into the basic structure of the introvert's personality, even more so than with people in general. Work is a period of time that belongs to somebody else, to be endured until it is over, so one may get back to the business of living his real life. For such a person, the modern trend of increasing intrusion of work into the sphere of private life is especially galling. The eroding and increasingly permeable boundary between work and home, with the possibility that work might erupt into one's private life at any moment