

Kill The God of Work & All His Clergy

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Life in the Machine

The Greek philosopher Diogenes was eating bread and lentils for supper. He was seen by the philosopher Aristippus, who lived comfortably by flattering the king. Said Aristippus, “If you would learn to be subservient to the king, you would not have to live on lentils.” Said Diogenes, “Learn to live on lentils, and you will not have to cultivate the king.”

I’d say one of the most impactful components of anarchy through the ages, and especially in this current decade is *anti-work* — the complete rejection of work. Though as old as civilization itself, anti-work ideas have been steadily regaining momentum in modern times, starting in small anarchist circles, and now taking off explosively in mainstream culture. Millions of people around the world have suddenly found themselves exposed to this very anarchist concept.

This has especially been evident during the Covid-19 pandemic. Perhaps because millions of workers have now seen, first-hand, just how disposable their lives are to their employers, who in countless cases have openly sacrificed them to the plague rather than risk putting a dent in their company’s bottom line.

In China, a growing “lying flat” anti-work movement has exploded in popularity¹, despite numerous attempts by the state to shut it down. Luo Huazhong kicked off the idea in an April 2021 forum post titled “lying flat is justice”, where he attached a photo of himself in bed under a blanket, with the curtains closed to shut out the sunlight.

Luo had been out of regular work for more than two years. He had to limit his consuming, but found that the abundant leisure time he was afforded in exchange for his curtailed productivity was deeply liberating.

In the post, he explained that the pervasive status anxiety in workerist Chinese society was a product of corrupted values and overwhelming peer pressure. He proclaimed there was nothing wrong with lying flat; living an idle existence. By overcoming his desire for consumer products and the structural pressure to be productive, he successfully freed himself from the servitude of work.

Luo’s post spoke to China’s urban youth who for years had worked non-stop while the promise of a middle-class lifestyle as their reward eroded more and more with each increase in the cost of living. Fellow lapsed workers responded to his post enthusiastically and exchanged their tips to survive with minimal work and reduced spending.

The idea immediately went viral on social media. Over the next several months, lying-flat advocates pushed back against cutthroat work culture and high cost of living and the movement grew at a rapid pace.

The communist party launched a censorship campaign to erase all mention of lying-flat from the web. The state media desperately tried to discredit Luo’s dangerous idea and shame or scare people back to the offices and factories they were increasingly abandoning.

Simultaneously in the English-speaking world, another anti-work movement exploded into being, primarily on the anarchist-run Reddit forum r/antiwork, which gathered millions of subscribers in just a few months. All over the world, the pandemic, massive inflation and a general

¹ The Guardian. *The low-desire life: why people in China are rejecting high-pressure jobs in favour of ‘lying flat’*. www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/05/the-low-desire-life-why-people-in-china-are-rejecting-high-pressure-jobs-in-favour-of-lying-flat.

disaffection with work-culture was driving people to question why they force themselves to drive to work every morning.

What anarchists mean by “work” is really very straight-forward. Work is the machine extracting our labor to feed itself.

Wolfi Landstreicher:

Work, in the social world in which you and I find ourselves, is the alienation of an individual’s time, activities, and forces from her/himself. In other words, it is the institutionalization of a process where the things you do, the things I do, and the things we do together are determined by powers (individuals, social structures, etc) outside of ourselves to serve their interests.²

Sadly, like any subversive idea that suddenly finds itself in the spotlight, a lot of opportunists have been willfully misrepresenting what anti-work is and trying to obscure its post-left anarchist roots. A steady line of communists and liberals have been trying to appropriate this very anarchist idea and make it line up with their decidedly pro-work 19th century ideologies.

Anti-work isn’t merely the critique of *work under capitalism* as the reds would have you believe, nor the push for better working conditions and nicer bosses as the liberals are pretending. It is the wholesale rejection of work in all its forms, regardless of whoever the boss is, whatever the form of remuneration, whatever the social or economic system in place happens to be.

It’s completely uprooting the institution of work, smashing all the systems of servitude that ensnare us, sabotaging workplaces in any way we can, exposing the markets for the giant houses of cards they are and then blowing on them until every card lays flat.

Anyone who claims otherwise is an entryist trying to water down anarchist ideas until they’re so insipid that they become plausibly compatible with the stale ideological dogma of whatever tired political program they’re recruiting for.

The protestant work ethic has long had a stranglehold on this global civilization, traumatizing all of us into seeing productivity as the universal metric of worth. Those who are perceived to be hard workers are accepted warmly by society, while those who lack a strong work ethic or the ability to toil away in menial, pointless servitude their entire lives are demonized as “lazy no-good layabout bums” and promptly discarded by their friends, their educators, their families, their government.

Despite common (and deliberate) misconceptions, being anti-work doesn’t mean wanting to cease all physical exertion, it means nurturing a new way of life based on *play* rather than *work*.

The word “play” has likewise been demonized by workerist society as being an inappropriate activity for anyone of working age, because play eats into our productivity as workers and the potential profits we can generate for our bloodthirsty bosses.

Alfredo M. Bonanno:

Play is characterized by a vital impulse that is always new, always in movement. By acting as though we are playing, we charge our action with this impulse. We free ourselves from death. Play makes us feel alive. It gives us the excitement of life. In the other model of acting we do everything as though it were a duty, as though

² Landstreicher, Wolfi. *A Sales Pitch for the Insurrection™*. theanarchistlibrary.org/library/wolfi-landstreicher-apio-ludd-feral-faun-a-sales-pitch-for-the-insurrection.

we 'had' to do it. It is in the ever new excitement of play, quite the opposite to the alienation and madness of capital, that we are able to identify joy.³

My father started regularly shaming me for “wasting time” playing as soon as I turned 12. Civilized children are expected to immerse themselves in a 12 – 18 year work-training program (school) that comes with daily homework, to ensure everyone is conditioned to see their time not as their time, but as a commodity to be exploited exclusively by their future bosses.

For millennia, play was all humans knew. Gatherer-hunters had no need of work because everything they needed to prosper was free for the taking. It wasn't until we started burning down our ancient food forests to form permanent settlements, cultivate crops and extract non-renewable resources from the land that work displaced play as the driving force in human society.

Anthropologists who study some of the few remaining gatherer-hunter bands of people in various parts of the world have frequently noted how the egalitarian, non-hierarchical bands emphasize acts of play rather than work in their various cultures.

(Developmental/evolutionary psychologist) Dr. Peter Gray:

Anthropologists who have trekked to isolated regions of the world to observe hunter-gatherer societies have consistently been impressed by the egalitarian nature of those societies. The people live in small self-governing bands of about 20 to 50 people. They are nomadic, moving from place to place to follow the available game and edible vegetation.

Most remarkably, unlike any other people that have been studied, hunter-gatherers appear to lack hierarchy in social organization. They have no chief or big man, no leaders or followers. They share everything, so nobody owns more than anybody else. They make all group decisions through discussion until a consensus is reached. [...] They have an extraordinary degree of respect for individual autonomy. They don't tell one another what to do or offer unsolicited advice.[...]

In order for two or more young animals to play together, they must suppress the drive to dominate one another. Social play always requires the voluntary participation of both (or all) partners, so play requires that the partners maintain one another's goodwill. Any attempt to dominate would drive the other away or elicit a fight rather than play. Thus, play involving two or more players is always an egalitarian, cooperative activity.

Some of the most compelling evidence for the anti-dominance function of adult play comes from research with various species of primates. For example, some species of macaque monkeys (referred to as tyrannical species) live in sharply graded hierarchical colonies, with a great deal of squabbling and fighting for power and relatively little cooperation except among close kin; and other species (egalitarian species) live in colonies with more muted hierarchies, with little fighting and much cooperation even among non-relatives. Consistent with the theory I am presenting here, the egalitarian species have been observed to engage in more social play in adulthood than the tyrannical species, apparently as a means to promote cooperation. [...]

³ Bonanno, Alfredo M. *Armed Joy*. theanarchistlibrary.org/library/alfredo-m-bonanno-armed-joy.

My theory is that hunter-gatherers everywhere learned that they could reduce aggression and promote cooperation and sharing by essentially turning all of their social life into play.

Children growing up in hunter-gatherer cultures have more opportunity to play than do children growing up in any other culture that anthropologists have observed, and as they become adults their playful ways continue. Hunter-gatherers' approach to work (e.g. to hunting and gathering) is playful in that it is social (people hunt and gather with friends, in groups) and always voluntary—nobody is required to hunt or gather, they will be fed anyway. Their religions are playful, highly imaginative and non-dogmatic, with gods that are vulnerable and serve as playmates in religious festivals. The adults, as well as children, engage regularly and playfully in music, dance, art, and noncompetitive games.

Even their means of putting down someone's budding attempts to dominate are playful, at least at first. They may make up a silly song about the person, as a way of making fun of the person's excessive pride, or they may tease him about thinking he's such a "big man."⁴

It's a truly tragic turn of events that work and all its associated authoritarian baggage has so successfully displaced play in the vast majority of human cultures. One of the most substantial things anarchists can do for ourselves is to relearn the joy of play, and to abandon the productivity-compulsion that's been hammered into us by assorted authority figures throughout our lives.

If other cultures embraced the constructive play that gatherer-hunters use, the protestant work ethic would soon lose its death-grip on public consciousness.

Work doesn't need to define us, and our productivity in the machine needn't be the measure of our worth. Devoting our entire lives to keeping the machine running ought to be perceived as the morbid waste of our existence that it truly is. The machine crushes all life eventually, the only question is how long you'll last as its colorful levers poke tiny holes in you while its gears slowly crush your bones.

Blessed be the Lord Who Gifts Us With His Bountiful Employment

In a world revolving around work, The Economy is venerated — treated as a hallowed, divine being. Every moment spent engaged in play, in idleness or in unprofitable creative pursuits is a penny we steal from the almighty economy. Anyone who lacks the will or capability to keep up their productivity is thus seen as sinning against the true deity of our age: The Economy is our one true god and has been for decades. And he's a vengeful god. Anyone who sins against him will be pushed into the gutters of society by his clergymen and left to rot and die.

There's nothing The Economy savors more than his clergy taking sinful unproductive workers and sacrificing them to him, that's the entire reason homelessness and prisons are such integral features of capitalist civilization.

⁴ Gray, Peter. *The Play Theory of Hunter-Gatherer Egalitarianism*. www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/freedom-learn/201908/the-play-theory-hunter-gatherer-egalitarianism.

The booming mantra of our God can be heard chanted all across the globe — Work or die — Work or die — and when you eventually reach breaking point and actually die — be sure to do it very publicly so that the other worshipers are forced to look upon your misery to witness what happens to workers who fail to keep up with the grind. They'll try not to notice, but they'll see the destitution from the corner of their eye and it'll further instill the fear of God in them.

Work or die — Work or die — Work or die. It's the chorus that rings in our ears almost every moment of our lives, even our "free time" being wholly consumed by the specter of work. We're no longer capable of relishing the simplicity of existence, instead we measure our productivity during every waking moment and punish ourselves if we don't measure up to our peers. A good worker is always finding ways to develop their skills and increase their usefulness to the machine. A good worker is forever climbing the hierarchy so they can one day join the ranks of the saintly clergy and strike down the no good lazy bums beneath them for their disgusting under-performing.

The modern anti-work movement was spawned in the late 20th century by anarchist Bob Black. Black spent years of his life pushing back against the conservative 19th century notions of productivity, industrialism and human-commodification that came from both capitalist and communist (including anarcho-communist) scholars and practitioners. He was especially frustrated to see fellow anarchists refuse to part ways with the miserable work-culture they inherited from the miserable workers that gave life to them.

Bob Black:

Work is the source of nearly all the misery in the world. Almost any evil you'd care to name comes from working or from living in a world designed for work. In order to stop suffering, we have to stop working. [...]

Liberals say we should end employment discrimination. I say we should end employment. Conservatives support right-to-work laws. Following Karl Marx's wayward son-in-law Paul Lafargue I support the right to be lazy. Leftists favor full employment. Like the surrealists — except that I'm not kidding — I favor full unemployment. Trotskyists agitate for permanent revolution. I agitate for permanent revelry. But if all the ideologues (as they do) advocate work — and not only because they plan to make other people do theirs — they are strangely reluctant to say so. They will carry on endlessly about wages, hours, working conditions, exploitation, productivity, profitability. They'll gladly talk about anything but work itself.

These experts who offer to do our thinking for us rarely share their conclusions about work, for all its saliency in the lives of all of us. Among themselves they quibble over the details. Unions and management agree that we ought to sell the time of our lives in exchange for survival, although they haggle over the price. Marxists think we should be bossed by bureaucrats. Libertarians think we should be bossed by businessmen. Feminists don't care which form bossing takes so long as the bosses are women. Clearly these ideology-mongers have serious differences over how to divvy up the spoils of power. Just as clearly, none of them have any objection to power as such and all of them want to keep us working.⁵

⁵ Black, Bob. *The Abolition of Work*. theanarchistlibrary.org/library/bob-black-the-abolition-of-work.

A workerist is any person who advocates for ideologies, systems and lifestyles that revolve around work. This includes every liberal, rightist, democratic socialist, social democrat, centrist, communist and fascist in the world. These are all staunchly workerist, industrial ideologies that strive to sell us the idea that humans and other animals exist to work on the assembly line, to extract resources and manufacture goods for the market, to be loyal servants to the revered productive forces. They all see the world through the same productivity-oriented, industrial lens, only with the tint slightly adjusted.

When Bob Black wrote *The Abolition of Work* in 1985 and called for “a collective adventure in generalized joy and freely interdependent exuberance”, he wasn’t proposing we give work a glossier tint to make it more democratic, merit-based or financially rewarding. He wasn’t proposing we hustle and invest in The Economy (praise be) to become wealthy enough to one day make passive income as landlords and shareholders. He was proposing we part with work in totality. Tear down all structures of work and kick all those who uphold those soul-crushing structures in the shins repeatedly until they let go.

This point is completely missed by the stale leftists who have appropriated this very anarchist concept and tried beating it into submission. They’ll forever be ready to seize hold of and immediately neuter anarchist ideas when they see them picking up any kind of steam. But the left will never be anti-work. It would go against everything the left exists to serve.

The entire labor movement — the unions, the socialist parties, the academics and Twitter theorists, are all wholly dedicated to building the load-bearing walls of their power-base: the ideology of work. Without workers and workplaces, there is no endlessly rotating left versus right race and everything both sides of the aisle depend on to satisfy their power and wealth machinations crumbles into rubble. Leftist organizers who try to redefine anti-work to mean “work-but-with-bigger-unions” are opportunistic weasels.

Likewise, anti-work is not a program to build stronger welfare states with universal basic incomes that subsidize the work-industrial complex and thus calm the growing urge to revolt; prolonging The Economy’s pillaging of our ecosystems and making us depend on the managers of productivity even more than we do now.

Being anti-work is desiring to bulldoze the offices, warehouses, farms, construction sites, restaurants and supermarkets that hold us all captive, push it all into a giant pile of glittering rubble, light a brilliant bonfire and sing and dance and fuck all night as the sweet fumes of a million copiers and filing cabinets fill the air.

Anti-work is the wholesale rejection of an obscenely traumatic and perverse way of life that we’ve been collectively conditioned into accepting as normal almost from birth, when we were pulled from our mother’s tit and thrown into a preschool so she could get back to the office.

So what happens after the bonfire dies down and we depart a work-based existence for a play-based one?

Bob Black:

Play isn’t passive. Doubtless we all need a lot more time for sheer sloth and slack than we ever enjoy now, regardless of income or occupation, but once recovered from employment-induced exhaustion nearly all of us want to act.

The point of anti-work, stripped of all the garbage leftist and Marxist ideology that’s been rapidly consuming it (I blame Graeber for kickstarting this process), is to treasure your fleeting

existence and spend it doing things you want to do. Not things your bosses force you to do by threatening to sacrifice you to the great Economy in the sky if you don't follow their script.

Anti-work is the burning desire to free yourself from that cacophonous workerist mantra forever ringing in your ears, to stop playing the subservient role assigned to you by The Great Economy and instead forge your own path and find real purpose through joyful play.

Henry Miller:

The world only began to get something of value from me the moment I stopped being a serious member of society and became—myself. The State, the nation, the united nations of the world, were nothing but one great aggregation of individuals who repeated the mistakes of their forefathers. They were caught in the wheel from birth and they kept at it until death—and this treadmill they tried to dignify by calling it “life.” If you asked anyone to explain or define life, what was the be-all and end-all, you got a blank look for an answer. Life was something which philosophers dealt with in books that no one read. Those in the thick of life, “the plugs in harness,” had no time for such idle questions. “You’ve got to eat, haven’t you?”⁶

Anti-work is the pursuit of happiness in your own terms. A life you actually desire, choices you make as an individual, unhindered by the suffocating demands of mass society.

Anti-work is the refusal to accept the authority of bosses and economists, even if you have to make do with simpler meals and uglier furniture than the working stiff next door. It's seeing the macabre construct of a work-based existence for what it really is and reaching out to reclaim your uniqueness before your brief existence on this planet ends. It's unleashing your long-buried feral fighting spirit and finding out who you really are under the decades of rigid indoctrination by tie-wearing yesmen.

Anti-work is the urge to smash every temple of The Great and Mighty Economy (hallowed be his name) and kill all his clergy before our bodies and minds start to fail and it's our turn to be sacrificed to him.

Anti-work, friends, is anarchy.

⁶ Miller, Henry. *Sexus* (Obelisk Press, 1949.)

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