

World Processor

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“I’m unemployed now and should be typing my resume. Typing a resume becomes more and more like typing a suicide note, and yet choosing not to work is a kamikaze mission.” - anonymous San Franciscan, Processed World, issue 7

Consider the plight of the office drone: more gadgeted-out than ever, but still facing the same struggle for essential benefits, wages, and dignity that workers have for generations.

Utopian reveries spill forth almost daily from the oracles of progress, forecasting a transformation of Information Age labor into irrepressible acts of impassioned fun. But we know all too well the painful truth about today’s ordinary work routines: they have become more, not less, routinized, soul-killing, and laden with drudgery. The contrast between the glum reality of cubicle labor and the captivating rhetoric of Internet liberation, which once seemed daft and risible, doesn’t anymore; now it’s only galling. In recent years, for instance, the term “creative” has been captured by advertising agencies, who’ve bestowed on it a capital *C* and made it into a noun, a coveted job title meant to signify *Mad Men*-style braggadocio. But all this business-card-ready term usually denotes is someone who writes copy for Google AdWords or applies Photoshop filters to an image of an anatomically impossible woman in carnal embrace with a bottle of vodka.

Even software programmers, once the Brahmins of the new economy, must contend with diminished status. The costs of launching a company have declined, so everyone is doing it. Direct your thanks to the glut of cheap engineering talent in Russia and India and the boom market in cloud computing, where a half-dozen companies control the digital infrastructure of hundreds of others, including Snapchat, Netflix, and the CIA. Please donate to your neighbor’s Kickstarter on your way out, and don’t mind the venture capitalists lazing nearby—they’ll still manage to get theirs, as bankers usually do.

Every city hungry to attract high-spending digital workers, from Austin to New York to Chattanooga, now lays claim to its own Silicon district, and lavishes potential corporate recruits with tax breaks and face time with the mayor. But the cyber touts in city government suffer their own version of the digital workplace’s bait and switch. In place of, say, a stream of tax revenues to revive decrepit public transport, they’ll end up with a smartphone app that links commuters with gray-market taxi drivers. At the same time, disconsolate holders of humanities degrees, who once may have caught on in a human resources, customer service, or speechwriting department, have found their jobs outsourced or automated. A glut of digital labor markets—oDesk, Amazon’s Mechanical Turk, TaskRabbit—lets companies summon pliable workforces on demand (a postindustrial reserve army, you might say) and deploy them at the stroke of a cursor to perform tasks that in better days would have gone to full-time employees: checking on store displays, organizing documents, performing transcription, writing newsletters. Even translation has become digitized and highly distributed; users of the Duolingo language-learning app are unwittingly translating articles—gratis—for BuzzFeed, CNN, and other media giants.

Such are the perverse rewards we reap when we permit tech culture to become *our* culture. The profits and power flow to the platform owners and their political sponsors. We get the surveillance, the data mining, the soaring inequality, and the canned pep talks from bosses who have been upsold on analytics software. Without Gchat, Twitter, and Facebook—the great release valves of workaday ennui—the roofs of metropolitan skyscrapers would surely be filled with pallid young faces, wondering about the quickest way down.

The Theory of the Sub-leisured Class

So what has happened, exactly, to the noble dream of the creative workplace? Is it simply that the giddy, VC-fueled idealism of the first wave of web startups was always destined to come crashing down into the pinched, clock-watching rounds of glorified make-work that have long bloated the days of insurance clerks and budget auditors? Or is there some more revealing and insidious dynamic at play here? Was the noble dream really a nightmare all along?

This latter option seems the likeliest. After all, the dramatic downturn in the quality of white-collar labor hasn't come about due to any slough in the core project of boosting worker productivity. Quite the opposite. As technology has advanced, so has productivity, just as the sunniest macroeconomic forecasters would expect. But the workers most responsible for carrying out improved routines of productivity are reaping none of the gains. It's not just that technological innovation has failed to bring about a more equitable, less labor-intensive society, contrary to the predictions of our daring prophets of leisured abundance from the 1950s onward. It's also that the lords of capital have used the very promise of technological revolution to extract ever more value from workers. Stock indices and corporate profits hover near all-time highs precisely because in the last forty years, most Americans' wages have barely kept up with inflation, much less increased in proportion with their output.

Technology, from an Excel spreadsheet to an assembly-line robot, may make aspects of our jobs easier. But that's at most a collateral aim; the real point of technological improvement in the office has always been to make us more productive. The "Great Speedup," as this phenomenon has been called, involves us working harder and longer, even when we're not in the office, than we ever have before. With history in mind, one can say that the introduction of new workplace technologies has been more about increasing profits for corporations and less about addressing the problems of workers or rewarding them for their feverish output. There's no indication that this pattern is set to change.

To grasp how deeply such patterns are rooted within the twenty-first century workplace, it's important not to look forward, as the hucksters of digital capitalism are forever urging us to. (Stare long enough at the futurist mirage and you might forget that you blew your department's slush fund on a Jeff Jarvis lecture.) Instead, let us travel backward in time, to the very cusp of the Information Revolution. Amid the first stirrings of dissent in Northern California, long before tech moguls were granted the dubious prestige of celebrity, a leaderless collective of disenchanting office workers put out a subversive periodical—a magazine called *Processed World*. First published in San Francisco in April 1981, the magazine now serves as an invaluable repository of all the mistaken, venal, and authoritarian guiding assumptions of the great digital reorganization of work. The brain trust behind *Processed World* was composed of people—many of them steeped in radical causes, environmental activism, and Situationist-type affairs—who began to identify the features of today's high-productivity, low-content corporate workplace. Standing on the frontier of the new Information Economy, they took stock of their working lives and despaired at what they saw—and they made special, mordant note of the new technologies that didn't make their work lives any easier or more meaningful.

These would-be revolutionaries were eager to see the automated world's long-promised bounty of self-determined leisure bear fruit at last. They had plenty of marketable skills, but what most of them really wanted was time—to write and paint and act and organize. Some of them didn't want to work at all. Others preferred not to give themselves over to big corpora-

tions and bureaucracies that offered them little in return for their labor. Most of all, they wanted their lives to be their own. Still animated by the antiwar radicalism of the previous decade, they were also bruised by the failures of 1968. Consequently, the magazine, if not its contributors, adopted no official ideology. They knew what they were against: wage labor, authoritarianism, war, nationalism, and the state itself. But they weren't always sure what they wanted in its place. Figuring that out would be a challenge; it would also be the great project of the next fourteen years, during which *Processed World* would publish thirty-two issues (give or take),¹ participate in numerous acts of protest, street theater, and sabotage, and launch a range of other initiatives, from Critical Mass, the cycling event now held in hundreds of cities worldwide, to the preservation of some of San Francisco's history in what may have been the last era a poor person could move to the Bay Area and still manage to get by.

Though its circulation peaked somewhere around four thousand copies, *Processed World* found an eager audience. Beginning with the second issue, the pages filled up with letters praising the magazine for finally talking about work and its discontents. Readers shared stories of corrupt unions, malignant bosses, profound existential boredom, and the recovery of some of their dignity through protest and mischief. They also argued with *Processed World's* writers, who were only too happy to return the volleys. Many of the letter writers simply offered thanks. As one reader marveled in the July 1981 issue, "THERE'S INTELLIGENT LIFE OUT THERE!! WE ARE AT YOUR SERVICE."

But *Processed World* did much more than supply to depressed office proles a therapeutic outlet. The magazine also managed to diagnose some of the issues that still animate radicals today: housework, sex work, and other unacknowledged forms of labor; unionization and its limits; income inequality; the precarity of the typical worker; corporate power; the state of exception that comes with permanent warfare (embodied then by the Cold War and later by the first Gulf War); and the ways in which the computerization of society was changing work, often to the detriment of workers. In the writing—essays, poetry, reportage, fantastical short stories about rebellious paper-pushers taking over San Francisco's financial district, only to be brutally put down by government soldiers—one can also find the beginnings of today's revolt against Silicon Valley and its pernicious mix of libertarian economics, techno-utopianism, and the deracinated remains of the sixties counterculture.

As *Processed World* veteran Dennis Hayes explained it to me, "We were really examining social history. We were asking questions that went unasked. We were asking, 'What's the value of a job that creates no value? Or that simply creates more work?'"

Speed Up, Power Down

In an Information Age "largely mute about the experience of work—its meaning, its purpose, who decides what should get done, by whom, and how"—*Processed World* was talking about little else. The magazine's twentieth-anniversary issue, published in 2001, surveyed our blasted landscape of false hopes for a simpler, leisure-enhanced American working life. An essay by Hayes, "Farce or Figleaf: The Promise of Leisure in the Computer Age," traced how computerization of the workplace has coincided with the Great Speedup. As Americans work more hours than ever,

¹Thirty-two issues appeared in the magazine's initial run. An abbreviated issue, referred to as number 33 1/3, appeared in the spring of '95, with others following in 2001 and 2005.

Hayes noted, the former utopian promises of automation have given way to the added burdens of computerization; we now work more not only at our own jobs, but also at learning to manage the ever-changing digital infrastructure of our lives. We don't work *with* computers; we work to keep up with them. (No wonder our smartphones "push" notifications at us.) What Thorstein Veblen knew in 1904 bears repeating: "Wherever the machine process extends, it sets the pace for the workmen, great and small."

"For most," Hayes wrote, "overwork is not elective, it is part of a new social contract." Just as temporary, freelance, and other "gig" work was supposed to be liberating in the 1980s—a fallacy that the earliest *Processed World* issues joyfully skewered—computers and information technologies were supposed to make work more efficient, more creative, and less onerous. Instead, we spend more time on more tasks, whether in the office, on the road, or at home, tethered to what Hayes calls "a mobile and instantly interruptible workplace." The too-frequent introductions of new software only increase the pace of the upgrade cycle, leading to boom times for manufacturers and support staff, while "those of us who work with computers now have a second job: keeping them patched and upgraded and responding to their intricate cues, messages and glitches." That is in addition to the many other unacknowledged jobs we have—email being among the biggest time-sinks—all part of a phenomenon that the computer scientist Ian Bogost recently labeled "hyperemployment."

By the time Hayes wrote "Farce or Figleaf," the dotcom bubble had already burst. The magazine had essentially disbanded, and the issue was a valedictory one—an anniversary celebration and an opportunity for *Processed World* writers to return and see just how completely their grim prophecies about the direction of the information workplace two decades earlier had come to pass. Hayes chose a fitting epigraph: an outlandishly optimistic forecast from Popular Front playwright Archibald MacLeish, who in 1933 looked forward to "a civilization in which all men would work less and enjoy more."

It was this ability—to take stock of the hidden history of the degradation of the info-workplace while also reclaiming the promise of greater leisure for America's workforce—that set *Processed World* apart from the bulk of Reagan-era ventures in radical publishing. Where other outlets of critical thought took reliable aim at the (ample) cast of historical villains who made up the Reagan revolution's vanguard, the keepers of *Processed World* kept their gaze fixed on history's longer vectors of resistance and (eventual) social change. One example: Members of the *Processed World* collective were instrumental in starting the Critical Mass bike ride in 1992; they also published an article about a 1896 San Francisco bicycle protest in which riders, by rallying for better-paved roads, not only anticipated the protest tactics that would be deployed by Critical Mass a century later, but also paved the way, quite literally, for "the car culture that contemporary bicyclists" now hope to undo. The *Processed World* crowd knew from whence they came.

But where exactly was that? And what can *Processed World* teach us about today's radical press, the organs now trying to lead the vanguard against the world's bullshit jobs (as David Graeber has memorably dubbed them) and technological determinism?

No Apologies

Anarchist credentials aside, the closest thing that *Processed World* had to a leader must have been Chris Carlsson. A longtime San Franciscan, Carlsson claims the fistful of titles that comes

from being self-employed for thirty-odd years—“writer, San Francisco historian, ‘professor,’ bicyclist, tour guide, blogger, photographer, book and magazine designer.” Carlsson has been with Critical Mass, itself a leaderless operation, since the beginning. And one of his ongoing projects is Shaping San Francisco, a Howard-Zinn-meets-Studs-Terkel social history project, with digital archives, public talks, recorded interviews, and invitations for community contributions.

When I reached Carlsson by phone, he was on his bike, heading to a farmer’s market and then a co-op grocery store. He eventually pulled over in a quiet alley, and we talked about his life and the origins of *Processed World*.

Carlsson and Caitlin Manning (the two would later have a daughter together) met, along with several other early *PW*ers, in a street-theater protest group called the Union of Concerned Comies. Founded in 1979, the UCC opposed war, militarism, and nuclear power. They held protests, distributed satirical leaflets, and published in underground newspapers. Some UCC members participated in the White Night riots—the street violence that followed the manslaughter conviction of former city supervisor Dan White, who killed supervisor Harvey Milk and mayor George Moscone. (The rioters had been expecting White to receive a harsher sentence than he did.) Afterward, the UCC made a T-shirt featuring a burning cop car with the words “No Apologies.” As if any clarification were needed, the date and location of the riot were also included.

More agitation followed. The jingoistic fervor that erupted after the seizure of U.S. hostages at the embassy in Tehran prompted UCC members to put on fake military uniforms and perform a satirical variety show in downtown San Francisco. They declared martial law, rationed food, extolled the virtues of war, sang anthems, and managed to poke fun at some Leninist factions who bore “complicity in capital’s authoritarianism and work fetishism.”

The UCC soon fell apart, but street theater, satirical art and graphics, and a strong sense of grievance would be mainstays of the group members’ lives, and of the cultural and social life of *Processed World*. As Daniel Brook recounts in his book *The Trap: Selling Out to Stay Afloat in Winner-Take-All America*, Carlsson and friends liked to “dress up as investment bankers and bow in unison at the stock ticker in front of the Charles Schwab building.” Marina Lazzara, one of the magazine’s poetry editors, recalled this period fondly. “I miss those days,” she told me. “We were really out in the streets.”

For Hayes, who would later become the magazine’s go-to source for Silicon Valley commentary, this attitude was refreshing. “There was a lot of leftist cant” in the air at the time, he said. The members of the *PW* collective “were actually funny—really funny. I started chatting with them. They radiated warmth, humor, and a kind of point of view that went way underneath what was going on at the time in the way of political protest.”

The magazine continued to straddle the line between sarcasm and playful derision, its pages filling with parodic advertisements, gallows-humor cartoons, provocative photography, and reprinted Dadaist leaflets excoriating work. While large chunks of *PW* are available on its official website, processedworld.com, many of these graphical elements aren’t; fortunately, the Internet Archive has full scans of the magazine, and Verso brought out an anthology, a meaty, oversized paperback called *Bad Attitude*, in 1990.

Processed World’s “first two issues were printed on paper unknowingly ‘donated’ by San Francisco’s major banks,” the magazine’s official history recounts. For the next five years, the magazine’s collective held collating parties with weed, booze, and potluck buffets. No one ever got paid for *Processed World* except the printers—a fact stated with bald pride in the magazine. It was a collective, volunteer effort, and it had the rotating cast (as many as four hundred members over

the years), intermittent publication, and borrowed office space to match. The various offices that Carlsson rented for his typesetting business often served as what Lazzara called the magazine's "clubhouse," where members would drop in to hang out, write, and argue.

"At one point, for me, it was really my social life, my politics, my creativity, muses for my own writing," Lazzara said. "For me, it was much bigger than a publication."

A sort of communitarian anarchism suffused much of what *Processed World* did. But this sensibility ran alongside an angry, even militant, approach to work and corporate America. According to the December 1985 issue, "One of *PW*'s principal aims is to make people feel good about hating their jobs, not to mention despising the dullness and ugliness of so much of life in general." Among the celebrated forms of rebellion were sabotage and resistance to unions—the anarchist insurgents at *PW* dismissed the union world of the eighties as too pro-management and hamstrung by the National Labor Relations Board, which had outlawed hallowed protest tactics like the sit-down strike decades earlier and which would only become more reactionary in the Reagan years.

This kind of attitude can seem more than a little purist, or like Left Coast posturing for posturing's sake, but it's not much different from what runs through the activist strains of the Twitter-sphere or in the pages of many radical publications today. In the case of *Processed World*, outrage rated more highly than ideology, and so the magazine sometimes lacked the theorizing and institutional affiliations that might have earned it more attention in a culture that values credentials and easy categorization. *PW* also placed a premium on first-hand experience—many contributors began as letter writers or people who encountered a *PW*er distributing the magazine on the street—something that today's labor press might take heed of. The magazine's amateurish execution (and I mean this in the best sense) gave *PW* a certain air of testimony, all the more so because a number of its writers, both out of a sense of fun and self-protection, chose to write under pseudonyms. *PW*'s dispatches from the working world were often rough-hewn and unfinished; they went in unexpected directions and contained sudden, moving confessional moments. They also were generally insightful about the power dynamics of the office and the petty tyrannies of bureaucratic regimes.

In issue 6, for example, one anonymous correspondent, a "Personnel Management Analyst Trainee for the State of Tennessee," recalled being hired to create detailed job definitions for 3,200 government positions. The consultant arrived on the first day to find eight colleagues working on this project without having completed one definition—and each was supposed to be three hundred pages long. They had been working on this task for two years. The ironies and indignities amassed from there: the project was only approved to satisfy a capricious judge, it would take so long that the definitions would be out of date, an upcoming election might require that they start over again. The writer concluded, "I had to work toward writing job definitions that would never be finished, and if finished never used."

This was but one among the magazine's darkly comic dispatches from the absurdist trenches of the overmanaged workplace. Others gestured at something more haunting, such as the anonymous San Franciscan who wrote in issue 7, "I'm unemployed now and should be typing my resume. Typing a resume becomes more and more like typing a suicide note, and yet choosing not to work is a kamikaze mission." It was to this group—torn between the exigencies of white-collarism and the seeming impossibility of living as one chooses—that *Processed World* ultimately spoke.

The Machine, Raging

San Francisco has changed dramatically over the last thirty years. It has been thoroughly gentrified, and become rich in a way that few American cities have before. Its radicalism, its poor and working classes, its patches of squalor, much of its analog culture—these once-distinguishing features have fled east across the bay, to Oakland. Like so many of us, they’ve been priced out.²

The tech backlash precipitated in journals like *Processed World* has also come of age. The cleaned-up version appears in the op-ed pages of our biggest newspapers, alongside news articles about the latest cuts in food stamps. Contrast this with a different, and likely more honest, form of dissent: crowds of bitter people holding placards (“Public \$\$\$\$, Private Gains”; “Stop Displacement Now”) while blocking the paths of Google buses, for example. The op-eds are understood to be the prudent, measured thoughts of experts. The protests are seen as bizarre, “misplaced” (a natural complaint for an industry obsessed with efficiency), and offensive.

What to say except that this is a sign of a pitiable softness? Protest—actual bodies in the street—has become so rare, and so fully prey to a reflexive and deeply unearned cynicism, that it’s practically gauche, the hopeful incursions of the Occupy movement notwithstanding. Who wants to make such a mess? Who can get over his or her own practiced nihilism?

If they were to be faced with the raucous, are-they-serious-or-aren’t-they militance of the *Processed World* crowd, today’s financial and tech elites in San Francisco or New York would probably just walk around it, perhaps asking the nearest police officer for assistance. (The state is there to help.) A stunt like the End of the World’s Fair—a “carnival of celebration and refusal” concocted by *PW* in 1984 after President Reagan, in a *People* magazine interview, suggested that we might be living in apocalyptic times—would be chum for a jaundiced media. That is, if it didn’t first die a thousand small, ignoble deaths on Twitter.

Many of us know we work bullshit jobs; others would be only too happy to have one, to escape the suffocating anxieties of living on the margins. Those employed in socially useful jobs—teachers, nurses, social workers—must contend with low pay or, if they agitate for something more, being vilified.

The point is to make something out of one’s disillusionment. Today, we have many smart, young, angry writers. Occasionally they sneak into legacy newspapers and magazines, or a *New Yorker* staffer will code-switch and bare his inner Marxist in an interview with *Salon*. Whether to reach larger audiences or exorcize their own guilty fixations, these radicals tend to hold up pop culture and celebrity as the prism through which their politics flow. Racism is important, but when you can talk about it in the context of Miley Cyrus or Macklemore,³ it’s *relevant*.

Along the way, the sense of community and common cause epitomized by *Processed World* has been sublimated into the incessant branding and self-promotion from which none of us appears immune. We are all living precariously, and so we tread water by competing for the occasional life preserver thrown out by the attention economy. Do your job well and maybe the *Washington Post*, the *Daily Beast*, or the latest buzzy new-media property will hire you as its token leftist columnist. Hit the jackpot, and you’ll become the next Chris Hayes.

Who can blame them? It’s now so expensive to live in a coastal metropolis that one hopes to sell out at least a little bit.

²Swap in “Manhattan” and “Brooklyn,” and you have the same story for New York, though the pattern is repeating itself in Brooklyn now.

³Or whichever famous name fits the news peg.

The remaining members of *Processed World* have become victims of some of the same forces. Over the last three years, Carlsson and Lazzara have seen an increasing number of friends evicted from San Francisco to make way for the tech nouveau riche. “It’s a tidal wave of displacement. All of our friends are leaving,” Carlsson said. “It’s like a trauma that people are living through.”

It’s become passé to blame our machines—in our individualist society, you are the sole author of your failures—but consider this: to those whose work appeared in *Processed World*, the introduction of computers to the workplace was a political act. The computerization of the workplace brought regulated workflows, surveillance by managers, deference to the dictates of software, and a machine with which you couldn’t keep up. It meant a noticeable loss of autonomy and a dawning sense—seen in the rapid turnover guaranteed by planned obsolescence—that productivity and growth had become ends in themselves. The most dangerous -isms turned out to be those preceded by “Ford” and “Taylor,” and they exerted their ultimate hold by becoming technologized and dispersed throughout our homes, our offices, our cars, and our cities.

In a 1982 essay, three *PW*ers wrote, “It is not hard to imagine that in the very near future most people will carry out their jobs in front of TV screens.” It’s one of those delightfully naive predictions that’s appreciated all the more because it so rapidly became antique. But there’s something unexpectedly apt here about the phrase “TV screens,” with its aura of anesthetizing entertainment. In 1982 an office computer was almost certainly just a machine for work. Now, the same machines we use for work can also provide a salutary escape—into something meaningful, sure, but maybe just into something distracting and numbing, enough to get through that day’s particular soul-deadening meeting or performance review. Work has been allowed to conquer our lives in part because there is now no difference between the tools we use for work and for play. These tools are always with us, and so we are always available to our jobs. Maybe we’d be able to do something about all this bullshit if we weren’t forever standing in it.

The essay, titled “Roots of Disillusionment,” ends with a consideration of why it’s so difficult to imagine, much less enact, a new social and political order. The members of *Processed World* hoped for a world defined by voluntary social and labor relations, “a freely, genuinely cooperative and communal world, in which the individual would be realized rather than suppressed.” It was a hazily defined goal, sure; they would always be searching, always be resisting the calls of competing ideologies and petty sectarianism, or giving up and going to work for Apple. But just as it had been in the sixties, that process was part of the point:

“Some of these experiences were disillusioning too—a good many former activists and communards turned sourly conservative after concluding that free collectivity was impossible. But others still remember the successes, partial as they were, the moments when people felt they had the power together to make their own history, to become anything they might desire to be. They carry with them a blurred snapshot of utopia.”

That snapshot is worth holding onto. As we joylessly compete for ever-shrinking rewards, it might even provide some small inspiration.

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