

Reflections on the End of Work

Jeff Shantz

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The meaning of work is once again on the agenda and gaining increasing relevance for contemporary struggles. Within movements such as ecology, work is being examined from novel and challenging perspectives and with a growing sense of urgency. Beyond prior theoretical understandings, either as the basis for identity (as in classical Marxism) or, conversely, as being of no relevance to social transformation, the category “jobs” is (re)opened as a crucial site of struggle. “What about work?” is returning as a key question for transformative politics at the turn of the millennium.

There are perhaps two principal, but very different, impulses for an emergent critique of work: firstly, the anti-productivist visions of social relations coming from social movements — most significantly ecology — which have encouraged a rethinking of the character of work; and secondly, the cybernetized restructuring of global capital with its jobless recovery and institutionalized levels of unemployment. The first impulse tends towards radical and critical approaches to the decline or end of jobs, while the second is commonly reflected in expressions of anxiety, desperation and political reaction.

Numerous authors (Polanyi, 1958; Black, 1995; Bridges, 1995) have discussed the historic emergence of “jobs” meaning “to work for wages” — as something distinguished from the performance of work — specific tasks engaged in to meet direct needs. This transformation was closely related to enclosure of common lands and the separation of home life and work life as people left villages to work in the factories of the cities. Through industrialism work became transformed into jobs. The new job-work gradually contributed to the destruction of traditional social relations and served to undermine prior ways of living. The job is a social artifact, although it is so deeply embedded in our consciousness that most of us have forgotten its artificiality or the fact that most societies since the beginning of time have done fine without jobs.

According to futurists such as Bridges, we have recently entered a new period signaled by further transformations in what is to be meant by jobs. “now, once again, we have come to a turning point at which the assumptions about living and working that people had grown comfortable with are being challenged” (Bridges, 1995:45). Fellow Nostramadian Jeremy Rifkin argues that the global economy is in the midst of a transformation as significant as the Industrial Revolution. He suggests that we have entered a “new economic era” marked by a declining need for “mass human labor”. As computers, robots and telecommunications networks and other cybernetic technologies replace human workers in an increasing range of activities we have entered the early stages of a shift from “mass labor” to highly skilled “elite” labor accompanied by increasing automation in the production of goods and the delivery of services” (Rifkin, 1995).

Bridges suggests that changes in technology and the global market have transformed work relations in such a manner as to suggest the disappearance of the very category “job”. Cybernetization of capital has provided a context in which it is not unreasonable for workers to expect that their jobs will be eliminated. Bridges also suggests that each increase in productivity seems to make jobs redundant.

Corresponding to this may be a shift in people’s perceptions of work. More and more, people are “searching for alternatives to jobs and job descriptions” (Bridges, 1995:46). Rifkin suggests that the “jobs” question is “likely to be the most explosive issue of the [present] decade”. More interesting than the futurists are those calling for the outright abolition of work in its job form. Recognizing that the category “job” signifies a dependency relationship disguised as independence (the “freedom” to consume), work abolitionists call for workers of the world to relax in a

gleeful rejection of the leftist mantra of full employment (Black, 1995). The abolitionist appeal is not a project for further integration of the working classes through preservation of jobs at all costs and over-reliance upon parliamentary mediation towards that end. Rather it expresses traditionally anarchic or libertarian sensibilities which journey beyond the reductionist contortion which has seen work come to be equated with jobs. This unconventional approach is made manifest primarily through emphases on creativity, self-determination and conviviality of relations. The category “jobs” is understood as marking a restriction of peoples’ capacities to care for themselves and those within their communal/ecological groupings, and is therefore rejected as a point for radical activist convergence.

Work abolitionism suggests a movement not “of class”, but rather, “against class”, i.e., against the commodification of creativity and performance. Jobs or employment within the “anti-class” milieu refer to the idea that one must sell oneself to any function in order to receive sustenance, i.e., the imperative of wage labor. The category “jobs” speaks to the compulsory character of involvement in production — production enforced via relations of economic and political control and power. Questions of what one is doing are removed given this construction, of course. Work is no longer done for its own sake but for secondary effects, such as wages, which are not characteristic of or inherent to the work itself. It might be said that jobs form a condensation point for complex relations of power around the trading of time for money, or what Zimpel quite poignantly refers to as a “transaction of existential absurdity”.

Jobs, as characterized by an extension of organizational control over people as workers, signify a system of domination practiced through forms of discipline which include surveillance and time management. The regimentation and discipline of the job serves to habituate workers to hierarchy and obedience, while also discouraging insubordination and autonomy. Jobs as regimented roles replace direct, creative participation and initiative through arrangements of subservience. Bob Black argues that employment is capital’s primary and most direct coercive formation, one which is experienced daily.

Anti-work themes are not new, of course. They find antecedents in Fourier, Lafargue, and even (especially?) in Marx’s critique of alienated labor. For radical abolitionists (see Negri, 1984), the liquidation of wage labor is not a given; it is a question of political struggle. Here a convergence between anti-work theorizing and the analyses developed within autonomist Marxism are particularly interesting. Drawing from Marx’s analysis of automation within a wage system, autonomist Marxists have argued that the cybernetization of capital will not usher in a leisure society (who would want it, anyway?), but would instead encourage an enlargement of the realm of work as labor displaced from primary and secondary industry becomes reabsorbed by the tertiary, quaternary, or quinary sectors as farther and farther flung domains of human activity are assimilated within the social factory. Cybernetized capital, through the commodification of expanded and novel realms of human activity, can maintain wage labor, incessantly recreating its proletariat, unless it is forcibly interrupted by the organized efforts of workers to reclaim their “life-time”.

Projects of both the left and the right, however, have maintained an almost devotional commitment to employment and job creation as social goals. Differences only emerge over details, such as wages, hours, or profitability. Until recently there had been little debate around the future of work and radical responses to the cybernetization of production.

While most activists — feminists, civil rights, labor — have sought increased participation in the job market, some greens have begun to question participation itself. Perhaps more than other

activists, abolitionists have increasingly come to understand jobs, under the guise of work, as perhaps the most basic form of unfreedom, one which must be overcome in any quest towards liberty. Too often, previously, the common response has been one of turning away from workers and from questions relating to the organization of working relations. Radical politics can no longer ignore those questions which are posed by the presence of jobs, however. Indeed, it might be said that a return to the problematic of jobs becomes a starting point for a reformulation of radicalism, at least along green lines.

So, what forms has the organization of “workers against work” taken? Earlier Wobbly (Industrial Workers of the World) demands for a four-hour day may be understood as an expression of opposition to the extension of capitalist control over labor and the reduction of workers to one-dimensional class beings. They suggest a movement for autonomy wherein labor achieves some distance from capital and the extension of control over creativity. The shortened workday might be best understood as the opening of creative time, outside of capitalist discipline and command, and the expansion of time available for such “frivolous” undertakings as bringing about the end of industrial capitalism. In limiting the duration and intensity of the work day, labor asserts its own project counter to that of capital.

The mythic use of the general strike by Wobblies might also be understood in this manner. Anarcho-syndicalists have long argued that for cooperative, community-based ways of living to endure, workers will have to stop producing for Capital and State. Given current political economy, this implies that workers must stop producing, period! In other words, class is only abolished through not working — a general strike. Through the general withdrawal of labor might the megamachine be ground to a halt and left to rust!

Historically, unions had responded to technological changes and increases to productivity with demands for a shortened work week. However, Rifkin reports that the union officials with whom he has spoken are “universally reluctant to deal with the notion that mass labor — the very basis of trade unionism — will continue to decline and may even disappear altogether.” Mainstream unionists have been incapable of any radical rethinking of their politics which might address the crucial transformation in jobs. Such failures to adapt, or even to remember their own radical histories, speak to the difficulties facing workers within traditional unions in the contemporary context.

Rifkin — while not discussing specifically the ecological significance of a shortened work week — recognizes that such a shortening could serve as a rallying point for a powerful convergence of social struggles. Rifkin’s analysis remains productivist (among other things undesirable), however — even arguing that a shortened work week could be beneficial for capital in allowing for a doubling or tripling of productivity! Rifkin never questions the legitimacy or the desirability of capitalist relations. Indeed, a major reason for concern over “vanishing jobs” is that the transformation threatens a capitalist collapse through a weakening of consumer demand. Rifkin’s main desire is to see an increase in the “purchasing power” of workers so that “employers, workers, the economy, and the government all benefit”. Like sociological “structural-functionalists” of old, Rifkin’s primary concern is with the possibility of “strain” in the system, and the alleviation of any such strain. Rifkin (1995) worries that the decline of jobs could threaten the foundations of the modern state (Yikes!) through the destabilizing impact upon social relations which previously rested upon a shared valuing of labor — what he calls the heart of the social contract. Rifkin even fears that the crisis in jobs will open the door to renewed militancy and to extralegal expressions of politics (Oh, horror!).

In like fashion, Bridges' optimism over possibilities for the transformation of jobs speaks only to the strata of well-skilled, well-paid workers in an increasingly polarized workforce. The conclusions drawn by Bridges never question the hegemony of capital in structuring possible responses to the "death of the job", leaving the "employee" as an intact category facing such unsatisfactory and increasingly tenuous options as freelance work, part-time work, or piecework. The decline of the job simply comes to mean that those who are working have more work to do. Even limited concerns over what is being produced, how, by whom and for what purpose never appear on the horizon of Bridges' schema. Neither do questions regarding what happens to those newly "liberated" — the jobless.

Among abolitionists, the "end of work" suggests much more intriguing possibilities. Far from being irrational responses to serious social transformations, workplace rebellion and workers' self-determination become ever more reasonable responses to the uncertainty and contingency of emerging conditions of (un)employment. They offer worker and community self-determination as alternatives to neo-liberal perspectives on unemployment. Such alternatives provide an articulation of the end of work which emphasizes workers actively overcoming their own worker-ness, against pessimistic or cynical responses such as mass retraining which simply reinforces dependence upon elites.

An objection might well be raised that abolitionism need not imply a transformation of capitalism; after all, the "abolition of work" is a reference also employed by some neo-liberal post-industrial theorists. There, however, the abolition of work is understood as completely realizable under capitalism. The possible end of work is conceptualized as coming from the application of innovative technological resources within capitalist relations — not as a destruction of those relations. At its most dramatic, it implies a leisure society enabled through the development of artificial intelligence and robotics.

These are not acceptable alternatives. It is not conceivable how any ecological lifestyles could be constituted otherwise than with the outright cessation of capitalist production. Only the end of production can necessarily imply the end of nuclearism, weapons production, clear-cutting, toxic waste products — the varieties of harmful applications to which nature is commonly subjected (again, Black states this most effectively). Among the prerequisites for ecological change is a reduction both in the amount of work being done and in the character of what is done. Much of work, involving massive appropriation of natural elements, is useless. That includes the defense and reproduction of work relations in political (ownership and control) and economic (circulation and consumption) forms.

Abolitionists envision work being performed through direct, participatory means within which work is conceived more as craft or play. Growing concerns over the regimentation and alienation of working conditions along with the fatal ecological consequences have contributed to the emergence of anti-technology-anti-civilization (anti-tech/anti-civ) discourses arguing quite persuasively that humans must abandon not only industry and technology, but civilization itself.

Abolitionist visions are raised against the undermining influences of work in contemporary conditions of globalism. They offer but one, though perhaps the most interesting, contribution to the problem of jobs, and to the refusal of authoritarian and coercive social relations.

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