

NEALA SCHLEUNING

‘THE ABOLITION OF  
WORK’  
AND  
OTHER MYTHS



**PRINCIPLES, PROPOSITIONS &  
DISCUSSIONS  
FOR LAND & FREEDOM**

AN INTRODUCTORY WORD TO THE ‘ANARCHIVE’  
“Anarchy is Order!”

*I must Create a System or be enslav'd by  
another Man's.  
I will not Reason & Compare: my business  
is to Create'*  
(William Blake)

During the 19th century, anarchism has developed as a result of a social current which aims for freedom and happiness. A number of factors since World War I have made this movement, and its ideas, disappear little by little under the dust of history.

After the classical anarchism – of which the Spanish Revolution was one of the last representatives—a ‘new’ kind of resistance was founded in the sixties which claimed to be based (at least partly) on this anarchism. However this resistance is often limited to a few (and even then partly misunderstood) slogans such as ‘Anarchy is order’, ‘Property is theft’,...

Information about anarchism is often hard to come by, monopolised and intellectual; and therefore visibly disappearing. The ‘anarchive’ or ‘anarchist archive’ Anarchy is Order ( in short **A.O**) is an attempt to make the ‘**principles, propositions and discussions**’ of this tradition available again for anyone it concerns. We believe that these texts are part of our own heritage. They don't belong to publishers, institutes or specialists.

These texts thus have to be available for all anarchists and other people interested. That is one of the conditions to give anarchism a new impulse, to let the ‘new anarchism’ outgrow the slogans. This is what makes this project relevant for us: we must find our roots to be able to renew ourselves. We have to learn from the mistakes of our socialist past. History has shown that a large number of the anarchist ideas remain

standing, even during the most recent social-economic developments.

**‘Anarchy Is Order’ does not make profits, everything is spread at the price of printing- and papercosts. This of course creates some limitations for these archives.**

**Everyone is invited to spread along the information we give . This can be done by copying our leaflets, printing texts from the CD (collecting all available texts at a given moment) that is available or copying it, e-mailing the texts to friends and new ones to us,... Become your own anarchivist!!!**

(Be aware though of copyright restrictions. We also want to make sure that the anarchist or non-commercial printers, publishers and authors are not being harmed. Our priority on the other hand remains to spread the ideas, not the ownership of them.)

The anarchivist offers these texts hoping that values like **freedom, solidarity and direct action** get a new meaning and will be lived again; so that the struggle continues against the

*“...demons of flesh and blood, that sway scepters down here;  
and the dirty microbes that send us dark diseases and wish to  
squash us like horseflies;  
and the will- ‘o-the-wisp of the saddest ignorance.”*

(L-P. Boon)

The rest depends as much on you as it depends on us. Don't mourn, Organise!

Comments, questions, criticism, cooperation can be sent to [A.O@advalvas.be](mailto:A.O@advalvas.be).

A complete list and updates are available on this address, new texts are always

**WELCOME!!**

# THE ABOLITION OF WORK AND OTHER MYTHS

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This article originally appeared in issue #35 (Summer, 1995) of *Kick It Over*

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## *About the Author:*

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**Okay. So we all hate work.** Aversion to work seems to be endemic across cultures and across time. In many cultures visions of freedom from work abound. The carefree life of the grasshopper who consumes without storing up goods for the winter continues to appeal to us, and the life of the dull, pedestrian worker ant attracts our scorn. In both ancient times and contemporary culture both, the potential of the machine to lighten our work has also proved fascinating. The epic poem of the Finnish people, the *Kalevala*, for example, includes a story of a

marvelous machine, the Sampo, that endlessly produces wealth. Throughout the history of western cultures, such perpetual motion machines have held a continuing fascination.

Despite these delightful fantasies of leisure, infinite pleasure and wealth, all cultures have also addressed the need for the individual to work. To live is to work and much of life is spent in economic activity. Whether work is seen as the means to achieving some spiritual height or individual salvation, or as a curse for previous transgressions, all the great religions of the world, for example, admonish the slacker, and some raise work to the level of a first principle. Most political thought also either assumes the value of work, or requires it, for the collective good. Basic survival is, of course, a given when we think about the necessity for work.

Almost from its inception, anarchist thought has also reflected two diverse philosophies of work: one school calls for the abolition of work, the other assumes the necessity of labour. For the latter school, the central political question turns on who controls the process of work and its products or outcome. Anarchists are also split on the relative merits of technology, arguing for one of three alternatives: an unabashed acceptance of technological advance at the service of the worker; a primitivist call to return to nature totally free of technology; or an aggressive Luddite hostility technology and the rule of the machine. I would like to briefly explore several of these positions.

The abolition of work argument can take one of several tracks: a critique of the mind-numbing work created by the division of labour; a rejection of technology and a

return to a simpler lifestyle free of the constraints of centralized control by capital and the machine; an appropriation of the "boss's" time for personal work; or an outright refusal to work and the personal appropriation of the work of others through squatting, stealing, etc. There are serious problems with some of the arguments for the abolition of work. At best, they are misguided and silly. At their worst, they are counterproductive to the life of the community and just plain irresponsible.

1) The idea of not working is nice, but unrealistic and simplistic. If the critique of what we have come to call "work" is meant to encourage resistance to exploitation by the wage labour system, the objective is a good one. But along with the critique must come a responsible plan for getting the long term work of the society accomplished.

2) The refusal to work is arrogant, and probably also a bit childlike. It is certainly individualistic and self-serving. May I risk an observation that this philosophy is probably especially appealing to the young and strong and healthy who have no responsibilities (or who think they have no responsibilities) for the care of others. Some abolition of work arguments are grounded in the ideology of a personal, individual work ethic rather than a social ethic, e.g., I have no responsibility to anyone but myself.

3) Demanding the right to be lazy or refusing to work is a position of resistance only. It is precious in its self-centeredness, and basically socially irresponsible. Like many things in fragmented contemporary culture, rather than being a liberatory position it is instead symbolic of

how powerless people feel. "Dropping out" is basically a statement of political despair, and is a modern nihilist response which unfortunately quite effectively removes the individual from the political arena (assuming the classical definition of politics as a collective act). Dropping out is also an individualistic act which is a very ineffective political tool. Individualism is at once a strength and a weakness of political activism. One of the primary dangers is that all the problems of modern individualistic culture can be reduced (as is our consumption) to individual choice and/or blame. For example, our skies are filled with pollution, but instead of going after the polluters, we challenge each other individually about our smoking habits; when wages are reduced or jobs are eliminated to create more profit for the corporation, we turn on each other and the work environment becomes a battleground pitting one individual against another; our work is dull and boring, so we solve the problem by individually dropping out. What we should demand instead is control of polluters, and the right to control and define our work. To demand to be lazy is only to remove oneself from an unpleasant situation. It does not empower that individual. It is a politics born, probably, of a luxury society where a few who are not locked into the "system" can stand outside and make fun of the rest of us.

4) Going back to nature to live at survival levels might work, but only in a southern climate, with a controlled population in an ecologically balanced regional biosphere and an environment producing enough food for foraging. Those of us living in northern climates have to do a *lot* of work to survive.

5) Another argument promising freedom from work is implicit in our modern culture, and while it isn't necessarily an anarchist argument, it seems implicit in some of the critiques of work, i.e., we don't have to work because technology will save us, and the machines will do it all for us. This belief underlies both Capitalist and Marxist agendas, and while it is not explicit in anarchist arguments (which tend to generally be suspicious of technology and its attendant centralized control), the implicit assumption is that we can entertain a life of leisure because we need to work fewer, or no, hours to achieve the same production levels. The idea of no work is just an extension of the demand for a 4 hour day, in this argument.

Paul LaFargue's 19th century call for the right to be lazy and Bob Black's recent exhortations notwithstanding, it seems that, work is with us, and shall be with us, even if we remain committed to a high level of technological development. By its very nature, work requires a long term, commitment. Much of the work to be done in any society is not a matter of choice. And much work will certainly not be exciting, or necessarily creative. The soiled diapers of the child must be changed; seeds must be planted and tended, the food gathered, stored in a variety of ways, prepared, and cooked (in northern climates moreso); fuel and shelter must be arranged for cooling and warmth; children must be tended, people must be healed, clothed. In much of the world, most of this work is done by women. For peoples who live outside the wage system especially, work - hand work - is the norm for survival. In fact, the price of freedom from industrial wage slavery is most likely more work rather than less. Moreover, if we remain committed to our modern, centralized, urban/industrial societies, at

minimum a vast infrastructure must be maintained and work must remain highly coordinated and specialized. Streets and sidewalks must be repaired, garbage must be removed, water must be brought to people, and waste must be carried away and processed in environmentally safe ways. The motors that lift the elevators have to work, the heat, water, electricity and telephone must be maintained. "Someone" must do all this work - cooperatively, individually, by lot, by coercion - the work must be done.

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There are certain options, certain choices that we can make to organize our work in a more meaningful way, however. Some of the solutions are economic, some personal, but all political, of course. Many are also deeper questions, ethical questions. To change the nature of work in the 21st century, we need to address change in all the areas of our society that support the current work environment: whether we ought to continue the centralization of capital and the private control of capital and the profits produced by this financial system; whether the division of labour we have established is humane and productive for the individual doing the work; the level of technological advancement we wish to achieve; the environmental costs we will pay for our standard of living; and whether we will continue to artificially stimulate ourselves to further obsessive consumption. We need to address questions about how much we want to work and how we accomplish that work; the lifestyle, the level of consumption we desire; the impact we want to make on our environments, the level of pollution we will accept.

One of our first tasks is to identify basic human needs and how much is "enough." The next step is to adopt an economic structure that guarantees those basic needs and sets limits on consumption. Paul Goodman and others have proposed a two-layered economy: one level designed to meet basic collective social needs, and the other devoted to gratifying individual wants and desires. In this economy, everyone who is able would be required to work to ensure for themselves a minimum guaranteed income that would cover basic individual needs and costs of building and maintaining collective infrastructure. People would be required to work 5 out of every 7 years (with two years of sabbatical). Each individual would also have an opportunity to work one of those years to earn additional money to consume at higher levels. One sabbatical year would be required. The amount of income earned in the second level economy could be limited to control overall consumption. The second level economy would allow for a certain degree of individual choice. Total income earned by any individual ideally would be limited to no more than five times the guaranteed income level. The "work" that truly is dull, boring, dangerous, or repulsive can be allotted to those who elect to do it, in exchange for fewer hours of work required of them (say miners, who work in dangerous situations). The difficult tasks themselves could be rotated. Part of our resistance to work is the treadmill nature of it. If we could structure especially the most onerous tasks so that one individual does not bear that burden alone, and doesn't have to do that work for long periods of time, it will make that work easier in the long run, and subject individuals to less risk and danger to their health overall.

This two-layered economy, however, would clearly have to be a "controlled" economy, but it would require a minimum of work for the majority of people. Many anarchists will balk at such a suggestion, but its merits are obvious: it would control consumption, or at least slow it, since most people would probably prefer not to work too much and would rather have two years of rest; it would relieve a lot of anxiety about meeting basic needs; it would distribute the wealth more equitably; it would allow for individual freedom in consumption, and it would share the work.

We need to once again call for a reassessment of the direction of technological development. Despite the strong attraction of returning to nature, it is highly unlikely, and probably extremely unrealistic that most people will abandon the comforts of a technological society for the grueling labour of the 19th century rural farm. What technologies, and whether they ought to be pursued, however, must come under the control and direction of society as a whole. We must consciously place limits on our technological development. Just because we can conceive that the most efficient way to gut chickens is to have someone repeat the same motion all day long, doesn't mean we ought to do the work this way and permanently damage the worker's carpal passages. We must also demand environmentally safe technologies.

One of our values should be to step as lightly on the earth as we can. We could begin by making things that last. This will be a complete turnaround and a contradiction to our consumer society. We have become addicted to newness, and to throwing away that which no longer entertains us. But just what is the real nature of

the "new," and why do we desire it so intensely? Perhaps it is the failure of creative challenges on our part, that causes us to desire it from a changing array of things. We could decide, for example, to wear sturdy uniforms and drive the same well-built car, but would this give us the apparent pride in self-representation that we desire? Do we need to consume things, or would face painting allow us individual self-expression? We must find a way to make statements about ourselves without waste, find a way to represent the self in ways that do not necessitate obsessive consumption. I was struck recently by the fact that in Russia there is a dearth of wastebaskets - a sure sign that the society does not appear to have much to throw away in a systematic manner. (But they're getting there, unfortunately.)

We must also consider ways of overcoming the pervasiveness of personal alienation from work. Some of the abolition of work arguments are rants against wage labour, meaningless labour, repetitive and mind-deadening labour, unnecessary labour, fragmented labour - labour over which the worker has no control. Good work is/should be a means of centering for the self. Good work calls on creative energies and resources, it requires integration of intellectual and physical efforts. The postmortem philosophy of work is to break every task apart, to reduce it to the smallest inconsequential act, and then to put an engineer in charge of mechanizing the tasks in the most efficient manner. This robs the task of its essence, and the worker of satisfaction.

Even our philosophy has fallen under the spell of this mechanistic, technological world view. Post-modernism as a "philosophy" (which it is not, it is merely a rebellion against, as near as I can tell, nearly everything in its

path) began as a tool for critiquing the dominant hegemony of corporate consumer capitalism, but has foundered on its own destructive reductionist techniques. No centre now holds, and we are cast adrift on our own meager individual resources. Post-modernism has become, ironically, the perfect mirror of a consumer society: there is no history, no continuity, no responsibility - only the childlike fascination with the random minutiae, the "now," and instant gratification. Our work, too, is fragmented. The methodology of the division of labour refined by industrial capitalism has created the mind-numbing assembly-line, repetitive motion disease and "scientific" management. The division of labour has resulted in a mechanical worker and a mechanical citizen who is also fragmented, channeled into one-issue politics and narrow-mindedness, has a short attention span, and lives in total isolation from others - both politically by not taking part in the collective life, and by being socially irresponsible and self-serving.

We could probably reduce the number of hours of work required in our societies by several options: if we choose a highly developed technological approach to work, and eliminated profit, we could reduce the number of hours required to work. We could also eliminate many technological processes. The lower we go on the technology scale, there are, of course, either corresponding increases in labour, or reductions in production/consumption. Anarchists traditionally have opted for a lower level of technology because of its potential to be more compatible with decentralization, of control and its need for lesser amounts of capital.

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There are many aspects of good work that are important to nourishing the individual human spirit and the collective well-being: meaningful work gives us a sense of completion and contributes to self-satisfaction; it also serves to stir the imagination and create intellectual well-being. Labour, on the other hand, is subhuman, it creates an environment of intellectual irresponsibility and unresponsiveness. Its meaningless repetition dulls the spirit, and erodes the mental habits of attentiveness and curiosity.

Good work is ultimately about community, and democracy. Work is most satisfying and fulfilling when it is done for others and in co-operation with others. It is in this setting that the self can most fully realize its potential. For example, art is created to be consumed by the community. Handiwork is designed with an appreciative audience to complete its beauty. The work of making culture/creating social/political community is perhaps the most important work that human beings undertake. Our alienation from all work has consequently contributed, I believe, to our alienation from one another and the "work" of making meaningful and satisfying collective lives. The modern "job" has contributed to the destruction of the community in which human potential is best realized. As people turn off and drop out of the drudgery of what one writer calls "the proletarianization of work," they also drop out of involvement in many things, including political and social community. The alienation from work carries over into alienation from one another. If there is good work to do, to refuse to work is to alienate oneself, to say, I will not participate. As human beings, we have the obligation to contribute, at minimum, to collective survival work.

No. one should have the luxury of refusing to work. To share in this collective survival work is not necessarily oppressive. Doing this for others, for their use, their satisfaction, and knowing and trusting that others will do the same for you is the essence of work. What is oppressive is forced labour, exploited labour, labour which creates goods and services not to enhance social connections, but to be commodified, to exchange. We need a radical restructuring of work, not its abolition. And we need to begin with the question, "what do we do for each - other?" "what is our work?", not just ask each other what we "do," what our individual labour is, how we fit into the system that isolates us. When we are truly invested in our work, we will solve the problems of who will care for the children, feed and clothe us, build our shelters, plant our gardens.

The following concepts are critical for personal empowerment and for political/social involvement in community:

1) Do your work with others. Non-alienated work takes place in a context of interaction with other people. One of the important managerial controls over workers in industrial capitalism, for example, is denying them the right to talk to each other on the job. Participation is critical to the development of meaningful economics and to effective political action. Work should be with and for others. Production has to emerge from the community and return to the community. This is the basis of a new work ethic.

(2) Recognize the need for skill in work. Mechanization of work kills curiosity and the attendant human impulse to become engaged, involved, to strive to be creative.

Mechanization also resists interruption, the worker becomes an observer, an attendant to the machine. Demand meaningful work.

(3) Be in charge of your own actions, in control of your work.

(4) Reclaim through your work a sense of the whole, of the ways in which the parts relate to one another. The division of labour deadens an important political skill - the ability to make connections between means and ends. A different but related problem centers on how a mechanistic world view simplifies our understanding of cause and effect. We almost unconsciously develop a preference for logical, mechanistic explanations, and we become impatient with ambiguity. Our level of frustration is increased markedly in a rigid mechanistic world and we lose our capacity to appreciate and handle subtlety.

(5) Simplify technological processes. According to T. Fulano in a *Fifth Estate* series some years back on anti-technology, technology itself is a system of political control: "The enormous size, complex interconnection and stratification of tasks which make up modern technological systems make authoritarian command necessary and independent, individual decision-making impossible." (1981). Simplification of technological infrastructure would also serve, according to E.F. Schumacher in *Small is Beautiful*, to decentralize political power and control of the worker. Organizational factors of technological infrastructures that centralize power and control include: large size, hierarchy, specialization, standardization of product and simplification of task. The elements of a free, democratic

economy include the structural alternatives of small size, non-hierarchical organization, cooperative work, diversity in tasks and products, and complexity of tasks.

6) Abolish private ownership of the means of production. A new social economics demands a re-examination of the concept of private ownership of the means of production. Despite the fact that some forms of socialism have "failed," we are still left with problems of capitalism that Karl Marx identified over a hundred years ago.

A new approach to global economics must also be developed. The global economy is "here" and we have strategized very little about how to respond to it. To begin with, perhaps, we should demand that survival level wages be granted in every economy. A global guaranteed minimum income would slow the restless movement of capital until means can be put in place to regain control over profit and investment. Value added to labour in any particular labour market should remain in the market in which it was created except to reimburse the creators of economic development for their investment and their labour in creating the factories/jobs. Prices also need to be stabilized worldwide on a scale relative to the comparative value of currencies. Blue-jeans in the United States must cost \$20; in Russia, only \$5, reflecting the relative value of the dollar and the ruble. The cost of all infrastructure required by a particular industry shall be borne entirely by that industry: roads; sewage; power needs; public transportation for workers, etc. Corporate responsibility to communities must be affirmed and institutionalized in law. Capital may be movable, but people generally are not, so special care must be taken when companies

attempt to relocate. All resources contributed to that industry/company by the workers in that community shall remain the property of that community. Companies must find ways to continue jobs in communities. A more compelling reason than profit, a cheaper labour supply or lax environmental regulations must be given before a company is allowed to remove its investment to a new site. Abolish tax increment financing, Require corporations to pay at least 50 percent of profit in taxes. Many of these suggestions are more reform-minded than radical restructuring, but in the absence of any coherent alternatives, *they could be a place to start.*

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