

Unlucky to have a job

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Prospects for social change amidst the culture of work

Culture Change Letter #162 - expanded on June 27, 2007

Introductory note: A recent cross-continental train ride brought forth the thoughts in this essay. I observed and heard workers on and off the rails, and saw settlements and landscapes not quite humming with health, conviviality and equality. I seemed closer to sensing what it is a worker today has really gotten into. Individual overparticipation in false values is mostly a victim's unnecessary plight. I try to expose the lie of the American Dream. Detailed sections include "Energy slaves and the housing bubble = 'wealth'" and "Dealing with the job problem." This essay concludes with comments from Tim Bennet, Dmitry Orlov and Tom Yamaguchi.

Future reports will deal with more dimensions such as the growing abuse of questionable pharmaceutical-petrochemicals. Past articles have focused on sustainable economics and lifestyle change, and these topics will be revisited. - JL

We are conditioned to believe we are lucky to have a job. The belief is understandable as a mistaken and tragic notion, if we consider we are generally raised in ignorance regarding, for example, infinite and universal human potential that is wasted. Society's rulers have their own agendas that aren't necessarily in your or the average person's interest.

There is also major brainwashing for the idea that industrialized, technological society has conquered ignorance. While much information (and misinformation) is well circulated, ignorance of the invasive reach of the dominant culture only grows as we continue to be submerged by materialism, commercial propaganda and manufactured fear. We are losing daily much critical wisdom and information from non-mainstream holdouts, mainly elders whose traditions include wisdom and skills for community self-sufficiency.

All around us much is done to foster a culture of work. It has gone on for thousands of years in much of the world, more strongly as religious piety and family cohesion have waned among modern workers. Formerly these attributes were the highest approved priorities for reasons for living, but they had to make way for bald-faced economic imperatives often cloaked in "freedom." Perhaps when Calvin and his work ethic came along, and as Protestantism got rid of the plethora of uneconomic Catholic holy holidays on behalf of the bourgeoisie, the triumphant connection between maximizing work and social control was historically ratified.

The idea of having a tolerable or even a nice job is to buy into the assumptions and rewards that help whitewash the slavery of working for others. Some forms of work are less unpleasant than others, so it is reasonable to compare one's plight or advantage with those who are held by other jobs. We are told we "hold jobs," but it's more like the jobs hold us. And to get to the root, it is the richest class and their institutions that control, maintain and enforce the worker society.

Evidence for this is in our face, as ostentatious wealth and income-disparity between top dogs and hard working employees are at record levels. The power structure and corporate media condone, reward and celebrate this.

But as soon as the consumer economy falters and lets down the scores of millions who are barely stretching their paychecks from one to the next, we may face a French Revolution sort of backlash against the rich. More likely, reactions and upheaval will be directed especially toward those who "have something," as severe shortages and the toll of deprivation and chaos quickly mount while the corporate economy's distributive system takes a holiday or dissolves. Then people will wonder what all their jobs were for, when they lack survival skills, and people can't get essential services or adequate food from the degraded local ecosystem. Their nice home-appliances, fashionable clothes and furnishings are seen to neither provide nor protect.

Freedom and rights are greatly diminished compared to conditions long ago. It's only getting worse, as the population explosion and greed continue unabated without regard to our children's future. Freedom of the primitive and traditional kind is almost nonexistent where the dominant culture invaded and grew. Yet, to characterize today's industrialized world as a "slave culture," and our cities "work camps," sounds outlandish. We have been told constantly that there has been amazing technological progress, and that there are pleasant, creative and lucrative paths that lead to "freedom" from want and from violation of privacy. It's true one can obtain almost unlimited material things and become safely isolated, but not without working hard and long -- one's whole life -- while remaining limited, excluded or confined.

Work has been sold as a virtue, to the point of terminal illnesses and loss of personal purpose. Let us question the arrangement further, in light of today's changing world:

The worker who takes home the paycheck and typically buys "toys" and has a commute is contributing to global ecocide and corporate domination. It's almost counter-intuitive that a non-worker or welfare recipient is living as the better planetary citizen, even if by happenstance.

Let's also take a moment to promote the lifestyle of being lucky not to have a job. Instead of simply being rich enough not to have to work, there exists a more conscious and adventurous way of living that maximizes community and relationships, thereby sharing, enjoying mutual support, and growing "spiritually." Such a person may be the activist, artist, healer, and the determined non-taxpayer -- all of whom may succeed in living closer to nature than the herd of downtrodden consumers who are assumed stuck in their urban and suburban treadmills.

Workers are actually

trying to obtain basics that were always naturally free -- safe food, clean water, and materials for shelter and clothing right from the Earth. Additionally, workers are trading dollars and losing wealth when many could be bartering to get most items and services they need.

Some say they love their work, but these must be mostly people who have done little in the vast world they have scarcely seen. Then there is the great number of jobs in the huge category of "someone has to do it." Is it really so, or are people pushed and misled?

See my daddy in bed he's dyin'

See his head it's turnin' grey

He's been workin' and slavin' his life away

- The Animals' song, We Gotta Get Out of This Place, 1966

It's understandable that in any country of private property and/or state control, where accessible open space is almost nonexistent, a worker would want a "box" to call home, to emulate what everyone else seems to have. A hope for happiness and security is promised by the box and the grid of boxes and technology known as a city or town. The reality, however, is also stifling and conducive to disease, insanity and despair. One can raise a family in such conditions, and we are all familiar with the sugar-coating of the stereotype households depicted on television. Novels tell a more honest story oftentimes, as pain, abuse and chaos -- and a measure of freedom for those who rebel and take risks -- are recounted. The strain of debt such as mortgage is part of the reality that is almost always aspired to, and is central to the unspoken oppression of materialist society. We are made to feel lucky to be full participants in a swindle, as pristine nature and the commons disappear.

This radical critique, or "negative" social analysis is abhorrent to those who want to remain in their mental bubble and lack the guts to challenge society or change their lives. Many comfort themselves by emphasizing the good and the kind instances in everyday life -- under the thumb of dominant industrial slave culture.

Love does exist under these conditions, and people seek it for nourishment as they are handicapped by oppression, ignorance and fear. Nurturing children and sacrificing for them through working to the breaking point is a touching form of love, but it is hyped as the only way or the best way. Often, though, family cohesion fails anyway, as manifested by individualism or predatory behavior within families in today's private-property system that legitimizes greed.

The dutiful worker who does all the right things usually finds him- or herself more isolated and lonely than less work-oriented members of the same family. When one masters the games and rigmarole of daily striving, without a basis of land-connection or strong community, the time spent alone or set "above" the average person (who's working less) increases. Ironically, a disabled person may find more companionship, love and leisure than the hard worker, although perhaps from only a small circle of people who work comparatively little and have "extra time."

Controlling the workers and the population

Religion and military subculture, as well as academia and corporate subculture, are quite useful for trying to control the mass of ignorant slaves who want to believe they are free. When these institutions do not function to control a given individual, there remain the powerful institutions of prison and/or medical-psychiatric tyranny. One way to skirt unpleasantness by oneself is the dead end of addictions that can be kept just short of ruinous.

Work as liberation is a clever sham. Co-opting women's lib (now known as feminism), capitalists were only too happy to have an expanding work force to hold down wages. High levels of immigration mandated by Congress are similarly

intended to dilute collective bargaining, along with keeping the numbers of consumers ever growing for buying corporate products. And the women entering the job market, especially in the 1970s, onward found they soon lost the option of staying home with their children: bills had to be paid, and a household with only one worker found it hard to compete with over-working households and cover the rent or mortgage, the kids' college costs, rising food prices, etc.

A child in the work culture is asked, "What do you want to be?" rather than "What do you want to do?" or "Where do you want to go?" The brainwashing to become some kind of worker starts young and never stops. When a teenager is trapped in school, the idea of a job is appealing, unless a better alternative such as starving musician or rock star grabs the imagination. Back in the late sixties and early '70s, idealism was common enough that many aspired to live on communes, end the Vietnam War and smash the state, for example.

Such ideas are dangerous to the property class, so it is no mere coincidence that the worker's lot is meant to be busy. Being busy all one's waking hours is handy for distracting the workers and boosting profitable production. Capitalists and war mongers want no congealing of popular sentiment to figure out alternatives to exploitation of people and the environment, nor to give a chance for the "little people" explore the way to peace instead of the state's ongoing military aggression on behalf of the megacorporations.

When people are too busy with work and too tired to go to town hall meetings to discuss issues, this allows greedy oppressors to continue operations uninterrupted. But repressing people and their concerns and needs can result in street demonstrations and other kinds of protest, or even a revolution. The rebel leaders are people who somehow don't have to work much for "the man" or have a "regular job."

Workers are also kept busy by physical and psychological tools and tricks. For example, a worker needs to relax after a day or a week of toil. So on goes the television, or drinks at the bar. And, to keep people from discussing the real situation that capitalists and politicians try to keep going as quietly as possible, phony issues and fear can be conjured up.

Examples of these range from the corporate media coverage of sexy celebrities, or the weightier issues of "enemies on Homeland soil" or resistance fighters in their own countries who dare to fight for their own homeland. The War on Terror has been a useful distraction to keep the U.S. population in line and keep them fed gasoline from the Middle East.

Considering the possible 200,000 civilians killed so far by U.S. bombs and other means in Iraq and Afghanistan, the term "War of Terror" would make more sense than War on Terror. Besides, one cannot have a war of a method of fighting or way of talking. The inevitable violent resistance to the U.S. invasions and occupation is carried out with terror, to be sure, But, as the Algerian rebel prisoner told the French news corps in the movie *The Battle of Algiers*, when he was asked how he can justify bombings in the European quarter, his side would have been happy to trade its hand-made bombs for some of his enemies' jet bombers and napalm.

A revolution can also be a distraction to the task of discussing people's relationship to employment. In the heat of fighting for survival or for justice, how can people raise issues of not wanting to spend their lives serving others (including a dictatorship of the proletariat)? The unimaginative Marxist may be content to have workers seize and maintain the means of production, but what if the work is still stifling and dangerous, or destructive for the environment?

Some workers are decidedly non-revolutionary and would rather suck up to power. They believe their "betters" can help them personally and possibly include them in their class. This temptation and aspiration is the best way for workers to be controlled. [Other means of control include pollutants and substances that affect the brain, as discussed in Culture Change Letter # 45, December 2, 2003: "Brain control of the masses via pollutants"]

Energy slaves and the housing bubble = "wealth"

The working class person, and just about everyone in the modern world, actually has slaves in the form of energy used. These "slaves" can be expressed in calories, horsepower, kilowatts, etc, and are rapidly getting more expensive and less abundant. Cheap petroleum by the middle of the 20th century allowed the average modern worker to live much like the rich actual-slave-owning masters had been living.

- A modern person's energy consumption is equivalent to having about 60 to 100 energy slaves, if one is a European, and typically 120 to perhaps 200 slaves if one is North American. At the low end of calculation, this energy-work takes care of such business as heating houses and offices and carrying us to and from work or the mall. The biggest component is in transportation. The average human around the world has 20 virtual slaves for energy...

- A single flight in Europe for one passenger represents as much energy as 6 pairs of legs bicycling over a full year... A small moped uses the equivalent of 15 to 20 human beings bicycling...(Jancovici)
- However, providing humans with food, clothing, and shelter requires many times more energy than just the calorie value of the food we eat. And due to the inefficiency of the human body in turning food energy into muscle work, the energy requirements of human beings are even higher.

- During a one-hour car commute, the energy for a 30-miles-per-gallon car works out to 360 virtual people moving the car. Because car engines are about 25-percent efficient, only about 90 virtual people keep the car moving while all the rest of them fly uselessly out the tail pipe. All this energy can be for just the driver and no passengers, or one can say half of all this energy is needed if two people are sharing it in the car...

- "This does not include the number of coal- and oil-eating virtual people it takes to dig rocks from the ground and pull the iron and aluminum and other materials from them, which are then shaped by yet other virtual people into cars, airplanes, computers, cell phones, Ipod Nanos, houses, highways, etc., etc., -- and each American's indeterminate share of virtual people who move the American army to the other side of the earth, and so on"... (Burruss)

Middle-class affluence in the 20th century featured much material wealth and little need for physical exertion. For decades this seemed like completely positive and good. It was lauded by society because so many people were making money off the fact that people were not getting enough exercise and gave up their own power in more ways than one.

With the steady decline in cheap petroleum supply, with rising energy prices -- prices subsidized to appear lower than they are -- workers have had to work much harder and longer and take on a second or third job. Women can hardly stay home anymore to be housewives and attentive mothers. This is even less possible when formerly "free work" from elders in the family has disappeared, as they've stopped living in the same household as their children and grandchildren live, in favor of nursing homes or retirement homes.

The loss of cheap energy for the consumer lifestyle has partly been made up for by the housing bubble. It has enabled the upper economic tier of workers to borrow on their "ever more valuable" homes to increase spending and thus emulate the rich.

In this fashion, the home has tended to become more of a center of wealth, investment and speculation than the haven of infinite security and love for all members of a family that the home always was. The home has become for scores of millions of people a mere place to sleep and stash their stuff, due in part to work pressures and the all-importance of jobs. The perceived need to work has grown in the post-cheap oil era, such that families enjoy less time together than ever before. In addition to working longer hours and extra jobs, families are separated also in their own homes by technological entertainment and "office" devices. Households were already beset by homework and sports practice that, while catering to and fostering competition, formally extended the public-school intrusion into family time.

Public school was originally patterned after prisons over a century ago in the U.S. northeast, as the city fathers strove to condition children to respond to bells, orders, respect for authority in the form of strangers -- all to produce useful, obedient factory workers. Prisons were and are work farms, thus being bastions of slavery.

The typical working and housing conditions today that get media attention, such as the suburban dwellers who want a little more time for themselves and loved ones, and who are willing to make a little less money, are for the fortunate workers; poorer people and immigrants work for the lowest wages and without "benefits." The mass of workers including executives are increasingly likely to be automatons who do not think freely or responsibly. They usually do not want to learn about their jobs anything "unnecessary," such as larger issues even if relevant to their jobs. An example is retail workers' (and up the line to distribution and manufacturing sectors) not being aware of the toxicity of the products they sell or serve to the public (e.g., bisphenol-A in cans of food and bottle/jar caps). When informed of such issues, such workers are disposed to just shrug and keep foisting off poison to the public. This is much like the reluctance or resistance to recycle if procedures are not in place.

Unions have done little to protect their members that might rock the boat of complicity with manufacturers, and are famous for opposing fuel-economy standards for cars, for example. Unions have served people well under the dominant system, but have been weakened to the point of barely holding the line on pay levels, at best. If one is questioning work and jobs to arrive at a sustainable and healthful way of life, it doesn't make sense to entrust this to union leaders who may be too compromised in keeping the status quo. When was the last time you heard of a general strike in the U.S. to fight for the improvement of all working people, such as to deliver them from costly militarism and environmental/public health onslaughts posed by the bosses of society? It's not as if there is an opposition party fighting the government or the corporate state to make real change.

Dealing with the job problem

By this point the reader tending toward the mainstream might cry, "Enough! Even if I agree somewhat, what can I do?" If the question is insincere, the implication is that there is nothing one can do. Disempowered workers who have little stomach to organize and strike have been well taught to let experts or activists deal with vexing problems. And what passes for rebellion is often the false example of the rock star or other entertainment celebrity. Churches and religions are more likely to prop up the status quo than to challenge it.

How can people survive without jobs, i.e., employment under capitalists or government agencies? How will people eat if they don't assume the role of worker? These are valid questions, but they are almost always asked only rhetorically. This essay is not an attempt to flesh out an alternative economic system. But we can recognize that people can and will self-organize in response to sudden need, perhaps as tribes. In fact, this has begun, and is about to accelerate because of clear need and desperation.

To offer a way out of slave culture and the box existence is a daunting task. It would be easy to advocate rebellion such as violent acts against figurative pigs whose society ensures they are allowed to own vast wealth, while suffering and deprivation rage on. However, such a solution has limited appeal or rational basis, if we consider that bloodshed and the taking of lives is exactly what must be eradicated, and is what the state was founded upon and relies upon.

The solution, then, would appear to reside in creating or joining an alternative to the slave society and box living. Self-interest is already fueling a change in attitude about lifestyle, as peak oil and climate change nudge some of us to look to a sustainable, alternative location that offers lower population. Aside from "getting out of Dodge," this change is commonly made by the individual on selected levels, such as an artist's use of tools and skills to portray truth and sensitivity in a time of deception and delusion.

Communes or intentional communities may be the only way of extricating oneself from the grind of working for others. In such communities, or even small, urban collectives of do-it-yourselfers or anarchists, mutual aid and support of one another's dreams, talents and needs can prevail. If not, these communities and households tend to break up, especially when the allure of high-paying jobs and urban diversions can still tempt us. Material advantage or mutual defense alone are attractions that, if emphasized at an intentional community or urban collective, differ little from the coldness of slave box society.

To advocate an alternative in the alleged Real World of material struggles as isolated individuals is to meet derision and dismissal. If the alternative is not easily dismissed, it is met with fear or threats. "If everyone did what you suggest, order would break down. We must run the machinery, keep the peace with a police force, update our military, build more schools, fix the roads, expand the prisons..." Some more extreme citizens would add, "Promote public prayer, destroy possible terrorists, pursue technologies to keep up today's level of consumption and communication and travel..."

To allow present society and the global economy to collapse is not a sane option in the minds of both die-hard reactionary conservatives and compassionate liberals. To advocate a sooner-rather-than-later end to the present arrangement of slave box culture raises concern over a worse successor -- this illustrates how fear can keep the status quo. However, when the present system is only generating more fear, because the global warming machinery and rabid militarism raise deep criticism and panic, today's practices of convenience and affluence are finally questioned and attacked by people from all walks of life and political parties.

The fact remains that present society is unable or unwilling to change course ecologically or for social justice. This helps assure that collapse is inevitable due to overpopulation and the imminent end of growth through nonrenewable resource depletion -- especially petroleum.

Our choice as individuals and as a people is to begin "alternative" living and build a sustainable culture, or wait for collapse. Direct opposition to society's visible head, such as government or the occupying U.S. military, does not apply or occur to present successful consumers/slaves. A third route is to undermine the present economy by only buying local goods, and resisting materialism and the institutions of private property, patriarchy and illegitimate authority.

"We are free roving bovines, we run free today. We will fight for bovine freedom and hold our large heads high. We will run free with the buffalo or die." - Dana Lyons, Cows with Guns

To end on a facetious note may honor exactly what we need in our so very "advanced" world that lacks, some of us notice, enough art, laughter, song and dance.

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Relevant to this essay, Tim Bennet, writer and director of What a Way to Go - Life at the End of Empire, wrote to us on June 15 in reaction to the previous Culture Change Letter on Ancient Innovations:

Most mainstreamers seem to stumble vaguely through life, holding onto the story that "this is good." When you point out to them that, no, in fact, this really sucks, for most of the people on the planet, and most of the other life forms, and, in fact, when you look at jobs and wage slavery and mental health statistics and physical health statistics and drugs and addictions and war and boredom and community

and relationships and divorce and abuse and all of that, you see that most of the people living comfortable lives right in the heart of empire aren't happy or whole either, they get angry and say stupid things like "you want us to go back to the stone age?"

...when they hear about collapse, (they) respond with some version of "that can't be." And when you question them about that, they admit, "it can't be because I don't want it to be." -- as if civilization is so good for them, they are so comfortable, that it can't collapse because it doesn't fit in with their plans! An astounding notion if ever there was one...

I'm hoping, they say.

For what, I ask.

For this to keep going, they respond in some way.

Sorry, I say. You can't have that.

Impossible!

Tim's powerful documentary, produced by Sally Erickson, was reviewed in Culture Change Letter #159:

culturechange.org/cms

Dmitry Orlov reviewed a draft of this essay, and commented,

Let's not exclude the possibility of a few excellent jobs out there, that anyone would be lucky to have. Such a job must:

- Take little or no time
- Pay quite a lot of money
- Undermine the system

Rather than advocating voluntary unemployment, I would prefer it if people tried to find or create jobs that fit the above criteria. You may say that it's too difficult, and that few people would succeed. But then, if everybody did it... we'd be living on a different planet, and I wouldn't be writing this, so it's a moot point.

-Dmitry

Tom Yamaguchi, a Culture Change volunteer, added:

The first on my mind is health care and how many of us are at financial risk because our jobs do not include health insurance. Another is values: Finding employment that is consistent with my values and ethics is a challenge. How much am I willing to compromise my values to make money? Should I take a job for an environmental agency if that job forces me to drive a car or fly to business conferences? How much money is enough?

We certainly need housing, food, medical care, clothing, transportation, etc. We also need to save enough for the years when we are too old to work. The irony is that we earn money in the quest for freedom and independence. As you point out, we become enslaved by our pursuit of financial wealth. We are slaves to our jobs, our houses, our insurance companies, etc.

After working with homeless people for over a decade, I would not trade what I have now for that type of life. I do see a world where we share more and, as individuals, own less. I would like to create a world where that is happening because I know that is where true happiness lies.

We believe that the more independence we have, the happier we are. In fact, as we become more self-centered and separated from others, we feel alienated and end up being unhappy.

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References:

"How much of a slave master am I?" by Jean-Marc Jancovici, August 2005:

manicore.com

"100-Watt Virtual People", by RAP Burruss, December 2005:

esva.net

Dana Lyons' song Cows With Guns:

cowswithguns.com

Note on the low number of references for this Culture Change essay:

Not many of the thoughts for Unlucky To Have A Job are totally original, but pinpointing their first appearance in books or other media of expression would be difficult. I have come to understand and retain much of what I know from many years of reading, listening and realizing. Some publications from Culture Change's 19 years have become sources in themselves, with Culture Change cited. For further background I suggest reading other essays in Culture Change, in this website's Main Menu (News/Essays, Archive Essays, and Magazine Archives), where you can see references and links to others' fine works. - JL