

READINGS

[Essay]

THE LANGUAGE OF WORK

By Mark Kingwell, from the introduction to *The Wage Slave's Glossary*, by Joshua Glenn, out next month from *Biblioasis*. Kingwell, a contributing editor of *Harper's Magazine*, teaches philosophy at the University of Toronto. His review "Ways of Not Seeing" appeared in the November 2009 issue.

The Great Recession of 2008 proved every anticapitalist critic right. The system was bloated and spectral, borrowing on its borrowing, insuring its insurance, and skimming profit on every transaction. The FIRE sector—finance, insurance, real estate—had created the worst market bubble since the South Sea Company's 1720 collapse, and nobody should have been surprised when that latest party balloon of capital burst. And yet everybody was. Since then, new awareness of the system's untenability has changed nothing. The role of gainful occupation in establishing or maintaining biological survival, social position, and, especially in American society, personal identity is undiminished.

Capitalism is probably beyond large-scale change, but we should not waste this opportunity to interrogate its most fundamental idea: work. The values of work are still dominant in far too much of life; indeed, these values have exercised their own kind of linguistic genius, creating a host of phrases, terms, and labels that bolster, rather than challenge, the dominance of work. This vocabulary naturalizes and so makes

invisible some of the very dubious, if not evil, assumptions of the work idea. This is all the more true when economic times are bad, since work then becomes itself a scarce commodity. That makes people anxious, and the anxiety is taken up by work: *Don't fire me! I don't want to be out of work!* Work looms larger than ever, the assumed natural condition whose "loss" makes the non-working individual by definition a loser.

No matter what the inevitabilists say, resistance to work is not futile. It may not overthrow capitalism, but it does highlight essential things about our predicament—philosophy's job always. In his 1932 essay "In Praise of Idleness," Bertrand Russell usefully defines work this way:

Work is of two kinds: first, altering the position of matter at or near the earth's surface relatively to other such matter; second, telling other people to do so. The first kind is unpleasant and ill paid; the second is pleasant and highly paid.

Russell goes on to note that "the second kind is capable of indefinite extension: there are not only those who give orders, but those who give advice as to what orders should be given." This second-order advice is what is meant by *bureaucracy*; and if two opposite kinds of advice are given at the same time, then it is known as *politics*. Russell, however, appears to miss one crucial aspect: The greatest work of work is to disguise its essential nature. The grim ironists of the Third Reich were exceptionally forthright when they fixed the maxim *Arbeit macht frei*—Work Shall Make You Free—over the gates at Dachau and Auschwitz. We can only conclude that this was their idea of a sick joke, and that

their ideological commitments were not with work at all but with despair and extermination.

The real ideologists of work—especially those of office work—are never so transparent, nor so wry. But they are clever, because their genius is, in effect, to fix a different maxim over the whole of the world: Work is fun! Or, pushing the point to its logical conclusion, *It's not work if it doesn't feel like work*. And so celebrated workaholics excuse themselves from what is in fact an addiction, and in the same stroke implicate everyone else for not working hard enough. “Work is the grand cure of all the maladies and miseries that ever beset mankind,” said that barrel of fun Thomas Carlyle. “Nothing is really work unless you would rather be doing something else,” added J. M. Barrie. And even the apparently insouciant Noel Coward argued that “work is much more fun than fun.” Really? Perhaps he meant to say, “What most people consider fun.” But still. Claims like these just lay groundwork for the *Fast Company* work/play maneuver of the 1990s and the current, more honest compete-or-die productivity language.

Work deploys a network of techniques and effects that make it seem inevitable and, where possible, pleasurable. Central among these effects is the diffusion of responsibility for the baseline need to work: everyone accepts, because everyone knows, that everyone must have a job. Bosses as much as subordinates are slaves to the larger servomechanisms of work. In effect, work is the largest self-regulation system the universe has so far manufactured, subjecting each of us to a panopticon under which we dare not do anything but work, or at least seem to be working, lest we fall prey to a disapproval all the more powerful for its obscurity. The work idea functions in the same manner as a visible surveillance camera, which need not even be hooked up to anything. No, let's go further: there need not even be a camera. Like the prisoners in the perfected version of Bentham's utilitarian jail, workers need no overseer *because they watch themselves*. When we submit to work, we are guard and guarded at once.

What is less clear is why we put up with this demand-structure of a workplace, why we don't resist more robustly. As Max Weber noted in his analysis of leadership under capitalism, any ideology must, if it is to succeed, give people reasons to act. It must offer a narrative of identity to those caught within its ambit, otherwise they will not continue to perform, and renew, its reality. As with most truly successful ideologies, the work idea latches on to a very basic feature of human existence: our character as social animals forever competing for relative advantage.

The most basic material conditions of work—office size and position, number of windows, attractiveness of assistant, cut of suit—are simulta-

neously the rewards *and* the ongoing indicators of status within this competition. Meanwhile, the competition sustains itself backward via credentialism: the accumulation of degrees and certificates from prestigious schools and universities that, though often substantively unrelated to the work at hand, indicate appropriate grooming. These back-formations confirm the necessary feeling that a status outcome is *earned*, not merely conferred. The narrative of merit encourages the false idea that such status is married to intrinsic qualities of the individual. In reality, the status is a kind of collective delusion, not unlike the one that sustains money, another key narrative of the system.

The routine collection of credentials, promotions, and employee-of-the-month honors in exchange for company loyalty masks a deeper existential conundrum—which is precisely what it is meant to do. Consider: It is an axiom of status anxiety that the competition for position has no end—save, temporarily, when a scapegoat is found. The scapegoat reaffirms everyone's status, however uneven, because he is beneath all. Hence many work narratives are miniature blame-quests. We come together as a company to fix guilt on one of our number, who is then publicly shamed and expelled. Jones filed a report filled with errors! Smith placed an absurdly large order and the company is taking a bath! This makes us all feel better and enhances our sense of mission, even if it produces nothing other than its own spectacle.

Blame-quests work admirably at their small scale. At larger scales, the narrative task is harder. What is the company for? What does it do? Here, as when a person confronts mortality, we teeter on the edge of the abyss. The company doesn't actually do much of anything. It is not for anything important. The restless forward movement of companies—here at CompuGlobalHyperMegaNet, we are always *moving on*—is work's version of the Hegelian Bad Infinite, the meaningless nothing of empty everything. There is no point to what is being done, but it must be done anyway. The boredom of the average worker, especially in a large corporation, is the walking illustration of this meaninglessness. But boredom can lower productivity, so a large part of work's energy is expended in finding ways to palliate the boredom in order to raise productivity. Workaholicism is the narcotic version of this, executed within the individual himself. The workaholic colonizes his own despair at the perceived emptiness of life—its non-productivity—by filling it in with work.

It can be no surprise that the most searching critic of work, Karl Marx, perceived this Hegelian abyss. But Marx's theory of alienated labor, according to which our efforts and eventually ourselves become commodities bought and sold



Back, a painting by Mary Henderson, was on view last month at Lyons Wier Gallery, in New York City.

for profit to others, is just one note in a sustained chorus of opposition and resistance to work. “Never work,” the Situationist Guy Debord commanded, articulating the baseline of opposition. Another Situationist slogan, the famous graffiti of May 1968, reminded us that the order and hardness of the urban infrastructure masked a playful, open-ended sense of possibility that was even more fundamental: *SOUS LES PAVÉS, LA PLAGE!* Under the paving stones, the beach!

We might wonder why such resistance is recurrently necessary and also why it seems always to fail. The answer lies in the evolutionary fact that reliable communication vastly expands the range of human possibility. Language acquisition is crucial to our evolutionary success because it aids highly complex coordination of action. But that same success hinges also on the misdirection, deception, control, and happy illusion carried out by language, because these too make for coordinated action. Thus this upgrade of language is at the same time a downgrade: language allows us to distinguish between appearance and reality, but it also allows some of us to persuade others that appearances are realities.

Jargon, slogans, euphemisms, and terms of art are all weapons in the upgrade/downgrade tradi-

tion. We might class them together under the technical term *bullshit*, set out by philosopher Harry Frankfurt. The routine refusal to speak with regard to the truth is called bullshit because evasion of normativity—correctness being, after all, a standard external to one’s personal desires—produces a kind of ordure, a dissemination of garbage, the scattering of shit. This is why, Frankfurt argues, bullshit is far more threatening, and politically evil, than lying. The bullshitter “does not reject the authority of the truth, as the liar does, and oppose himself to it. He pays no attention to it at all. By virtue of this, bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are.”

Work language is full of bullshit. The victory of work bullshit is that, in addition to having no regard for the truth, it passes itself off as innocuous or even beneficial. Especially in clever hands, the controlling elements of work are repackaged as liberatory, counter-cultural, subversive: you’re a skatepunk rebel because you work seventy hours a week beta-testing videogames. This, we might say, is meta-bullshit. And despite what philosophers might assert, or wish, this meta-bullshit, and not truth, is the norm governing most coordinated human activity under conditions of capital markets. Thus does bullshit meet, and

become, filthy lucre; and of course, vice versa.

As the work idea works itself out in language, we observe a series of linked paradoxes: imprisonment via inclusion; denigration via celebration; obfuscation via explanation; conformity via distinction; failure via success; obedience via freedom; authority via breezy coolness. The manager is positioned as an intellectual, a visionary, even

a genius. “Creatives” are warehoused and petted. Demographics are labeled, products are categorized. Catch-phrases, acronyms, proverbs, clichés, and sports metaphors are marshaled and deployed. Diffusion of sense through needless complexity, diffusion of responsibility through passive constructions, and elaborate celebration of minor achievements mark the language of work.

And so: Outsourcing. Repositioning. Downsizing. Rebranding. Work the mission statement. Push the envelope. Think outside the box. Stay in the loop. See the forest *and* the trees. Casual Fridays! Smartwork! Hotdesking! The whole nine yards! You-topia! These shopworn work-idea locutions have already been exposed, and mocked, such that we may think we know our enemy all too well. But the upgrade/downgrade is infinitely inventive.

The solution to a language problem may at first appear to be a language solution. The very same inventiveness that marks the ideology of work can be met with a wry counterintelligence. Witness such portmanteau puns as “slacktivism” or “CrackBerry,” which mock, respectively, people who think that blogging is a form of political action and those who are in thrall to text and email messages the way some people are addicted to crack cocaine. Or observe the high linguistic style of office-bound protagonists from Douglas Coupland’s *Generation X* (1991) to Joshua Ferris’s *Then We Came to the End* (2007) and Ed Park’s *Personal Days* (2008).

These books are hilarious, and laughter is always a release. But their humor is a sign of doom, not liberation. The “veal-fattening pen” label applied to those carpet-sided cubicles of the open-form office (Coupland) does nothing to change the facts of the office. Nor does calling office-mateyness an “air family” (Coupland again) make the false camaraderie any less dispiriting. Indeed, the laughs render the facts more palatable by mixing diversion into the scene of domination—a willing capitulation, consumed under the false sign of resistance. This applies to most of what we call slacking, a term that has been with us since at least 1530, when Jehan Palsgrave asked of a task-shirking friend, “Whye slacke you your busynesse thus?”

Slacking is consistent with the work idea; it does not subvert it, but merely gives in by means of evasion. As John Kenneth Galbraith pointed out in *The Affluent Society* (1958), such evasion is actually the pinnacle of corporate life:

Indeed, it is possible that the ancient art of evading work has been carried in our time to its highest level of sophistication, not to say elegance. One should not suppose that it is an accomplishment of any particular class, occupation, or profession. Apart from the universities where its

[Guidelines]

WHAT KNOT TO WEAR

From a forty-three-page dress code given to employees of Swiss bank UBS last year. Translated from the French by Anthony Lydgate.

In general, a blouse is worn with a jacket.

When it gets very hot and you have received approval from your immediate superior, you may wear just a blouse with pants or skirt.

The scarf must always be folded and tied with the knot oriented not down but, as much as possible, up and to the left.

Under no circumstances should the point of your tie enter your pants.

To improve your comfort, you may use “Party-Feet” silicone inserts, for example when you walk on hard surfaces.

Allow your shoes a respite equivalent to twice the time of their use.

The wearing of ultra-trendy glasses is not allowed. Also see to it that your jewelry matches the metallic color of your frames.

A man who wears a watch conveys reliability and a great concern for punctuality.

Light day makeup composed of foundation, mascara, and discreet lipstick goes well with the dress code and will highlight your personality.

The skin being our primary item of clothing, we recommend that you protect it by applying a nourishing, soothing cream.

Never massage an area where you have applied perfume, as this can destroy its molecules.

Studies have shown that a stylish, immaculate haircut considerably raises individuals’ likability.

Every little hair that grows on the body has a function. The eyebrows protect the eyes from sweat and the eyelashes keep out dust and little insects. Stray facial hairs, however, upset one’s overall look and ought to be avoided.

Never wear shoes that are too small for you: there’s nothing worse than a pinched smile.

practice has the standing of a scholarly rite, the art of genteel and elaborately concealed idleness may well reach its highest development in the upper executive reaches of the modern corporation.

Galbraith's "idleness" is not to be confused with genuine idling, of course. Genuine idling is never an evasion of work; it is instead, as Aristotle argued long ago, cultivation of the most divine element in us through the exercise of leisure: spirited but serious reflection on who we are and what we are up to, free from the base demands of mere usefulness. A slacking executive is no better, and also no worse, than the lowliest clerk hiding in the mail-room to avoid a meeting. But neither the executive nor the clerk is idling, an activity that calls for openness and joy.

And so here we confront again the Bad Infinite at the heart of work. What is it for? To produce desired goods and services. But these goods and services are, increasingly, the ones needed to maintain the system itself. The product of the work system is work, and specters such as profit and growth are covers for the disheartening fact that, in Galbraith's words, "as a society becomes increasingly affluent, wants are increasingly created by the process by which they are satisfied." Which is only to echo Herbert Marcuse's and Hannah Arendt's well-known aperçus that the basic creation of capitalism is *superfluity*—with the additional insight that capitalism must then create the demand to take up such superfluity. Galbraith nails the contradiction: "But the case cannot stand if it is the process of satisfying wants that creates the wants. For then the individual who urges the importance of production to satisfy these wants is precisely in the position of the onlooker who applauds the efforts of the squirrel to keep abreast of the wheel that is propelled by his own efforts."

Still, all is not lost. There is a gift in the excess that the economy of work is constantly generating. Indeed, that gift is the growing awareness that there is always a gift economy operating beneath, or beyond, the exchange economy. Any market economy is a failed attempt to distribute goods and services exactly where they are needed or desired, as and when they are needed and desired. If we had a perfect market, idling would be the norm, not the exception, because distribution would be frictionless. As Marcuse saw decades ago, most work is the result of inefficiency, not genuine need. Idling is, indeed, entirely consistent with capitalism's own internal logic—which logic of course implies, even if it never realizes, the end of capitalism. This insight turns the Bad Infinite of work into a Good Infinite, where we may begin to see things not as resources, ourselves not as consumers, and the world as a site not of work but of play.

[Schadenfreude]

EXIT, PURSUED BY A BEAR

From the script for a skit performed by Washington Mutual employees at a 2007 corporate retreat in Kauai, Hawaii, released last year by the U.S. Senate, which was investigating the company's 2008 collapse. In April, the Senate published a report on the financial crisis, using Washington Mutual as a case study. Countrywide, formerly the country's leading independent mortgage lender, with assets totaling \$200 billion, was sold to Bank of America in 2008 for \$2.8 billion.

DAVID: [Brings a note out to the podium.]

JOHN: [Reads the note silently and appears serious.]

We have just received very sad news about one of our competitors. Ladies and gentlemen, I'm sorry for this departure from our agenda, but here is David to share the details.

[Upbeat intro music]

DAVID: Please, not now. That's the wrong feel for this moment. [Music: dirge-like funeral march]

That's better, thank you. Brothers and sisters of the home-loans fraternity, it is my sad responsibility on this otherwise joyous occasion to be the bearer of tragic news. For this day, we have lost one of the true legends in our industry.

[A coffin imprinted with large Countrywide logos is slowly carried onto the stage by four pallbearers.]

DAVID: So many of us warned the dearly departed about the risky—some may say reckless—behavior they engaged in. Throwing money around like Paris Hilton and selling products they didn't really know or understand. But still, their demise takes us by surprise. I guess we should have suspected something when we heard they had their Option ARM amputated. They just couldn't stop the bleeding. And while it is true that when you dance with the Devil you have to expect to get burned, we are indeed sorry that it will be flames for eternity for them. Even while they danced the funky chicken on the very edge of the cliff, we always cared about them because—well, we hired so many of their best people to work for us. [Smiles] Yet, if we look hard enough, we can see the good that also comes from their departure.

[Music: "Na na na/ na na na na/ hey, hey, hey,/ goodbye."]

DAVID: First off, their pain has finally ended, and that's a good thing. Now borrowers across the nation will all be better served with Simpler Banking and More Smiles! And some *really* scary and dangerous people won't be on the street anymore. All of a