

“It is work that keeps the whole miserabilist system going. Without work, the death-dealing juggernaut that proclaims itself the “free market” would grind to a halt. “Free market” means freedom for Capital, and unfreedom for those who work. Until the problem of work is solved — that is, until work is abolished — all other problems will not only remain, but will keep getting worse...In a world too busy to live, work itself has become toxic, a form of “digging your own grave’.”

“So in order to put an end to one’s slavery, to move beyond the limits of merely getting by, it is necessary to make a decision to refuse to submit; it is necessary to begin to reappropriate one’s life here and now. Such a project inevitably places one in conflict with the entire social order of work; so the project of reappropriating one’s existence must also be the project of destroying work...This is the world we must destroy in the process of taking back our lives, and the necessity of this destruction makes the project of the reappropriation of our lives one with the projects of insurrection and social revolution.”

“Because there is no common positive project to be found in our condition as proletarians — as the exploited and dispossessed — our project must be the struggle to destroy our proletarian condition, to put an end to our dispossession. The essence of what we have lost is not control over the means of production or of material wealth; it is our lives themselves, our capacity to create our existence in terms of our own needs and desires. Thus, our struggle finds its terrain everywhere, at all times. Our aim is to destroy everything that keeps our lives from us: capital, the state, the industrial and post-industrial technological apparatus, work, sacrifice, ideology, every organization that tries to usurp our struggle, in short, all systems of control.”

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# ***3 ESSAYS AGAINST WORK AND THE DEPRIVATION OF LIFE***



of moving beyond these categories to the point that our differences (including those that this society would define in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, etc.) are the reflection of each of us as singular individuals.

Because there is no common *positive* project to be found in our condition as proletarians — as the exploited and dispossessed — our project must be the struggle to destroy our proletarian condition, to put an end to our dispossession. The essence of what we have lost is not control over the means of production or of material wealth; it is our lives themselves, our capacity to create our existence in terms of our own needs and desires. Thus, our struggle finds its terrain everywhere, at all times. Our aim is to destroy everything that keeps our lives from us: capital, the state, the industrial and post-industrial technological apparatus, work, sacrifice, ideology, every organization that tries to usurp our struggle, in short, all systems of control.

In the very process of carrying out this struggle in the only way that we can carry it out — outside of and against all formality and institutionalization — we begin to develop new ways of relating based on self-organization, a commonality based on the unique differences that define each of us as individuals whose freedom expands with the freedom of the other. It is here in revolt against our proletarian condition that we find that shared positive project that is different for each one of us: the collective struggle for individual realization.



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inhabitants of these shantytowns are compelled to form a black market economy to survive, but this also still serves the interests of capital. Others, in desperation, choose immigration, risking imprisonment in refugee camps and centers for undocumented foreigners in the hope of improving their condition.

So, along with dispossession, precariousness and expendability are increasingly the shared traits of those who make up the exploited class worldwide. If, on the one hand, this means that this commodity civilization is creating in its midst a class of barbarians who truly have nothing to lose in bringing it down (and not in the ways imagined by the old workerist ideologues), on the other hand, these traits do not in themselves provide any basis for a positive project of the transformation of life. The rage provoked by the miserable conditions of life that this society imposes can easily be channeled into projects that serve the ruling order or at least the specific interest of one or another of the rulers. The examples of situations in the past few decades in which the rage of the exploited has been harnessed to fuel nationalist, racist or religious projects that serve only to reinforce domination are too many to count. The possibility of the end of the current social order is as great as it ever was, but the faith in its inevitability can no longer pretend to have an objective basis.

But in order to truly understand the revolutionary project and begin the project of figuring out how to carry it out (and to developing an analysis of how the ruling class manages to deflect the rage of those it exploits into its own projects), it is necessary to realize that exploitation does not merely occur in terms of the production of wealth, but also in terms of the reproduction of social relationships. Regardless of the position of any particular proletarian in the productive apparatus, it is in the interests of the ruling class that everyone would have a role, a social identity, that serves in the reproduction of social relationships. Race, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual preference, subculture — all of these things may, indeed, reflect very real and significant differences, but all are social constructions for channeling these differences into roles useful for the maintenance of the current social order. In the most advanced areas of the current society where the market defines most relationships, identities largely come to be defined in terms of the commodities that symbolize them, and interchangeability becomes the order of the day in social reproduction, just as it is in economic production. And it is precisely because identity is a social construction and increasingly a saleable commodity that it must be dealt with seriously by revolutionaries, analyzed carefully in its complexity with the precise aim

## The Psychopathology of Work

by Penelope Rosemont

*“Work, now? Never, never. I’m on strike.”*  
— Arthur Rimbaud

Depersonalization and alienation from our deepest desires is implanted during childhood via school, church, movies, and TV, and soon reaches the point where an individual’s desire is not only a net of contradictions, but also a commodity like all the others. “True life” always seems to be just a bit beyond what a weekly paycheck and credit card can afford, and is thus indefinitely postponed. And each postponement contributes to the reproduction of a social system that practically everyone who is not a multimillionaire or a masochist has come to loathe.

That is the problem facing us all: How to break the pattern of work — of week-to-week slavery, that habit of habits, that addiction of addictions; how to detach ourselves from the grip of Self-Defeating Illusions For Sale, Inc., a.k.a, the corporate consumer State. Especially ingrained is that pattern of working for someone else: making someone else’s “goods”, producing the wealth that someone else enjoys, thinking someone else’s thoughts (sometimes actually believing them one’s own), and even dreaming someone else’s dreams — in short, living someone else’s life, for one’s own life, and one’s own dream of life, have long since been lost in the shuffle.

The systematic suppression of a person’s real desires — and that is largely what work consists of — is exacerbated by capitalism’s incessant manipulation of artificial desires, “as advertised.” This gives daily life the character of mass neurosis, with increasingly frequent psychotic episodes. To relieve the all-embracing boredom of daily life, society offers an endless array of distractions and stupefactions, most of them “available at a store near you”. The trouble is, these distractions and stupefactions, legal or illegal, soon become part of the boredom, for they satisfy no authentic desire.

When the news reports horrible crimes committed by children or teenagers trying to be satanists, or superheroes, or terrorists, or just “bad guys”, we can be sure that these kids lived lives of intolerable dullness, that they were so isolated from their own desires and from the larger society that they didn’t even know how or where to look for something different, or how to rebel in such a way that it might actually make a difference. Instead, they picked up some trashy notions from bible school, Hollywood and TV which promised a few minutes of meaningless “excitement” followed by lots of publicity — also meaningless. Each time something like this happens we

hear cries to “monitor” films more closely, and to ban “violence” on TV. Rarely, however, does anyone criticize the Bible or the Christian churches, despite the fact that Christianity — by far the bloodiest of the “world’s great religions” — is far more to be blamed. Similarly, one rarely hears criticism of the armed forces — a gang of professional killers whose influence on children cannot be anything other than baleful.

And even less often does one encounter criticism of another intrinsically violent institution: the nuclear family. Indeed, at this late date in human history, this relic of patriarchy is still held up as some sort of ideal. Replacing the extended family as we know it today is an invention of the nineteenth century. Constructed by white bourgeois Europeans to meet the needs of expanding industrialization, it reflects capitalism’s model of the “chain of command”. It continues the sanction of male supremacy as a time-honored tradition dating back to a mandate of God, no less. In the nuclear family, he works at a job, and she works in the home (and increasingly also at a job). As for the children, they are the family’s private property, and remain so for years after they reach biological maturity.

Children too learn to work, or at least how to suffer boredom. From the earliest age they are taught to obey orders. School and church teach them the necessity of going to and staying at a particular place for a prolonged period, even when they would rather be anywhere else. All the classic parental admonitions — “Sit still!”, “Do what I tell you!”, “Don’t talk back!”, “Stop behaving like a bunch of wild Indians!” — are part of the education of the well-behaved, uncomplaining wage-slave...

The world today is confronted by greater, more earth-shaking, more life-threatening problems than ever before: wars all over, massive pollution, global warming, white supremacy, oppression of women, ecological disaster, neocolonialism, state terrorism, the prison industry, genocide, cancer, AIDS, the traffic death-toll, xenophobia, pesticides, genetic engineering — the list goes on and on. Ceaselessly bombarded by news reports and sound bites of one catastrophe after another, most people have no idea what to do, and lapse into paralysis. On the ideological front, this widespread passivity, itself a major social problem, is maintained by Andre Breton called *miserabilism*, the cynical rationalization of misery, suffering and corruption — the dominant ideology of Power in our time.

Every hour, moreover, countless billions are spent on propaganda, advertising and other mystifications to sustain the delusion that the crisis-strewn society we live in today is the best and only one possible.

What is most important to grasp is that work is at the center of all these

service of the human community. By ignoring most of the world (along with a significant portion of the exploited in the industrialized areas), revolutionary theorists were thus able to invent a positive project for the proletariat, an objective historical mission. That it was founded on the bourgeois ideology of progress was ignored. In my opinion, the luddites had a much clearer perspective, recognizing that industrialism was another one of the masters’ tools for dispossessing them. With good reason, they attacked the machines of mass production.

The process of dispossession has long since been accomplished in the West (though of course it is a process that is going on at all times even here), but it is in much of the South of the world it is still in its early stages. Since the process started in the West though, there have been some significant changes in the functioning of the productive apparatus. Skilled factory positions have largely disappeared, and what is needed in a worker is flexibility, the capacity to adapt — in other words, the capacity to be an interchangeable cog in the machine of capital. In addition, factories tend to require far fewer workers to carry on the productive process, both because of developments in technology and management techniques that have allowed a more decentralized productive process and because increasingly the type of work necessary in factories is largely just monitoring and maintaining machines.

On a practical level this means that we are all, as individuals, expendable to the production process, because we are all replaceable — that lovely capitalist egalitarianism in which we are all equal to zero. In the first world, this has had the effect of pushing increasing numbers of the exploited into increasingly precarious positions: day labor, temporary work, service sector jobs, chronic unemployment, the black market and other forms of illegality, homelessness and prison. The steady job with its guarantee of a somewhat stable life — even if one’s life is not one’s own — is giving way to a lack of guarantees where the illusions provided by a moderately comfortable consumerism can no longer hide that life under capitalism is always lived on the edge of catastrophe.

In the third world, people who have been able to create their own existence, if sometimes a difficult one, are finding their land and their other means for doing so being pulled out from under them as the machines of capital quite literally invade their homes and eat away any possibility to continue living directly off their own activity. Torn from their lives and lands, they are forced to move to the cities where there is little employment for them. Shantytowns develop around the cities, often with populations higher than the city proper. Without any possibility of steady employment, the

apparatus. Thus these conceptions end up presenting a narrow and simplistic understanding of exploitation and revolutionary transformation. In order to carry out a revolutionary struggle against exploitation, we need to develop an understanding of class as it actually exists in the world without seeking any guarantees.

At its most basic, class society is one in which there are those who rule and those who are ruled, those who exploit and those who are exploited. Such a social order can only arise when people lose their capacity to determine the conditions of their own existence. Thus, the essential quality shared by the exploited is their dispossession, their loss of the capacity to make and carry out the basic decisions about how they live.

The ruling class is defined in terms of its own project of accumulating power and wealth. While there are certainly significant conflicts within the ruling class in terms of specific interests and real competition for control of resources and territory, this overarching project aimed at the control of social wealth and power, and thus of the lives and relationships of every living being, provides this class with a unified positive project.

The exploited class has no such positive project to define it. Rather it is defined in terms of what is done to it, what is taken away from it. Being uprooted from the ways of life that they had known and created with their peers, the only community that is left to the people who make up this heterogeneous class is that provided by capital and the state — the community of work and commodity exchange decorated with whatever nationalist, religious, ethnic, racial or subcultural ideological constructions through which the ruling order creates identities into which to channel individuality and revolt. The concept of a positive proletarian identity, of a single, unified, positive proletarian project, has no basis in reality since what defines one as proletarian is precisely that her life has been stolen from her, that he has been transformed into a pawn in the projects of the rulers.

The workerist conception of the proletarian project has its origins in the revolutionary theories of Europe and the United States (particularly certain marxist and syndicalist theories). By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, both western Europe and the eastern United States were well on their way to being thoroughly industrialized, and the dominant ideology of progress equated technological development with social liberation. This ideology manifested in revolutionary theory as the idea that the *industrial* working class was objectively revolutionary because it was in the position to take over the means of production developed under capitalism (which, as products of progress, were assumed to be inherently liberating) and turn them to the

problems. It is work that keeps the whole miserabilist system going. Without work, the death-dealing juggernaut that proclaims itself the “free market” would grind to a halt. “Free market” means freedom for Capital, and unfreedom for those who work. Until the problem of work is solved — that is, until work is abolished — all other problems will not only remain, but will keep getting worse...In a world too busy to live, work itself has become toxic, a form of “digging your own grave”.

Renewed scarcities and engineered economic crises notwithstanding, society today has the capacity to reduce work to a tiny fraction of what it is now, while continuing to meet all human needs. It is obvious that if people really want paradise on Earth, they can have it — practically overnight. Of course, they will have to overcome the immense and multinational “false consciousness” industry, which works very hard to make sure that very few working people know what they really want...

Work kills the spirit, damages the body, insults the mind, keeps everyone confused and demoralized, distracts its victims from all the things that really matter in life...Our struggle calls for labor organizers of a new kind...To bring about the meltdown of miserabilism, we need awakeners of latent desires, fomentors of marvelous humour, stimulators of ardent dreams, provokers of the deepest possible yearning for a life of poetic adventure.

## **Work: The Theft of Life** **by Wolfi Landstreicher**

*“What is the bombing of a judge,  
the kidnapping of an industrialist,  
the hanging of a politician,  
the shooting of a cop,  
the looting of a supermarket,  
the burning of a commissioner’s office,  
the stoning of a journalist,  
the heckling of an intellectual,  
the thrashing of an artist,  
in the face of the deadly alienation of our existence, the much too early sound  
of the alarm clock, the traffic jam on the expressway, the goods for sale lined up  
on the shelves?”*

The alarm clock disrupts your sleep again — as always, much too early. You drag yourself from the warmth of your bed to the bathroom for a shower, a shave and a shit, then run down to the kitchen where you wash down a pastry or, if you have the time, some toast and eggs with a cup of coffee. Then you rush out the door to battle traffic jams or crowds in the

subway until you arrive... at work, where your day is spent in tasks not of your choosing, in compulsory association with others involved in related tasks, the primary aim of which is the continued reproduction of the social relationships that constrain you to survive in this manner.

But this is not all. In compensation, you receive a wage, a sum of money that (after paying rent and bills) you must take out to shopping centers to buy food, clothes, various necessities and entertainment. Though this is considered your “free time” as opposed to “work time”, it too is compulsory activity that only secondarily guarantees your survival, its primary purpose again being to reproduce the current social order. And for most people, moments free of these constraints are fewer and fewer.

According to the ruling ideology of this society, this existence is the result of a social contract between equals — equals before the law that is. The worker, it is said, contracts to sell her labor to the boss for a mutually agreed upon wage. But can a contract be considered free and equal when one side holds all the power?

If we look at this contract more closely, it becomes clear that it is no contract at all, but the most extreme and violent extortion. This is currently exposed most blatantly at the margins of capitalist society where people who have lived for centuries (or, in some cases, millennia) on their own terms find their capacity to determine the conditions of their existence ripped away by the bulldozers, chainsaws, mining equipment and so on of the world’s rulers. But it is a process that has been going on for centuries, a process involving blatant, large-scale theft of land and life sanctioned and carried out by the ruling class. Bereft of the means for determining the conditions of their own existence, the exploited cannot be said, in honesty, to be contracting freely and equally with their exploiters. It is clearly a case of blackmail.

And what are the terms of this blackmail? The exploited are forced to sell the time of their life to their exploiters in exchange for survival. And this is the real tragedy of work. The social order of work is based on the imposed opposition between life and survival. The question of how one will get by suppresses that of how one wants to live, and in time this all seems natural and one narrows one’s dreams and desires to the things that money can buy.

However, the conditions of the world of work do not just apply to those with jobs. One can easily see how the unemployed searching for a job from fear of homelessness and hunger is caught up in the world of work. But the same holds for the recipient of state aid whose survival depends on the existence of the assistance bureaucracy... and even for those for whom the

avoidance of getting a job has become such a priority that one’s decisions come to center around scams, shoplifting, dumpster diving — all the various ways to get by without a job. In other words, activities that could be fine means for supporting a life project become ends in themselves, making mere survival one’s life project. How, really, does his differ from a job?

But what is the real basis of the power behind this extortion that is the world of work? Of course, there are laws and courts, police and military forces, fines and prisons, the fear of hunger and homelessness — all very real and significant aspects of domination. But even the state’s force of arms can only succeed in carrying out its task because people submit. And here is the real basis of all domination — the submission of the slaves, their decision to accept the security of known misery and servitude rather than risk the unknown of freedom, their willingness to accept a guaranteed but colorless survival in exchange for the possibility of truly living that offers no guarantees.

So in order to put an end to one’s slavery, to move beyond the limits of merely getting by, it is necessary to make a decision to refuse to submit; it is necessary to begin to reappropriate one’s life here and now. Such a project inevitably places one in conflict with the entire social order of work; so the project of reappropriating one’s existence must also be the project of destroying work. To clarify, when I say “work”, I do not mean the activity by which one creates the means of one’s existence (which ideally would never be separate from simply living) but rather a social relationship that transforms this activity into a sphere separate from one’s life and places it in the service of the ruling order so that the activity, in fact, ceases to have any direct relationship to the creation of one’s existence, but rather only maintains it in the realm of mere survival (at whatever level of consumption) through a series of mediations of which property, money and commodity exchange are among the most significant. This is the world we must destroy in the process of taking back our lives, and the necessity of this destruction makes the project of the reappropriation of our lives one with the projects of insurrection and social revolution.

## **From Proletarian to Individual: Toward an Anarchist Understanding of Class by Wolfi Landstreicher**

The social relationships of class and exploitation are not simple. Workerist conceptions, which are based on the idea of an objectively revolutionary class that is defined in terms of its relationship to the means of production, ignore the mass of those world-wide whose lives are stolen from them by the current social order but who can find no place within its productive