



Dead Man Working¹

by Allan Glynn Binns

“The morning. Explosions. Blue everywhere. Always blue; magnificent. The new day unrelenting. When will life be gentle? When will I be dead?”



Michel Houellebecq’s contemplation of yet another drab morning commute is just one of many harrowing studies giving colour to Carl Cederström’s and Peter Fleming’s provocation on the tedious and humiliating nature of modern day work, *Dead Man Working*. In the text, the authors unveil our society to be extreme and eccentric; one

where suicide functions as a viable alternative to a life drained by pointless work; a life of non-living. The symptoms of which are unpacked in the opening chapter with the help of Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi’s apocalyptic YouTube lullaby, *Waiting for the Tsunami*. He begins. “Before the tsunami hits, you know how it is? The sea recedes, leaving a dead desert in which only cynicism and dejection remains.” (Berardi, 2007) However, as our authors note (2012: 3), Bifo’s metaphor only functions until the final moment; when the wave ultimately hits. The presence of the wave, that will surely wipe us away, holds a certain lightness; soon we will be unburdened. All you have to think about is having “the right words to say, the right clothes to wear, before it finally wipes you away.” (Berardi, 2007) Sadly, we are not blessed with the convenience of such terminus. Instead we are left to wander this desolate landscape rife with pointless work and mental recession, endlessly waiting.

Of course the masses have long since bemoaned capitalism’s ability to subtract social value, in the form of dehumanisation, to accumulate numerical value. However, even though the legitimacy of work is at an all time low, we are in fact working more

¹ Cederström, C., Fleming, P. (2012). *Dead Man Working*. Winchester, UK: Zero Books.



than ever. This paradox would suggest that the dominant social imaginary still upholds work as a strong, if not an incogitable, cultural ideal. This is exemplified by our society's 'you can be anything you want to be' capitalist ideology, where unemployment and lesser paid positions are considered to be a direct result of individual failings, while we widely regard the hard worker as good. So why is this? Why can't we see work for what it is? And more importantly, for what it is doing to us?

Cederström and Fleming's book not only echoes Marx's broader thoughts of workforce alienation, but it is intensified by the observation that every aspect of our social selves is now being harvested in the name of capital; leaving us with little to "no imaginative energy left to look beyond it." (Cederström and Fleming, 2012: 2) This is the condition of the dead man working; a life blinded and paralysed by work into a perpetual state of non-living.

So what does the dead man working do? Does he fight back? How can he? "How can we resist capitalism when it has penetrated our very mode of social being?" (Cederström and Fleming, 2012: 8) To answer these questions, the authors have divided the book into two clear sections. The first (chapters 2-4) provides a detailed exposition of how, in a desperate attempt to revive its flagging fortunes, capitalism has evolved to extract value from labour beyond the usual means. While the second section (chapters 5-6) explores possible means of escape from our exploitation. The postscript further develops this escapist ideology. I shall now give an overview of the main ideas proposed in the first section.

Since the de-industrialisation of the West and its subsequent growth in service work, capital has become increasingly dependent on subsidising productivity with things outside of the normal realms of work. One of the key facets being excavated here is leisure, or actions and time of non-work. In addressing this, our authors (2012: 7) revise the idea of '24hr capitalism', not just to mean that someone somewhere is always working, but that we are all always working. They support this claim by considering how the management function has been partially, if not largely, displaced onto labour itself. By breaking down and levelling hierarchies, they claim that labour has effectively become its own boss. Through what they term as the internalised 'boss function', we now find ourselves exploiting our own 'free time' to hone our skills, to be the best worker we can be. They compound this point by considering Michel Foucault's thoughts on bio-power; where it is life (bios) itself, not labour that it being put to work.

Arguably, our 'boss function' is something that, in isolation, we can learn to control. This is to say that we could teach ourselves to leave work at work. But, as Cederström and Fleming (2012: 9-10) lament, today's workplaces are a far cry from the 'halcyon' blue-collar, white-collar days of Fordism. The stereotypical tyrannical boss has been replaced by a passive aggressive HR Manager, who's hell-bent on us enjoying our own exploitation. They are programmed not only to make us do what we don't want to do, but to make us want to do it. Armed with the latest embarrassing team building



exercises and accompanied by a smörgåsbord of self-loving mantras, these 'funsultants' are making work and our own exploitation fun.

With our personalities now in demand, the anti-authoritarians amongst us may feel the urge to push back. But as chapter 3 uncovers, rebellious actions are just another aspect of our lives that capital has become well versed at extracting value from. The language of criticism had previously been reserved for the left, however, in the 1990's something changed and phrases like anti-authoritarianism became part of modern management discourse. As part of a new type of capitalist ideology, companies now look to harness the edge and non-conformist energy of workers. Once seen as somewhat of an inconvenience, anti-authoritarians are now considered a useful tool for injecting life back into the 'dead zone' of work. As the author's note (2012: 23), the fact that they are cynical and are prepared to challenge everything only illustrates a high level of engagement; a welcomed break from late Fordism's pandemic of 'presenteeism'.

With our leisure time consumed by thoughts of work and our idiosyncrasies commodified, it is no surprise that one of the biggest challenges facing managers today is that they are plagued with a generation who recognise capitalism as being fundamentally destructive. However, as chapter 3 continues, we learn that corporations have starting talk openly about their environmental impact and the alienating nature of work to combat this view. Adorned with language from critical theory manifestos, most firms today have a corporate social responsibility policy claiming to be giving something back to the community or aspiring to be sustainable. We know that this is just a front, but as Cederström and Fleming (2012: 29) argue, even the most alienated employee can be comforted by the facade of business' ethics. This is to say we might be mentally drained by our unabated engagement with a fundamentally corrupt corporation that is bastardising our unsustainable economic system, but we take solace in the fact that the company recycled 10% more last month. The authors (2012: 28) parallel this thought with Slavoj Žižek observation that environmentalism has become 'the new opium of the masses'.

Having outlined some of the new ways in which capitalism is extracting value from labour, I will now address the second section which examines how we might negotiate an exit from our plight. The most typical means of escape are not pretty and tend to involve mind-numbing drugs and self-loathing, but in chapter 5 the authors delve into the increasingly strange and desperate ways we try to withdraw from our life of non-living. Two notable characters from these pages are the adult babies and the habitual users of floatation tanks. While both are quite curious means of escape, their motivations are unsurprising. The adult babies are retreating from the pressures of work into nappies and a state of total dependence, while the overworked pay £40 a pop to float in the dark and "become no one". (Cederström and Fleming, 2012: 51)

These are indeed strange means of escape, but certainly not the most extreme. In chapter 6 the authors detail a wide-range of work related suicides under the title, *The Big Exit*. In 2008 a banker suicide epidemic saw several high profile cases. These tragic



deaths could simply be attributed to the added stresses of the financial crash. However, our authors (2012: 57) believe that there might be something to learn from looking at the 18th century English aristocracy, who staved off boredom by duelling, gambling and in some cases committing suicide. But the bankers of today are not bored. In fact boredom would be a blessing. Instead they seek to escape their living death through risky behaviour, teasing a glimpse of some kind of conclusion. This evidenced with the emergence of a host of Wall Street fight clubs, with one banker calling them 'a great stress reliever'.

At the other end of the scale is Foxxconn, a Chinese electronics manufacturer employing 420,000 workers. After a succession of suicides, an undercover study revealed that the lives of staff had been completely overtaken by work. This was to the extent that employees had reported that their hands continued to twitch when the working day had finished. The frequent suicides led the company to install safety nets, a stress room and counsellors, making them pioneers in suicide management. In a similar vein, France Telecom had suffered 60 suicides after restructuring in 1998; with notes left by employees referencing stress and work. What is common in all of these accounts is a preference for death over a non-life of work. To further understand what's happening here the authors (2012: 61) look for empirical evidence and consider which profession statistically has that highest rate of suicide. The answer is not the banker or the academic, but the artist. An obvious answer if we consider their working conditions; self employed with flexible hours, low pay, instability and no pension. These conditions, in the form of zero hour contracts and unpaid work, are now sweeping across the post-industrial landscape.

But, if the dead man working is already dead, can he commit suicide? Probably not. And why would he? It seems senseless to kill what is already dead. Checking out of the capitalist game in the form of suicide would only confirm the length and breadth of capital's tentacle. Rejected by the authors, suicide on the job only performs as the ultimate form of loyalty to work. So the question remains, how can we escape the unending world of work? Can suicide be a successful exit? If the answer yes, then it surely it only comes in the form of symbolic death. Again the authors look to Žižek. "The erasure of the symbolic network that defines the subject's identity, of cutting off all the links that anchor the subject in its symbolic substance. Here, the subject finds itself totally deprived of its symbolic identity, thrown into the 'night of the world' in which its only correlative is the minimal of an excremental leftover". (Cederström and Fleming, 2012: 66) I will now provide criticisms of the both the work's arguments and format.

Despite being categorised as Philosophy, *Dead Man Working* is more akin to prose poetry than it is to rational argument. Having said this, Cederström and Fleming have produced a sustained and provocative thesis on the pervasiveness of modern day work that is likely to appeal to a far broader readership than is typical of books on this subject. While it is comfortable and apt that a text about such unifying topic is written



in this accessible way, it suffers for a having no supporting citations, making engaging with and finding further reading toilsome.

In terms of content my main criticism of the book is that it is somewhat ahistorical in its lamentation for the simple days of Fordism. The world of work along with the master-slave dialectic has been omnipresent for centuries so to romanticise about this specific epoch creates a rather limited debate. Yes, it fashions a nice 'you don't know what you've got until it's gone' moment, as we ponder how good it would be to just work from 9 to 5, but the pitfalls of this mechanically natured work have been well documented by the likes of Karl Marx, amongst others, and do not need exasperating here. Needless to say, if we are really looking for salvation from work then we need to look far beyond our current state for answers.

As the reader approaches the final pages, and indeed the postscript, they will probably find themselves craving answers; looking for the exit. Sadly, like the wave it does not come. Of course, it is difficult to ask more of a work that is only 75 pages long, but I also feel that the authors could have developed their propositions on the symbolic suicide further. Žižek's symbolic suicide is an abstract concept, one that doesn't give the reader too much direction. In all, I still consider *Dead Man Working* to hold real value as a playful provocation to help us look beyond haze of work. If we are to judge this work according to the publishers own criteria, that is to be 'intellectual without being academic, popular without being ponderous', then Cederström and Fleming's book can only be considered a triumph.

References

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