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Penelope Rosemont

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antidote for miserablism**

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Can the great joy in the restoration of forests and prairies and sanctuaries for animals be called work? Is the joy of creating art, work? Or, constructing beautiful buildings, or teaching and helping others, work? Those lucky scientists who have the privilege of puzzling over the universe and figuring out complicated scientific and technical problems, do they define that activity as a sacrifice of their time and energy? They may call it “their work,” but this is not working by any current definition of the activity.

If for one day, work was freely shared, was focused on needs and for the benefit of all, not only would it be necessary to find another word for what was formerly known as “work,” but also, the world would change overnight. Also, freedom from oppressive work would allow us for the first time in history to truly develop our individuality.

It is interesting to note that Marszalek’s concluding comments on Lafargue’s *The Right to be Lazy* are almost a prediction of what began in lower Manhattan as Occupy Wall Street. Marszalek calls for seizing space-creating communal living spaces, occupying abandoned factory sites to re-industrialize for community use, building a decentralized energy commons, doing spontaneous theater in a bank—are like the late winter blossoms in the field of a new culture, a culture of rhizomic expansion.”

These remarks especially found their concrete expression during Occupy Oakland’s General Strike on Nov 2, when a theatrically animated and inspired crowd closed down a Wells Fargo Bank by assembling a typical American living room—complete with sofas, chairs, end-tables and lamps on the sidewalk in front of the bank.

They apparently were planning to make themselves at home and why not? It’s our world. What are you going to do about it?

Marszalek analyzes what happens when we take our daily-lives into our own hands: “Development of this sort encourages and connects diverse social projects in a non-hierarchical way to solidify pragmatic politics and to amplify human capabilities that can lead to a truly rich life.”

In other words, rebellion that creates lasting social change changes the change-maker — frees the agent of change, to, as Breton famously said, change life and transform the world.

“Disobedience, in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man’s original virtue.”

— Oscar Wilde

“. . . and then we go out and seize a square of singular symbolic significance and put our asses on the line to make it happen. The time has come to deploy this emerging stratagem against the greatest corrupter of our democracy: Wall Street, the financial Gomorrah of America.”

— From *Adbusters* (September/October 2011 issue)

“We are not protesting. Who is there to protest to? What could we ask them for that they could grant? We are occupying. We are reclaiming those same spaces of public practice that have been commodified, privatized and locked into the hands of faceless bureaucracy, real estate portfolios and police ‘protection.’ Hold on to these spaces, nurture them and let the boundaries of your occupations grow.”

— Egyptian (Tahrir Square) Comrades

Unemployed, depressed, don’t know what to do next? WORK FULL-TIME! Men and women needed NOW to work on Occupy Everything! No pay; possible great future.

Guaranteed: Enormous satisfaction right now! Make your Unemployment meaningful. Take the world apart and remold it to your desires. Don’t gamble in casinos for petty stakes, don’t waste your nickels and dimes. Gamble big! You have a world to win!

Work as we have known it is gone! For better or for worse, the workless future is here; right now. And, it must be reckoned with. Don’t ask for jobs, don’t be lonesome for your exploitation; don’t miss your cage, or your alarm clock. Demand instead that everyone gets an equal share; demand ownership of the products that you make, the world that you create. Demand the natural world be restored. . . a beauty for us now to enjoy and a way to sustain us in the future.

Jacques Vache, one of those World War I rebels who, with Andre Breton, was at the root of surrealism, considered the role of the Alarm-Clock in daily-life-that materialized superego lurking in every household. The Alarm Clock, he wrote, “a monster that has always frightened me because of the regimentation glaring from its face, because of the way it — this honest man — glares at me when I enter the bedroom.” It is, “a hypocrite that detests me.”

Franklin Rosemont, co-founder of the Chicago Surrealist Group, commented that the alarm/time clock is “at the very center of the class struggle . . . scientific management . . . multiplied profits and the power of the giant trusts.” He then asks, “When will the last ten-thousand alarm-clocks be tossed on a bonfire of the last ten-million time cards?”

A good time would be now.

“Human dignity has been reduced to the level of exchange value,” wrote Surrealist Andre Breton. “We do not accept the laws of economy and exchange, we do not accept enslavement to work.”

Occupy Wall Street (OWS), we need to note, is the precariat—those who face an uncertain future—manifesting not as the “unemployed,” as defined by pointless policy makers, but as humanity in search of its dignity.

The critique of work and the consideration of new possibilities for everyday life began in the 1880s when Paul Lafargue, Karl Marx’s son-in-law, wrote an amazing book, *The Right to Be Lazy*. It was the first to recognize a disastrous dogma, “A strange delusion possesses the working classes of the nations where capitalist civilization holds its sway . . . [T]his delusion is the love of work, the furious passion for work, pushed even to the exhaustion of the vital force of the individual and his progeny. Instead of opposing this mental aberration, the priests, the economists and the moralists have cast a sacred halo over work . . .”

This year, *The Right to Be Lazy* has come back into print at the precisely right moment with an excellent introduction by Bernard Marszalek, a Fifth Estate contributor in this issue. In his introduction, Marszalek writes, “*The Right to be Lazy*, after decades of obscurity, was reprinted by Solidarity Bookshop in the 60’s, at a time when academics, hippies and revolutionaries questioned the future of work.”

At that time, he writes, “A tiny faction of the ’60s revolutionaries questioned the very necessity of work itself and advocated its abolition

before the 1968 rebellion of French students and workers inspired many to think of work radically transformed. The Rebel Worker Group in Chicago, Fredy and Lorraine Perlman’s Black and Red and the Fifth Estate, both in Michigan, and Black Mask in New York City, expressed their utter disdain for toil and devised schemes to avoid it. Several dissident intellectuals, like Paul Goodman and Ivan Illich, agreed with these sentiments.”

The State, and the capitalism that it embodies and defends, has no solutions to offer; it can only respond by expanding its influence, economically if possible, and militarily if necessary. Ideally, however, its best method of social control is through a bewildering array of Non-Choices—breathtaking spectacles of useless products and despicable celebrity antics. A corruption geared to leave us with an acute sense of defeatism.

We can observe the truth of Fredy Perlman’s often quoted passage from his *Reproduction of Daily Life*, concerning the situation of humankind in this society. They who were “previously conscious creators of their own meager existence become unconscious victims of their own activity . . . Men who were much but had little; now, have much, but are little.” Surrealists have a word for it—“miserablism.”

In *Creating Anarchy*, Ron Sakolsky writes, “Miserablism is a system that produces misery and then rationalizes it by perpetuating the idea that such misery comprises the only possible reality.”

It’s time to ask the question, what do we really want? Shiny-black Gucci shoes and a stone-grey Bugatti Veyron, the world’s most overpriced auto to drive around through the assorted junk-yards of smashed automobiles, graveyards of abandoned tires and lonesome-bloated refrigerators that now surround our cities instead of prairies and forests? Or, an authentic life in a verdant world?

Our social world could be restructured so that work that needs to be done would be divided up among us all. Many hands make work light, as the old, old saying goes. Work could be structured so that hours would be short, variety would be possible, and it would be a pleasure to cooperate with each other and accomplish what needs to be done. Transforming work into useful, collaborative and fun activity, means we need to call that activity something besides work.