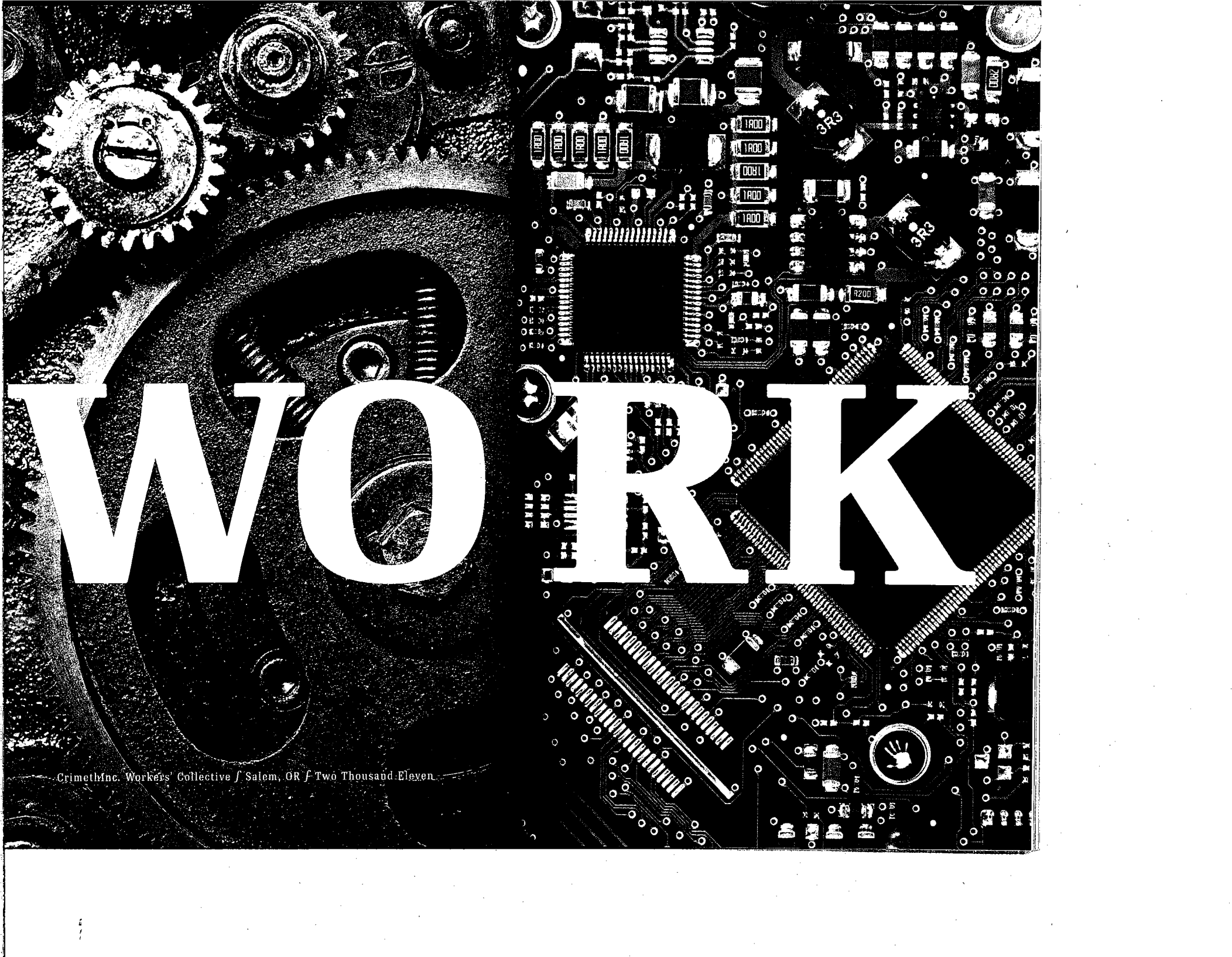


At any time, we could all stop paying rent, mortgages, taxes, utilities; they would be powerless against us if we all quit at once. At any time, we could all stop going to work or school—or go to them and refuse to obey orders or leave the premises, instead turning them into community centers. At any time, we could tear up our IDs, take the license plates off our cars, cut down security cameras, burn money, throw away our wallets, and assemble cooperative associations to produce and distribute everything we need.

Whenever my shift drags, I find myself thinking about this stuff. Am I really the only person who's ever had this idea? I can imagine all the usual objections, but you can bet if it took off in some part of the world everybody else would get in on it quick. Think of the unspeakable ways we're all wasting our lives instead. What would it take to get that chain reaction started? Where do I go to meet people who don't just hate their jobs, but are ready to be done with work once and for all?





WORK

CrimethInc. Workers' Collective / Salem, OR / Two Thousand Eleven



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The diagram of the pyramid of capitalist society is by
Packard Jennings: centennialsociety.com

A full-size electronic version of the diagram and an array of
poster designs are available here: www.crimethinc.com/work

You can obtain a printed version of the diagram, along with a
great deal of other material, via www.crimethinc.com

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“Is it conceivable that there can be a ‘fair market price,’
or any price whatsoever, estimable in gold, or diamonds,
or bank notes, or government bonds, for a man’s [sic]
supremest possession—that one possession without
which his life is totally worthless—his liberty?”

- Mark Twain

By itself,
this is a book about work,
but it's also more than that.

It complements a diagram of the different positions and dynamics that make up the economy that necessitates work. Together, the book and diagram outline an analysis of capitalism: what it is, how it works, how we might dismantle it. And the book, the diagram, and the analysis are all outgrowths of something more—a movement of people determined to fight it.

So this book isn't just an attempt to describe reality but also a tool with which to change it. If any of the words or illustrations resonate with you, don't leave them trapped on these pages—write them on the wall, shout them over the intercom at your former workplace, change them as you see fit and release them into the world. You can find poster versions of many of the illustrations at crimethinc.com/work for this purpose.

This project is the combined effort of a group of people who have already spent many years in pitched struggle against capitalism. What qualifies us to write this? Some of us used to be students or pizza deliverers or dishwashers; others still are construction workers or graphic designers

or civic-minded criminals. But all of us have lived under capitalism since we were born, and that makes us experts on it. The same goes for you. No one has to have a degree in economics to understand what's happening: it's enough to get a paycheck or a pink slip and *pay attention*. We're suspicious of the experts who get their credentials from on high, who have incentives to minimize things that are obvious to everyone else.

Like every attempt to construct a scale model of the world, this one is bound to be partial in both senses of the word. To present the whole story, it would have to be as vast as history. There's no way to be unbiased, either: our positions and values inevitably influence what we include and what we leave out. What we offer here is simply one perspective from our side of the counter and our side of the barricades. If it lines up with yours, *let's do something about it*.

better ashes than dust—
CrimethInc. Workers' Collective

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At this moment, an employee in a grocery store is setting out genetically engineered produce rather than tending her garden;

A dishwasher is sweating over a steaming sink while unwashed dishes stack up in his kitchen;

A line cook is taking orders from strangers instead of cooking at a neighborhood barbecue;

An advertising agent is composing jingles for laundry detergent rather than playing music with his friends;

A woman is watching wealthier people's children at a daycare program rather than spending time with her own;

A child is being dropped off there instead of growing up with those who know and love him;

A student is writing a thesis about an activity that interests her instead of participating in it;

A man is masturbating with internet pornography instead of exploring his sexuality with a partner;

An activist, weary after a hard day's work, is putting on a Hollywood movie for entertainment;

And a demonstrator who has her own unique reasons to protest is carrying a sign mass-produced by a bureaucratic organization.

I. The Occupation





Occupation. The word brings to mind images of Russian tanks rolling through the streets of Eastern Europe, or US soldiers nervously patrolling hostile neighborhoods in the Middle East.

But not every occupation is so obvious. Sometimes occupations go on so long the tanks become unnecessary. They can be rolled back into storage, as long as the conquered remember they can return at any time—or behave as if the tanks were still there, forgetting why they do so.

How do you recognize an occupation? Historically, occupied peoples had to pay a tribute to their conquerors, or else render them some kind of service. A tribute is a sort of rent the occupied pay just to live on their own lands; and as for the service—well, what's *your* occupation? You know, what occupies your time? A job, probably, or two—or preparations for one, or recovery from one, or looking for one. You need that

job to pay your rent or mortgage, among other things—but wasn't the building you live in built by people like yourself, people who had to work to pay their rent too? The same goes for all those other products you have to earn money to pay for—you and others like you made them, but you have to buy them from companies like the one that employs you, companies that neither pay you all the money they make from your labor nor sell their products at the price it cost to produce them. They're getting you coming and going!

Our lives are occupied territory. Who controls the resources in your community, who shapes your neighborhood and the landscape around it, who sets your schedule day by day and month by month? Even if you're self-employed, are *you* the one who decides what you have to do to make money? Picture your idea of perfect bliss—does it bear a suspicious resemblance to the utopias you see in advertisements?

Not only our time, but also our ambitions, our sexuality, our values, our very sense of what it means to be human—all these are occupied, molded according to the demands of the market.

And we aren't the only territory under enemy control. The invisible occupation of our lives mirrors the military occupation of areas at the fringe of this conquered land, where guns and tanks are still necessary to enforce the property rights of robber barons and the liberty of corporations to trade at the expense of hostile locals—some of whom still remember what life is like without leases, salaries, or bosses.

You might not be all that different from them yourself, despite having been raised in captivity. Maybe in the boss's office, or in career counseling or romantic quarrels, whenever someone was trying to command your attention and your attention wouldn't cooperate, you've been chided for being *preoccupied*. That is—some rebel part of you is still held by daydreams and fantasies, lingering hopes that your life could somehow be more than an *occupation*.

There is a rebel army out in the bush plotting the abolition of wage slavery, as sure as there are employees in every workplace waging guerrilla war with loafing, pilfering, and disobedience—and you can join up, too, if you haven't already. But before we start laying plans and sharpening spears, let's look more closely at what we're up against.

i. Work



What exactly is work? We could define it as *activity for the sake of making money*. But aren't slave labor and unpaid internships work, too? We could say it's activity that accumulates profit for *someone*, whether or not it benefits the one who carries it out. But does that mean that as soon as you start making money from an activity, it becomes work even if it was *play* before? Perhaps we could define work as labor that takes more from us than it gives back, or that is governed by external forces.

Or perhaps we can only understand what work is by stepping back to look at the context in which it takes place. In a world of "diversity," one common thread connects us: we're all subject to the economy. Christian or Muslim, communist or conservative, in São Paulo or St. Paul, you probably have to spend the better part of your life trading time for money, or make someone else do it for you, or suffer the consequences.

What else can you do? If you refuse, the economy will go on without you; it doesn't need you any more than it needs any of the hundreds of millions already unemployed, and there's no point going hungry for nothing. You can join a co-op or commune, but you'll still face the same market pressures. You can canvas and lobby and protest on behalf of sweatshop workers, but even if you succeed in getting reforms passed, they—like you—will still have to work, whether in maquiladoras or NGO offices. You can go out at night in a black mask and smash all the windows of the

shopping district, but the next day you'll have to do your shopping somewhere. You could make a million dollars and *still* be stuck with your nose at the grindstone trying to keep your lead on everyone else. Even when workers overthrew governments to establish communist utopias, they ended up back at work—if they were lucky.

All this makes it easy to feel that work is inevitable, that there's no other way our lives could be structured. That's convenient for the ones who profit most from this arrangement: they don't have to prove that it's the *best* system if everyone thinks it's the only one *possible*. Is this really how life has always been?

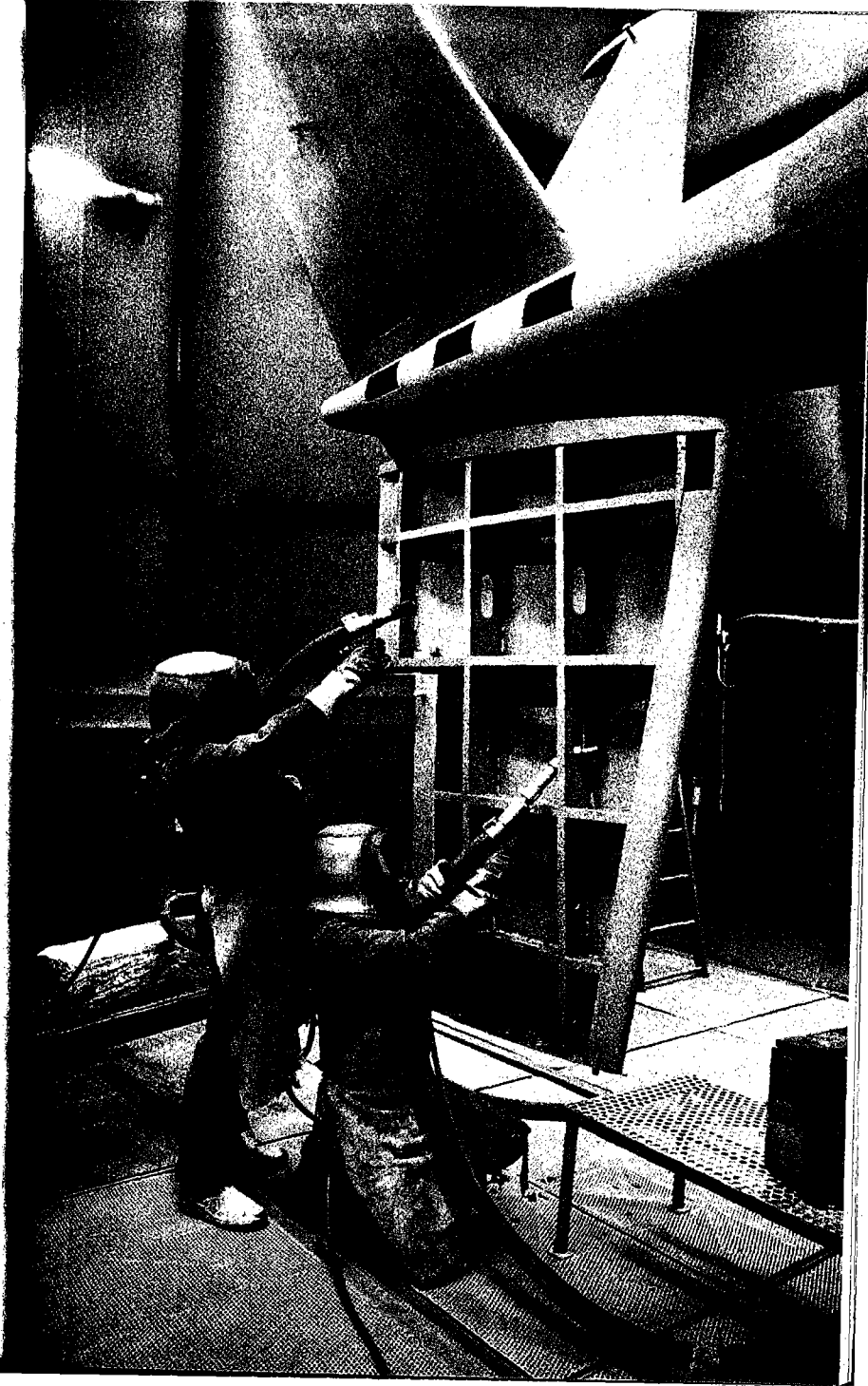
Now, however, even the future of the economy is uncertain.

Forget about the Economy—What about Us?

When the economy crashes, politicians and pundits bewail the consequences for average working families. They demand emergency measures—such as giving billions of dollars of taxpayer money to the banks that caused the crisis by ripping off “average working families” in the first place. What's going on here?

We're told that our lives depend on the economy, that it's worth any sacrifice to keep it running. But for most of us, keeping it running is *always* a sacrifice.

When the economy crashes, mining companies stop blowing up mountains. Developers stop cutting down forests to build new offices and condominiums. Factories stop pouring pollutants into rivers. Gentrification grinds to a halt. Workaholics reconsider their priorities. Prisons are forced to release inmates. Police departments can't buy new weapons. Governments can't afford to mass-arrest demonstrators. Sheriffs sometimes even refuse to evict families from foreclosed homes.



Of course, millions more are forced out of their homes and go hungry. But the problem isn't that there's no housing or food to be had—it's not the *crisis* that causes that, but the fact that the system is still functioning. Long before the crash, people were being forced out of their homes while buildings stood empty and going hungry while food surpluses rotted. If more people go hungry during a recession, it's not because there has been any material change in our productive capacities, but simply one more example of how irrationally our society *always* distributes resources.

When workers go on strike, you can see some of the same effects as during a crash. They may go hungry, but they can also develop a new awareness of their power as they get to know each other outside the constraints of the daily grind. The rest of society suddenly notices that they exist. Sometimes they establish new collective projects and ways of making decisions. Occasionally they even take over their workplaces and use them to do things outside the logic of profit and competition. The same goes for student occupations.

So perhaps the real issue is that crashes and strikes don't go *far enough*. So long as the economy runs our lives, any interruption is going to be hard on us; but even if nothing ever went wrong, it would never deliver the world of our dreams.

And whether or not we're ready for change, things aren't going to go on this way forever. Who can still believe we're on the right track now that pollution is killing off species by the thousand and causing the polar ice caps to melt? Between global warming and nuclear war, industrial capitalism has already produced at least two different ways of *ending life on earth*. That doesn't sound very stable!

If we want to survive another century, we have to reexamine the mythology that grounds our current way of life.

The MYTHOLOGY of WORK



What if nobody worked? Sweatshops would empty out and assembly lines would grind to a halt, at least the ones producing things no one would make voluntarily. Telemarketing would cease. Despicable individuals who only hold sway over others because of wealth and title would have to learn better social skills. Traffic jams would come to an end; so would oil spills. Paper money and job applications would be used as fire starter as people reverted to barter and sharing. Grass and flowers would grow from the cracks in the sidewalk, eventually making way for fruit trees.

And we would all starve to death. But we're not exactly subsisting on paperwork and performance evaluations, are we? Most of the things we make and do for money are patently irrelevant to our survival—and to what gives life meaning, besides.



WORK IS NECESSARY.

That depends on what you mean by “work.” Think about how many people enjoy gardening, fishing, carpentry, cooking, and even computer programming just for their own sake. What if that kind of activity could provide for all our needs?

For hundreds of years, people have claimed that technological progress would soon liberate humanity from the need to work. Today we have capabilities our ancestors couldn't have imagined, but those predictions still haven't come true. In the US we actually work longer hours than we did a couple generations ago—the poor in order to survive, the rich in order to compete. Others desperately seek employment, hardly enjoying the comfortable leisure all this progress should provide. Despite the talk of recession and the need for austerity measures, corporations are reporting record earnings, the wealthiest are wealthier than ever, and tremendous quantities of goods are produced just to be thrown away. There's plenty of wealth, but it's not being used to liberate humanity.

What kind of system simultaneously produces abundance and prevents us from making the most of it? The defenders of the free market argue that there's no other option—and so long as our society is organized this way, there isn't.

Yet once upon a time, before time cards and power lunches, everything got done without work. The natural world that provided for our needs hadn't yet been carved up and privatized. Knowledge and skills weren't the exclusive domains of licensed experts, held hostage by expensive institutions; time wasn't divided into productive work and consumptive

leisure. We know this because work was invented only a few thousand years ago, but human beings have been around for hundreds of thousands of years. We're told that life was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” back then—but that narrative comes to us from the ones who stamped out that way of life, not the ones who practiced it.

This isn't to say we should go back to the way things used to be, or that we could—only that things don't have to be the way they are right now. If our distant ancestors could see us today, they'd probably be excited about some of our inventions and horrified by others, but they'd surely be shocked by how we apply them. We built this world with our labor, and without certain obstacles we could surely build a better one. That wouldn't mean abandoning everything we've learned. It would just mean abandoning everything we've learned *doesn't work*.



WORK IS PRODUCTIVE.



One can hardly deny that work is productive. Just a couple thousand years of it have dramatically transformed the surface of the earth.

But what exactly does it produce? Disposable chopsticks by the billion; laptops and cell phones that are obsolete within a couple years. Miles of waste dumps and tons upon tons of chlorofluorocarbons. Factories that will rust as soon as labor is cheaper elsewhere. Dumpsters full of overstock, while a billion suffer malnutrition; medical treatments only the wealthy can afford; novels and philosophies and art movements most of us just don't have time for in a society that subordinates desires to profit motives and needs to property rights.

And where do the resources for all this production come from? What happens to the ecosystems and communities that are pillaged and exploited? If work is productive, it's even more *destructive*.

Work doesn't produce goods out of thin air; it's not a conjuring act. Rather, it takes raw materials from the biosphere—a common treasury shared by all living things—and transforms them into products animated by the logic of market. For those who see the world in terms of balance sheets, this is an improvement, but the rest of us shouldn't take their word for it.

Capitalists and socialists have always taken it for granted that work produces value. Workers have to consider a different possibility—that working *uses up* value. That's why the forests and polar ice caps are being consumed alongside the hours of our lives: the aches in our bodies

when we come home from work parallel the damage taking place on a global scale.

What should we be producing, if not all this stuff? Well, how about *happiness itself*? Can we imagine a society in which the primary goal of our activity was to make the most of life, to explore its mysteries, rather than to amass wealth or outflank competition? We would still make material goods in such a society, of course, but not in order to compete for profit. Festivals, feasts, philosophy, romance, creative pursuits, child-rearing, friendship, adventure—can we picture these as the center of life, rather than packed into our spare time?

Today things are the other way around—our conception of happiness is constructed as a means to stimulate *production*. Small wonder products are crowding us out of the world.

WORK CREATES WEALTH.



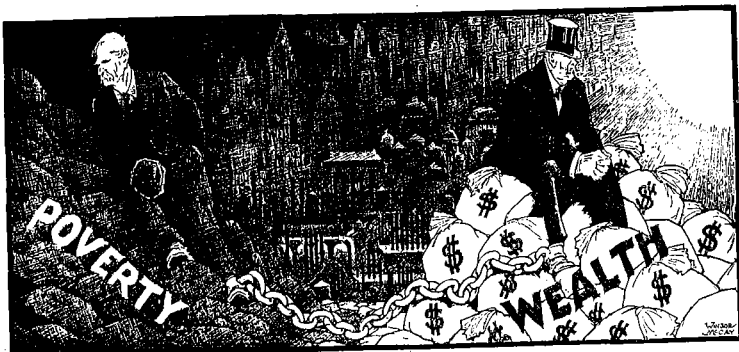
Work doesn't simply create wealth where there was only poverty before. On the contrary, so long as it enriches some at others' expense, work creates *poverty*, too, in direct proportion to profit.

Poverty is not an objective condition, but a relationship produced by unequal distribution of resources. There's no such thing as poverty in societies in which people share everything. There may be scarcity, but no one is subjected to the indignity of having to go without while others have more than they know what to do with. As profit is accumulated and the minimum threshold of wealth necessary to exert influence in society rises higher and higher, poverty becomes more and more debilitating. It is a form of exile—

the cruelest form of exile, for you stay within society while being excluded from it. You can neither participate nor go anywhere else.

Work doesn't just create poverty alongside wealth—it concentrates wealth in the hands of a few while spreading poverty far and wide. For every Bill Gates, a million people must live below the poverty line; for every Shell Oil, there has to be a Nigeria. The more we work, the more profit is accumulated from our labor, and the poorer we are compared to our exploiters.

So in addition to creating wealth, *work makes people poor*. This is clear even before we factor in all the *other* ways work makes us poor: poor in self-determination, poor in free time, poor in health, poor in sense of self beyond our careers and bank accounts, poor in spirit.



GOODNESS, GENTLEMEN, WE CAN'T ALL BE BILLIONAIRES—THAT WOULD JUST BE INFLATION. REALLY NOW! IF ANYONE IS TO BE RICH, SOMEBODY HAS TO BE POOR.



**YOU NEED
TO WORK TO
MAKE A LIVING.**

“Cost of living” estimates are misleading—there’s little living going on at all! “Cost of working” is more like it, and it’s not cheap.

Everyone knows what housecleaners and dishwashers pay for being the backbone of our economy. All the scourges of poverty—addiction, broken families, poor health—are par for the course; the ones who survive these and somehow go on showing up on time are working miracles. Think what they could accomplish if they were free to apply that power to something other than earning profits for their employers!

What about their employers, fortunate to be higher on the pyramid? You would think earning a higher salary would mean having more money and thus more freedom, but it’s not that simple. Every job entails hidden costs: just as a dishwasher has to pay bus fare to and from work every day, a corporate lawyer has to be able to fly anywhere at a moment’s notice, to maintain a country club membership for informal business meetings, to own a small mansion in which to entertain dinner guests that double as clients. This is why it’s so difficult for middle-class workers to save up enough money to quit while they’re ahead and get out of the rat race: trying to get ahead in the economy basically means running in place. At best, you might advance to a fancier treadmill, but you’ll have to run faster to stay on it.

And these merely financial costs of working are the least expensive. In one survey, people of all walks of life were asked how much money they would need to live the life they wanted; from pauper to patrician, they all answered approximately double whatever their current income was.

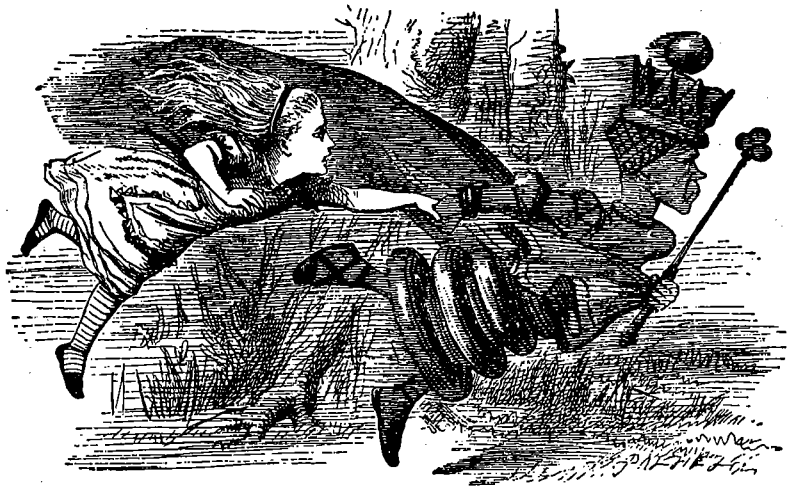
So not only is money costly to obtain, but, like any addictive drug, it’s less and less fulfilling! And the further up you get in the hierarchy, the more you have to fight to hold your place. The wealthy executive must abandon his unruly passions and his conscience, must convince himself that he deserves more than the unfortunates whose labor provides for his comfort, must smother his every impulse to question, to share, to imagine himself in others’ shoes; if he doesn’t, sooner or later some more ruthless contender replaces him. Both blue collar and white collar workers have to kill themselves to keep the jobs that keep them alive; it’s just a question of physical or spiritual destruction.

Those are the costs we pay individually, but there’s also a global price to pay for all this working. Alongside the environmental costs, there are work-related illnesses, injuries, and deaths: every year we kill people by the thousand to sell hamburgers and health club memberships to the survivors. The US Department of Labor reported that twice as many people suffered fatal work injuries in 2001 as died in the September 11 attacks, and that doesn’t begin to take into account work-related illnesses. Above all, more exorbitant than any other price, there is the cost of never learning how to direct our own lives, never getting the chance to answer or even ask the question of what we would do with our time on this planet if it was up to us. We can never know how much we are giving up by settling for a world in which people are too busy, too poor, or too beaten down to do so.

Why work, if it’s so expensive? Everyone knows the answer—there’s no other way to acquire the resources we need to survive, or for that matter to participate in society at all. All the earlier social forms that made other ways of life possible have been eradicated—they were stamped out by conquistadors, slave traders, and corporations that left neither tribe nor tradition nor ecosystem intact. Contrary to capitalist propaganda, free human beings don’t crowd into

factories for a pittance if they have other options, not even in return for name brand shoes and software.

In working and shopping and paying bills, each of us helps perpetuate the conditions that necessitate these activities. Capitalism exists because we invest everything in it: all our energy and ingenuity in the marketplace, all our resources at the supermarket and in the stock market, all our attention in the media. To be more precise, capitalism exists because our daily activities *are* it. But would we continue to reproduce it if we felt we had another choice?



"A slow sort of country!" said the Queen. "Now here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that."

"I'd rather not try, please!" said Alice.

WORK IS A PATH TO FULFILLMENT.



On the contrary, instead of enabling people to achieve happiness, work fosters the worst kind of self-denial.

Obeying teachers, bosses, the demands of the market—not to mention laws, parents' expectations, religious scriptures, social norms—we're conditioned from infancy to put our desires on hold. Following orders becomes an unconscious reflex, whether or not they are in our best interest; deferring to experts becomes second nature.

Selling our time rather than doing things for their own sake, we come to evaluate our lives on the basis of how much we can get in exchange for them, not what we get out of them. As freelance slaves hawking our lives hour by hour, we think of ourselves as each having a price; the amount of the price becomes our measure of value. In that sense, we become commodities, just like toothpaste and toilet paper. What once was a human being is now an employee, in the same way that what once was a pig is now a pork chop. Our lives disappear, spent like the money for which we trade them.

Often we become so used to giving up things that are precious to us that *sacrifice* comes to be our only way of expressing that we care about something. We martyr ourselves for ideas, causes, love of one another, even when these are supposed to help us find happiness.

There are families, for example, in which people show affection by competing to be the one who gives up the most for the others. Gratification isn't just delayed, it's passed on from one generation to the next. The responsibility of finally enjoying all the happiness presumably saved up over years

of thankless toil is deferred to the children; yet when they come of age, if they are to be seen as responsible adults, they too must begin working their fingers to the bone.

But the buck has to stop somewhere.

“If hard work were such a wonderful thing, surely the rich would have kept it all to themselves.”
- Lane Kirkland



WORK INSTILLS INITIATIVE.

People work hard nowadays, that's for sure. Tying access to resources to market performance has caused unprecedented production and technological progress. Indeed, the market has monopolized access to our own creative capacities to such an extent that many people work not only to survive but also to *have something to do*. But what kind of initiative does this instill?

Let's go back to global warming, one of the most serious crises facing the planet. After decades of denial, politicians and businessmen have finally swung into action to do something about it. And what are they doing? Casting about for ways to cash in! Carbon credits, "clean" coal, "green" invest-

ment firms—who believes that these are the *most effective* way to curb the production of greenhouse gases? It's ironic that a catastrophe caused by capitalist consumerism can be used to spur more consumption, but it reveals a lot about the kind of initiative work instills. What kind of person, confronted with the task of preventing the end of life on earth, responds, "Sure, but what's in it for *me*?"

If everything in our society has to be driven by a profit motive to succeed, that might not be initiative after all, but something else. Really taking initiative, initiating new values and new modes of behavior—this is as unthinkable to the enterprising businessman as it is to his most listless employee. What if working—that is, leasing your creative powers to others, whether managers or customers—actually *erodes* initiative?

The evidence for this extends beyond the workplace. How many people who never miss a day of work can't show up on time for band practice? We can't keep up with the reading for our book clubs even when we can finish papers for school on time; the things we *really* want to do with our lives end up at the bottom of the to-do list. The ability to follow through on commitments becomes something outside ourselves, associated with external rewards or punishments.

Imagine a world in which everything people did, they did because they *wanted* to, because they were personally invested in bringing it about. For any boss who has struggled to motivate indifferent employees, the idea of working with people who are equally invested in the same projects sounds utopian. But this isn't proof that nothing would get done without bosses and salaries—it just shows how work saps us of initiative.



WORK PROVIDES SECURITY.

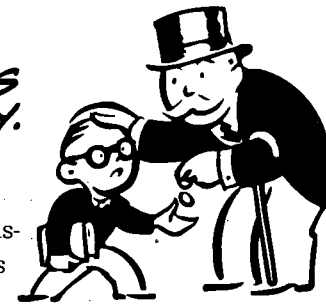
Let's say your job never injures, poisons, or sickens you. Let's also take it for granted that the economy doesn't crash and take your job and savings with it, and that no one who got a worse deal than you manages to hurt or rob you. You still can't be sure you won't be downsized. Nowadays nobody works for the same employer his whole life; you work somewhere a few years until they let you go for someone younger and cheaper or outsource your job overseas. You can break your back to prove you're the best in your field and still end up hung out to dry.

You have to count on your employers to make shrewd decisions so they can write your paycheck—they can't just fritter money away or they won't have it to pay you. But you never know when that shrewdness will turn against you: the ones you depend on for your livelihood didn't get where they are by being sentimental. If you're self-employed, you probably know how fickle the market can be, too.

What could provide real security? Perhaps being part of a long-term community in which people looked out for each other, a community based on mutual assistance rather than financial incentives. And what is one of the chief obstacles to building that kind of community today? *Work*.

ca-reer (kə-rîr') *v. -intr.* 1. Move swiftly and in an uncontrolled way in a specified direction: *the car careered across the road and went through a hedge.*

WORK TEACHES RESPONSIBILITY.

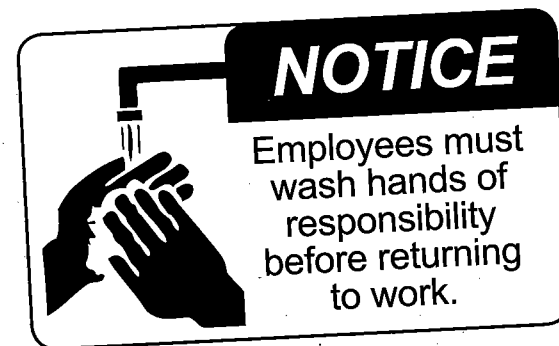


Who carried out most of the injustices in history? *Employees*. This is not necessarily to say they are *responsible* for them—as they would be the first to tell you!

Does receiving a wage absolve you of responsibility for your actions? Working seems to foster the impression that it does. The Nuremberg defense—"I was just following orders"—has been the anthem and alibi of millions of employees. This willingness to check one's conscience at the workplace door—to be, in fact, a mercenary—lies at the root of many of the troubles plaguing our species.

People have done horrible things without orders, too—but not nearly so many horrible things. You can reason with a person who is acting for herself; she acknowledges that she is accountable for her decisions. Employees, on the other hand, can do unimaginably dumb and destructive things while refusing to think about the consequences.

The real problem, of course, isn't employees refusing to take responsibility for their actions—it's the economic system that makes taking responsibility so prohibitively expensive.



Employees dump toxic waste into rivers and oceans.
Employees slaughter cows and perform experiments on monkeys.
Employees throw away truckloads of food.
Employees are destroying the ozone layer.
They watch your every move through security cameras.
They evict you when you don't pay your rent.
They imprison you when you don't pay your taxes.
They humiliate you when you don't do your homework or show up to work on time.
They enter information about your private life into credit reports and FBI files.
They give you speeding tickets and tow your car.
They administer standardized exams, juvenile detention centers, and lethal injections.
The soldiers who herded people into gas chambers were employees,
Just like the soldiers occupying Iraq and Afghanistan,
Just like the suicide bombers who target them—they are employees of God, hoping to be paid in paradise.



THAT'S ENOUGH!

**YOU HAVE TO PAY YOUR OWN WAY—
EVEN IF THAT MEANS DOING IT AT
EVERYONE ELSE'S EXPENSE!
ANYTHING ELSE IS IRRESPONSIBLE,
SUICIDAL, A SIN AGAINST GOD,
A BETRAYAL OF YOUR POOR PARENTS,
A SLAP IN THE FACE OF ALL THE POOR
BASTARDS WHO HAVE NO OTHER CHOICE,
AND A VIOLATION OF THE
TERMS OF YOUR PROBATION—
NOT TO MENTION PROOF THAT YOU MUST
BE A SPOILED BRAT WITH A TRUST FUND!**

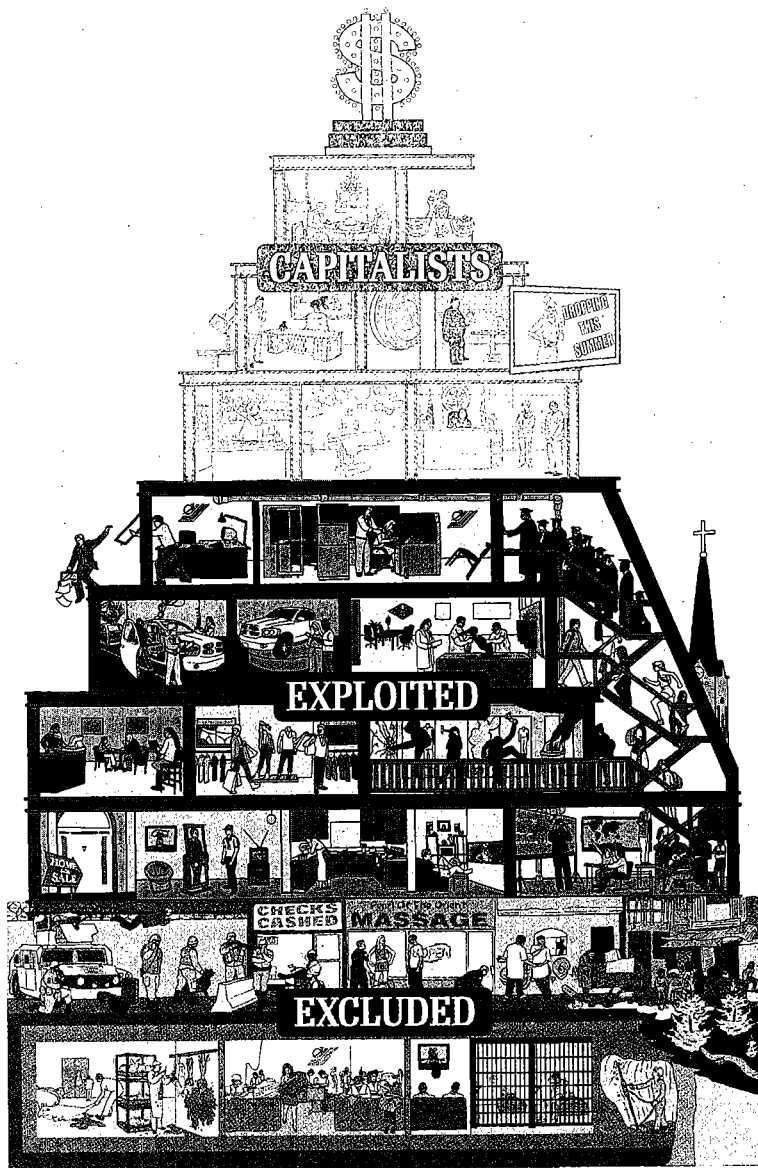
**NOW GET
BACK IN
THERE
AND GO
BACK TO
WORK!**



Let's be clear about this—critiquing work doesn't mean rejecting labor, effort, ambition, or commitment. It doesn't mean demanding that everything be fun or easy. Fighting against the forces that compel us to work is hard work. Laziness is not the alternative to work, though it might be a *byproduct* of it.

The bottom line is simple: all of us deserve to make the most of our potential as we see fit, to be the masters of our own destinies. Being forced to sell these things away to survive is tragic and humiliating. *We don't have to live like this.*

ii. The Economy



Understanding The Economy

The economy extends infinitely in all directions around us. It seems impossible to get a handle on how it works. How could anyone conceptualize the activities of billions of human beings?

The idea that you need a *complete understanding of the economy* to come to any conclusions about it just serves to silence people. By that reasoning, only the best-informed economists are entitled to decide whether to go to work in the morning. However informed we are, at every moment we all have to choose whether to continue what we've been doing or try something else.

Perhaps instead we can start from our individual positions, looking at the things that are familiar to us. If there are general principles that govern capitalism, they should be visible from wherever we begin. In this view, an economist isn't necessarily more qualified to talk about the economy than a janitor.

There are many ways to structure an analysis of the economy. One conventional approach is to break it into sectors according to the processes of production and consumption: sector one involves direct resource extraction such as mining and agriculture, sector two includes manufacturing and construction, sector three is the service industry, and so on.

In the 19th century over two thirds of US laborers worked in the primary sector; today, over 80% of the labor force is employed in the tertiary sector.

But if we want to focus on who benefits from the current state of affairs, it makes more sense to divide things up according to other criteria. Studying the flows of capital, we might say there are three basic categories: **capitalists**, who profit from others' labor; the **exploited**, whose activity turns a profit for others; and the **excluded**, who are left out of the equation and have to survive on the fringes of the economy. These categories are not exclusive or definitive; some people occupy multiple positions at once or during different phases of their lives.

Capitalists make money not only on what they *do*, but also from what they own. It takes money to make money, as the saying goes. Business owners, landlords, and large shareholders are capitalists. So are executives who receive salaries padded with money produced by other people's efforts. An employee who owns a small amount of company stock could be called a microcapitalist.

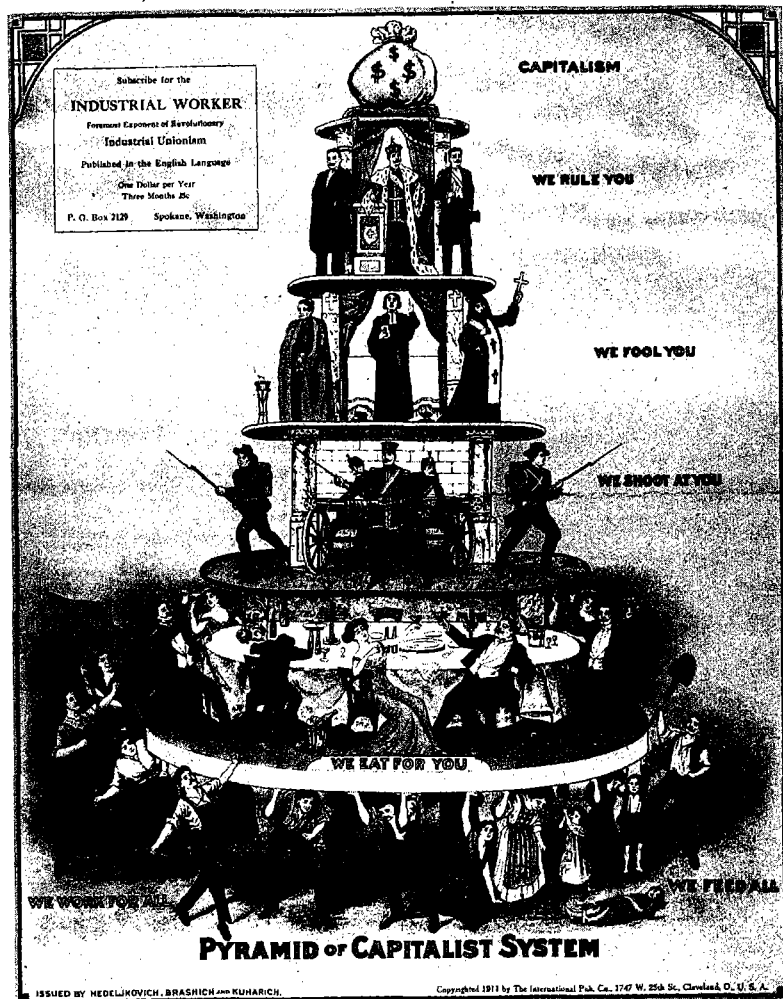
Capitalists derive their profit from the activity of the **exploited**. The majority of the exploited can only make money from their own labor, so it's easy for employers to pay them less than the value they produce. When banks and credit card companies make money off debtors, they're exploiting them, the same as a corporation that pays an employee a dollar to make a \$200 pair of shoes.

Untold millions are at the mercy of the economy but **excluded** from participating in it. The unemployed and the homeless are excluded, along with most of the occupants of favelas and shantytowns around the world. Prisoners are often both excluded and exploited, being forced to work at a pittance that amounts to slave labor. Being excluded is not the same as being outside the market—the dispossessed are poor precisely because they are *inside* capitalism.

This is only one version of the story, of course. A horror movie buff might use different language: *vampires*, *robots*, *zombies*. We could also structure our analysis in terms of production and consumption, or material versus immaterial labor. And alongside these economic structures are other power structures, like race and gender, that can be charted countless other ways. The economy cannot be understood apart from these—could modern capitalism have come about without the colonialism that plundered the so-called New World? How about the racism that justified slavery, or the sexism expressed in glass ceilings and unpaid domestic labor? Nor can these be remedied without changing the economy. How much difference does it make to have an African-American president when nearly a million black men are behind bars?

So all these dynamics can't be disentangled or reduced to a single narrative. A real working model of the world would be as immense and complex as the world itself. The point is to develop tools that can help us make sense of our lives and regain control of them.

To that end, let's chart some of the economic roles and relationships that are familiar to us. This is just one cross-section of the economy—but if our hypothesis is correct, it should offer a starting point from which to understand our situation.



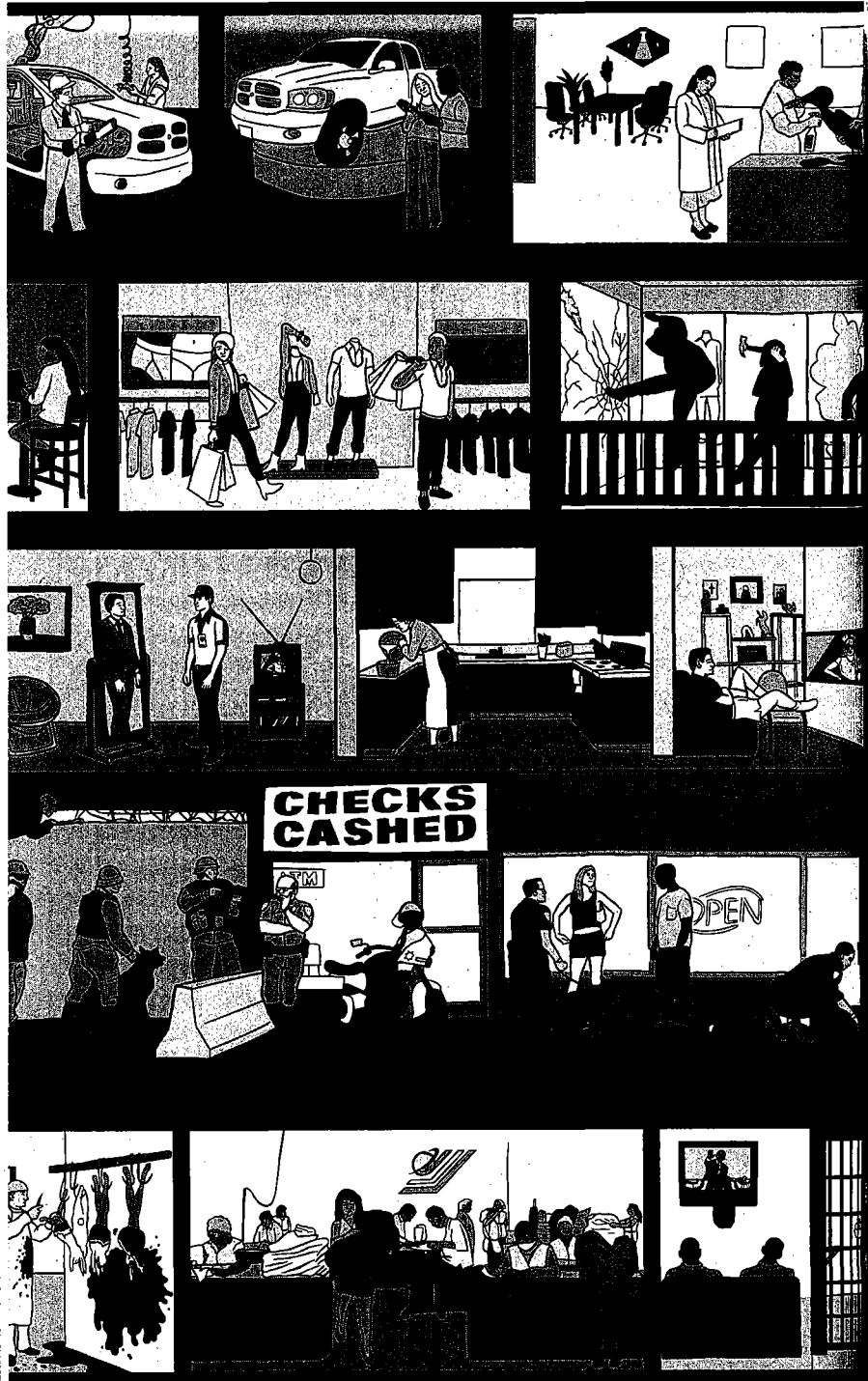
Shifting Terrain

The structure of the economy isn't static. It is constantly evolving and expanding, incorporating new territories, subjects, and modes of production and consumption. We can't rely on previous conceptions of it for guidance, although they can help us understand the ways it has changed over the years.

Resistance is one of the most powerful forces that drives the development of the economy. As people find new ways to fight or escape the roles imposed on them, the economy changes to suppress, incorporate, or outmode their resistance. One generation declares that industrialism is polluting the earth; the next generation sees "sustainability" become a selling point for new commodities. One generation rejects network television as an immobilizing spectacle controlled by an elite; the next becomes dependent on participatory formats such as Youtube and Facebook.

This means we can't just make incremental reforms over time. If employees win wage increases, landlords just raise their rent; if laws are passed to protect the environment, corporations take their business elsewhere.

It also makes it difficult to build up a resistance movement over the years. Often, as soon as a movement starts to pick up steam, the context changes and its sources of strength dry up. On the other hand, this volatility means that things sometimes change quickly and unexpectedly—and history is moving faster than ever these days.



The Metropolis

The economy reshapes the physical and social terrain in its own image: silicon valleys, motor cities, banana republics. It erases the distinction between natural and synthetic: a cornfield in Iowa is no more natural than the concrete wasteland of Newark, New Jersey. It unifies space while producing new partitions within it.

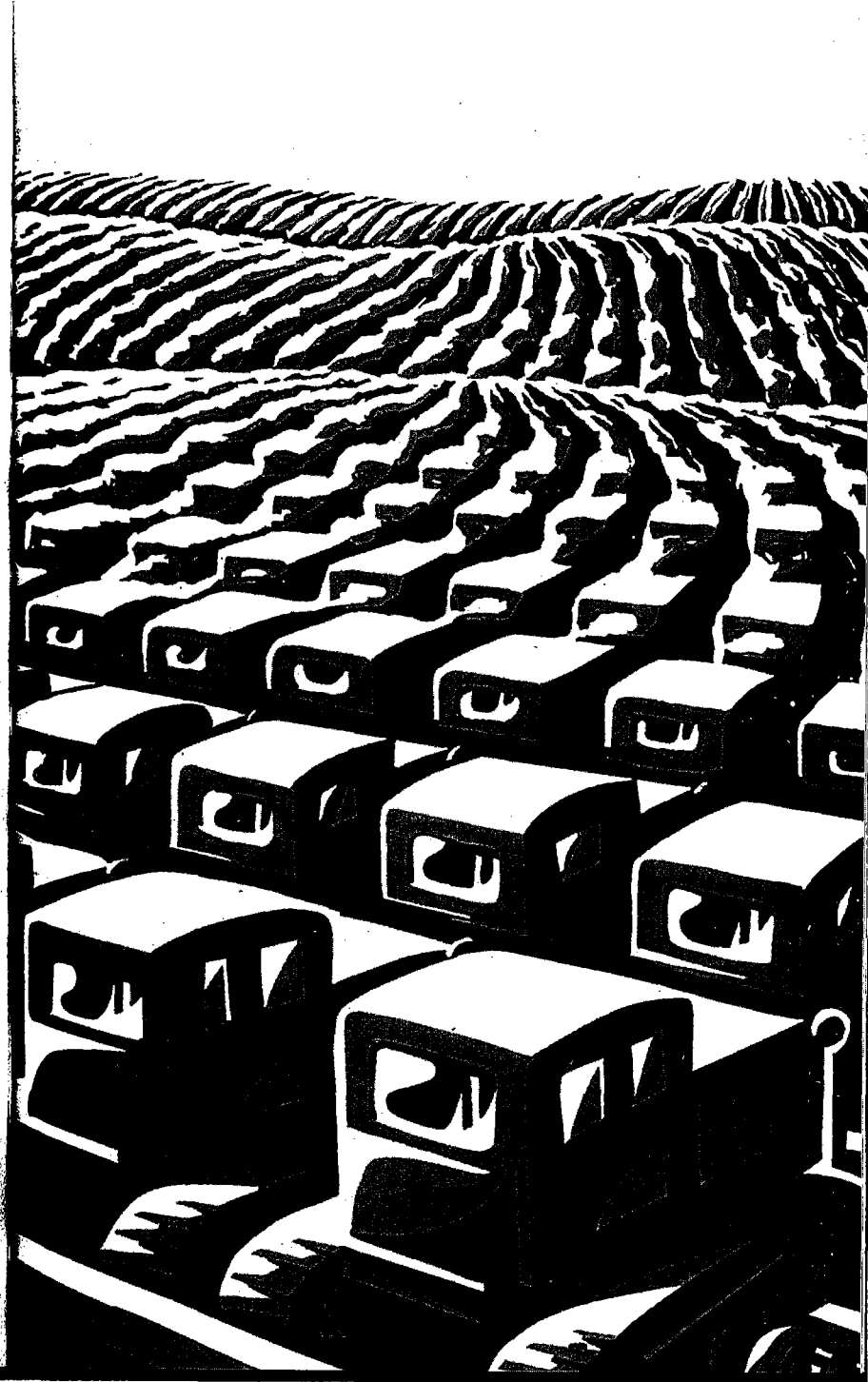
The metropolis in which our story takes place is *every* metropolis, which is to say it is *one* metropolis. Roses picked on plantations in rural Ecuador are sold to Manhattan businessmen the same day; a set by a DJ at a Barcelona nightclub is broadcast simultaneously in Johannesburg. News, fashions, and ideas are transmitted instantaneously around the globe; every city is populated by tourists and refugees from every other city. People spend more time communicating across hundreds of miles than they do talking to their neighbors. Physical distance between people in different cities is giving way to social distance between people *in the same city*.

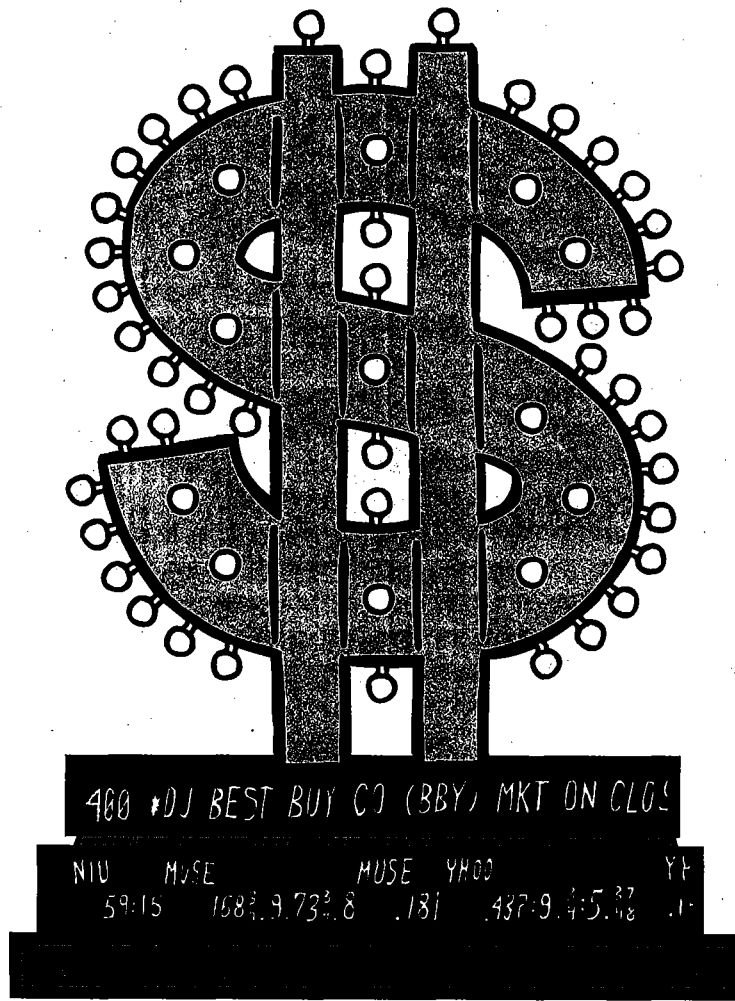
National boundaries are increasingly obsolete as a framework for understanding economics. One can no longer distinguish the domestic economy from the global economy, if such a thing was ever possible. The majority of the wealth of many US corporations is comprised of their holdings overseas; a single task may be outsourced from New York

City to Mumbai; an idea from Argentina generates profits in Finland. The world isn't made up of distinct physical territories or political bodies; it is a sea of interlocking relations that, like wind, water, and thermal currents, do not conform to imaginary boundaries.

And yet, though national borders cannot block them, the economy imposes real constraints on these relations. Today the significant borders are not the horizontal ones drawn between regions but the vertical ones dividing social strata, which are enforced everywhere at once rather than at individual checkpoints. These divide the metropolis into different zones of privilege, determining access to resources and power. Such zones may meet anywhere: an undocumented immigrant cleans a congressman's house for illegally low wages; guards brandish guns at the gate of an expensive hotel housing European businessmen right next to a shantytown in New Delhi.

Work reshapes the world in its own image.





At the Top

Who wields the ultimate power in the capitalist system?

Is it heads of state? They seem to rule only at the behest of the wealthy, whose interests they protect. Is it the wealthiest ones, the magnates who own corporations and draw profit from a thousand shrewd investments? They still have to scramble to maintain their positions as a thousand contenders struggle to replace them. How about the Federal Reserve, the bankers, the ones who administrate the system? When something goes awry, they seem as powerless and distraught as everyone else. Is it a secret conspiracy of tycoons or Freemasons? That sounds like lingering anti-Semitic rhetoric, implying that the problem is the power of a specific group rather than the dynamics of the system itself.

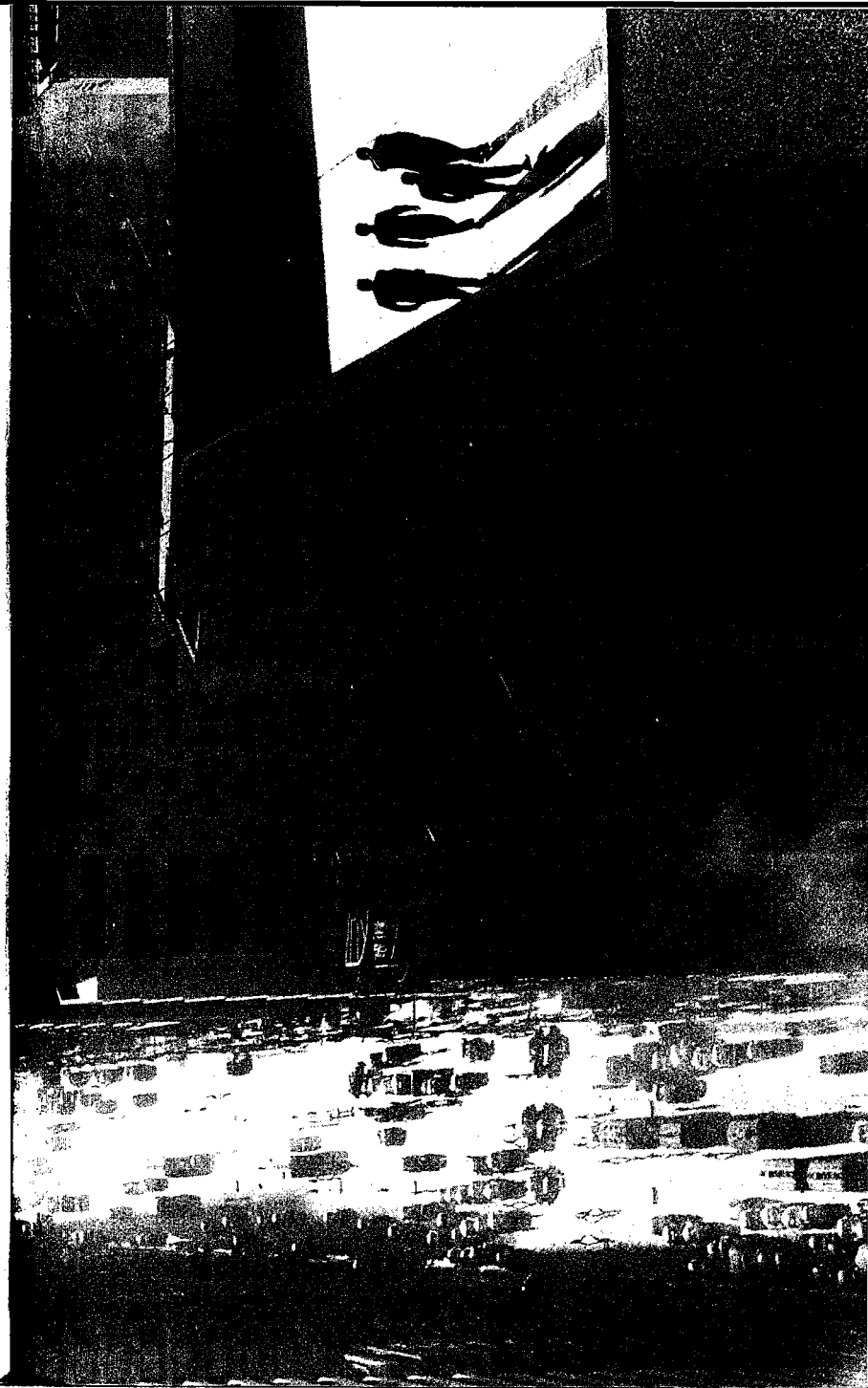
Or is *no one* in control? People speak about the economy the way they speak about God or Nature, even though it's comprised of their own activities and the activities of people like them. It is a sort of Ouija board on which the self-interested actions of competing individuals add up to collective disempowerment. Has there ever been an autocrat as tyrannical and destructive as the market?

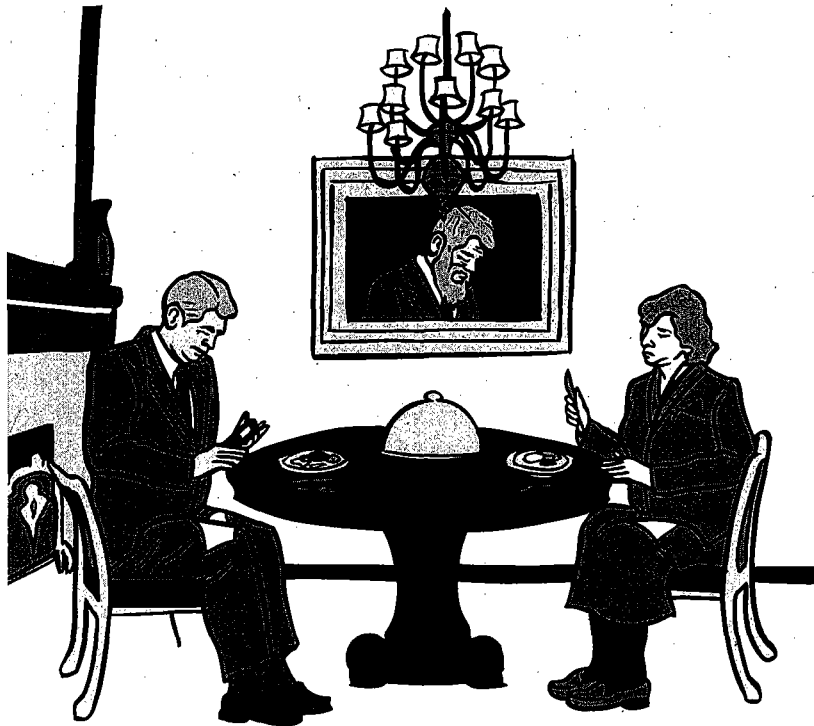
Capital appears to be autonomous. It flows one way, then another; it concentrates itself in one nation, then disappears capriciously overseas. From an economist's perspective, it is the subject of history, acting upon us. Its movements seem unstoppable, inevitable, a sort of financial weather. And yet

capital as we know it is simply a collective hallucination imposed on the world, a socially produced relationship.

What is capital? Broadly put, it is a product of previous labor that can be used to produce wealth. This can take many forms. A factory is capital; a trademarked computer program can function as capital; if you have enough money left to play the stock market after you've paid your gas bill, that counts as capital too. The common thread is that all of these can be used to accumulate profit on an ongoing basis in a society that believes in private property. Capitalism is the system in which private ownership of capital determines the social landscape: in a sense, it really is *capital* that calls the shots, ruling through interchangeable human hosts.

That doesn't mean the solution is to use political structures to "tame" capital, making it more rational, more "democratic." Wealth is more concentrated today than ever before in history, despite all the experiments that have taken place in socialism and social democracy. Political power can impose control over human beings, but it can't make capital function differently—that would take a fundamental social transformation. As long as the foundation of our economic system is *ownership*, capital will tend to accumulate into higher and higher concentrations, and the resulting inequalities will determine the dynamics of our society regardless of checks and balances.





Magnates

The market rewards skill, brilliance, and daring—but only to the extent that they produce profit.

The essential quality naturally selected for those at the top of the pyramid is that they make decisions on the basis of what concentrates the most power in their hands. That power doesn't come out of the air; it is comprised of others' capabilities and agency and effort.

They pass down all the costs of this accumulation of power that they can—not only to workers and consumers and victims of pollution, but also to their spouses and secretaries and housemaids. But they can't avoid the fact that they have to make decisions based on economic constraints or else lose their positions of power. Perhaps this is self-determination, but only inside a very narrow framework for what self-determination is.

You could say capitalism puts power in the worst hands, but that misses the point. It's not that the ones rewarded by the economy tend to be the worst people, but that—however selfish or generous they are—their positions are contingent on certain kinds of behavior. The moment an executive deprioritizes profit-making, he or his company is instantly replaced with a more ruthless contender. For example, in a world in which corporate decisions are governed by the necessity of producing good quarterly reports, CEOs are simply powerless to make decisions that place ecology over profit. They might promote ecological products or sustainable energy, but only as a marketing campaign or

PR move. Genuinely ecocentric decision-making can only occur outside the market.

So you don't have to believe all executives are bad people to conclude that capitalism itself is pernicious. On the contrary, the defenders of the free market are the ones who have to make arguments based on human nature. To excuse the destructiveness of the economy, they must argue that no other social system can motivate human beings and provide for their needs.



Who dies when they make a killing?

Politicians

Everybody hates politicians. This should be surprising, considering that their careers depend on being liked, but the reason is simple enough. They get their jobs by promising us the world, but their job is to keep it out of our hands—to govern it.

Like every other form of work, this governing imposes its own logic. Think about what goes on in the Pentagon and the Kremlin and the offices of every town hall. Those day-to-day activities are the same under Democrats as they are under Republicans; they're not much different in Moscow today than they were under Bolsheviks or even the Tsar. Politicians may wield power within the structures of the state, but those structures dictate what they can do with it.

To understand how this works, we have to begin in feudal Europe, when capitalism was just getting started and the fabric of society was simpler. Kings granted nobles power in return for military support; nobles gave vassals land in return for fealty; peasants and serfs gave their lords free labor and a share of what they produced in return for not being exterminated. Access to resources was determined by inherited status and an ever-shifting balance of allegiances. These hierarchies were explicit but extremely unstable: because there were few other ways to better one's lot, people were constantly rebelling and overturning them.

Eventually, however, monarchs began to consolidate power. To accomplish this, they had to construct what we know today as the apparatus of the state: they integrated their



henchmen into a single bureaucratic machine monopolizing military force, judicial legitimacy, and the regulation of commerce. Unlike the nobles of feudal times, the functionaries in this machine had specialized duties and limited authority; they answered directly to the monarchs who paid their wages, often with money borrowed from the banks that were springing up all over Europe.

The first politicians were ministers appointed by kings to operate this machinery. In some ways, they were bureaucrats like those under them; they had to be fairly competent in the fields they oversaw, like an attorney general or secretary of state today. But competence was often less important than the ability to curry favor with the king via flattery, bribes, or outlandish promises. This should sound familiar to anyone who follows contemporary politics.

Capitalism developed in a symbiotic relationship with the apparatus of the state. In feudal times, most people had obtained much of what they needed outside the exchange economy. But as the state consolidated power, the fields and pastures that had been held in common were privatized, and local minorities and overseas continents were ruthlessly plundered. As resources began to flow more dynamically, merchants and bankers gained increasing power and influence.

The North American and European revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries brought an end to the reign of kings. Seeing the writing on the wall, merchants sided with the exploited and excluded. But the apparatus of the state was essential for protecting their wealth; so instead of abolishing the structures through which the king had ruled them, they argued that people should take them over and administer them "democratically." Consequently, "we the people" replaced the king as the sovereign power for politicians to court.

The state apparatus went on consolidating power independently of the individuals at its helm and the sovereign to

whom they supposedly answered. Police, education, social services, militaries, financial institutions, and jurisprudence expanded and multiplied. In keeping with their symbiotic relationship with capitalism, all of these tended to produce docile workforces, stable markets, and a steady stream of resources. As they came to administer more and more aspects of society according to a body of specialized knowledge, it became ever more difficult to imagine life without them.

In the 20th century, a new wave of revolutions established the rule of this bureaucratic class throughout the "developing world." This time, merchants were often overthrown along with kings; but once again, the state apparatus itself was left intact, operated by a new generation of politicians who claimed to serve "the working class." Some called this "socialism," but properly speaking it was simply *state capitalism*, in which capital was controlled by government bureaucracy.

Today, capital and the state have almost completely replaced the hierarchies of the feudal era. Wealth and influence remain hereditary—hence the succession of Roosevelts and Bushes in the White House—but it is the structures themselves that dominate our lives rather than the individuals operating them. And while feudal hierarchies were fixed but fragile, these new structures are extremely resilient.

Some still hope that democracy will counteract the effects of capitalism. But it's no coincidence that the two spread across the world together: both preserve hierarchies while enabling maximum mobility within them. This channels discontent into internal competition, enabling individuals to change their positions without contesting the power imbalances built into society. The free market gives every sensible worker an incentive to remain invested in private ownership and competition; as long as it seems more feasible to better his own standing than to pull off a revolution, he'll choose competing for a promotion over class war. Similarly, democracy is the best way to maximize popular investment



A spectacle to distract

in the coercive institutions of the state because it gives the greatest possible number of people the feeling that they could have some influence over them.

In representative democracy as in capitalist competition, everyone supposedly gets a chance but only a few come out on top. If you didn't win, you must not have tried hard enough! This is the same rationalization used to justify the injustices of sexism and racism: look, you lazy bums, you could have been Bill Cosby or Hillary Clinton if you'd just *worked harder*. But there's not enough space at the top for all of us, no matter how hard we work.

When reality is generated via the media and media access is determined by wealth, elections are simply advertising campaigns. Market competition dictates which lobbyists gain the resources to determine the grounds upon which voters make their decisions. Under these circumstances, a political party is essentially a business offering investment opportunities in legislation. It's foolish to expect political representatives to oppose the interests of their clientele when they depend directly upon them for power.

But even if we could reform the electoral system and vote in representatives with hearts of gold, the state would still be an obstacle to consensual social structures and self-determination. Its essential function is to impose control: to *enforce*, to *punish*, to *administer*. In the absence of kings, domination continues—it's all the system is good for.

Modern debates between the political "left" and "right" generally center on how much control of capital should go to the state rather than to private enterprise. Both agree that power should be centralized in the hands of a professional elite; the only question is how this elite should be constituted. Leftists often argue their case by decrying the irrationality of the market and promising a more humane state of affairs.

Yet there's no evidence that we'd be better off if the state owned everything. From the Soviet Union to Nazi Germany,

the 20th century offers plenty of examples of this, none of them promising. In view of their historical origins and the demands of maintaining power, it shouldn't be surprising that state bureaucracies are no better than corporate bureaucracies. All bureaucracy alienates human beings from their own potential, rendering it something external that they can only access through its channels.

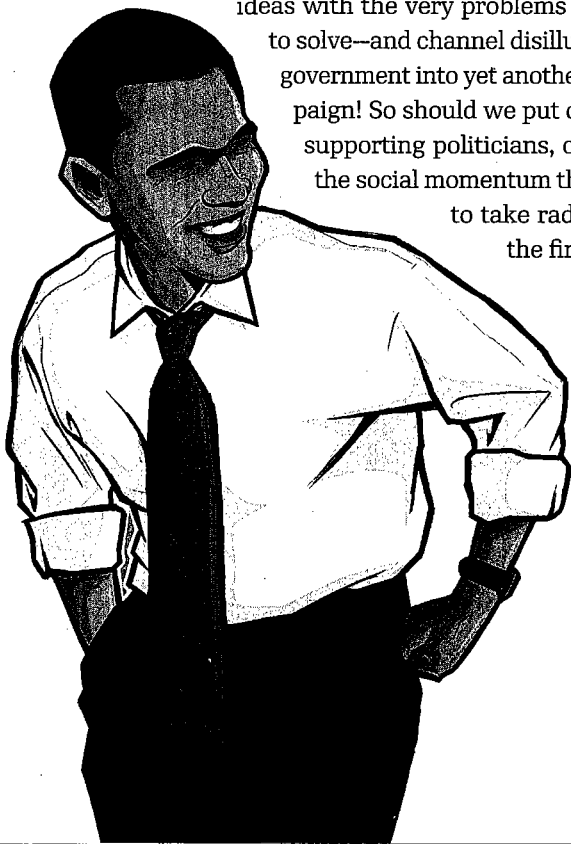
While some politicians might oppose powerful individuals or classes, no politician will contest hierarchical power *per se*; like magnates, their position is contingent on the centralization of power, so they can do no different. In extreme cases, a government may replace one capitalist class with another—as the Bolsheviks did after the Russian Revolution—but no government will ever do away with private ownership, for governing necessarily entails controlling capital. If we want to create a world without work, we'll have to do so without politicians.



You will never ascend to the stage

Sometimes a candidate appears who says everything people have been saying to each other for a long time—he seems to have appeared from outside the world of politics, to really be *one of us*. By critiquing the system within its own logic, he subtly persuades people that it can be reformed—that it *could* work, if only the right people had power. Thus a lot of energy that might have gone into challenging the system itself is redirected into backing yet another candidate for office, who inevitably fails to deliver.

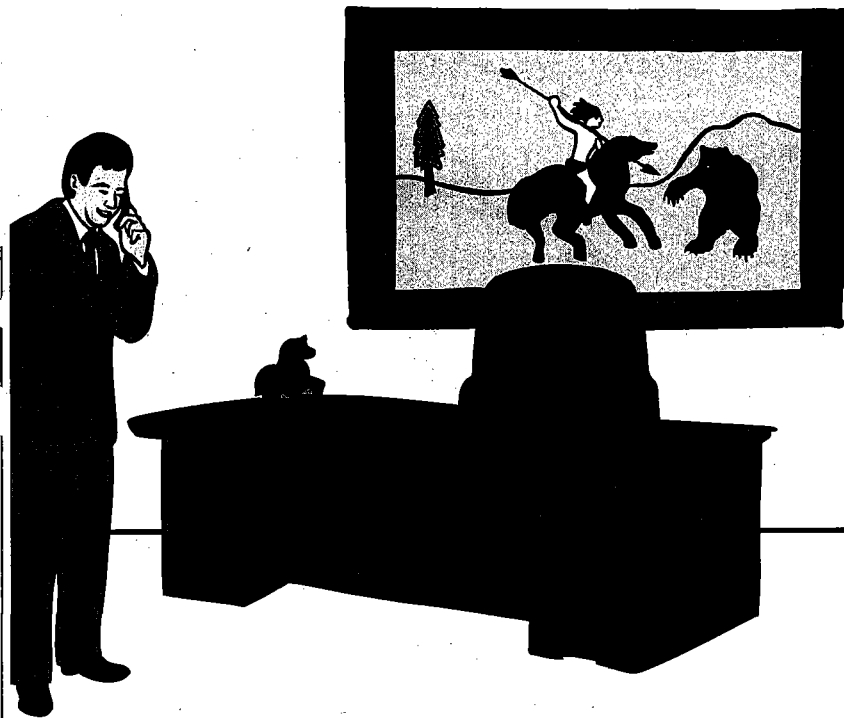
These candidates only receive so much attention because they draw on popular sentiments; the one thing they're good for is diverting energy from grass-roots movements. When they come to power and sell out the public, the opposition parties can capitalize on this to associate their supposedly radical ideas with the very problems they promised to solve—and channel disillusionment with government into yet another political campaign! So should we put our energy into supporting politicians, or into building the social momentum that forces them to take radical stances in the first place?



More frequently, we're terrorized into focusing on the electoral spectacle by the prospect of being ruled by the worst possible candidates. "What if *he* gets into power?" To think that things could get *even worse!*

But the problem is that politicians wield so much power in the first place—otherwise it wouldn't matter who held the reins. So long as this is the case, there will always be tyrants. This is why we have to put our energy into lasting solutions, not political campaigns.





Bosses

Who doesn't hate their boss? Even people who claim to like their bosses say so with a certain reserve: *he's not so bad . . . for a boss.*

Nobody likes being told what to do or turning a profit for someone else. These simple resentments keep things a little tense even without an anticapitalist movement. From the bosses' perspective, every day is a Kafkaesque struggle to cajole or coerce employees who would rather be anywhere else on earth. No one appreciates how tough it is at the top; everyone tells bosses what they want to hear, instead of the truth—not surprising, of course, considering the power differential. Small wonder the typical boss thinks the whole world would grind to a halt without bosses.

But workers hate bosses because bosses are *useless*. Bosses get in the way. The higher you rise in management, the less you're involved in practical day-to-day tasks and the less you know about them—hence the story of the incompetent worker who was promoted to ensure that he couldn't do any harm. In any case, most executives at the top of the corporate ladder did not start out at the bottom.

All this gives the lie to the narrative of meritocracy, the idea that people achieve money and power according to their skill and effort. Executives often make *hundreds of times* what their rank-and-file employees make; such dramatically unequal earnings cannot possibly reflect a real difference in

how hard they work or how much they offer to the world. More pragmatic businessmen explain that these salaries are necessary to compete against other companies to recruit effective executives. But if these disparities seem inevitable, this only shows that the capitalist economy *cannot* reward people according to their actual contributions.

Ironically, it seems that the only way to escape bosses is to become one—that is, *to become what you hate*. Hence the ambivalence many workers display to career advancement.

**BUT I WORKED HARD FOR MY MONEY!
I PULLED MYSELF UP BY MY BOOTSTRAPS!**

**MAYBE YOU DID, BUT DON'T YOU THINK THE PEOPLE
WHO CLEAN YOUR BATHROOMS WORK HARD, TOO?
THERE SIMPLY ISN'T ENOUGH SPACE AT THE TOP FOR
EVERYONE WHO WORKS HARD—AND I'M BETTING
YOU DIDN'T START OUT CLEANING BATHROOMS.**

BUT MY WEALTH CREATES JOBS FOR PEOPLE!

**YOU THINK PEOPLE HAD NO WAY OF LIV-
ING BEFORE YOU STARTED 'CREATING JOBS'
FOR US? ON THE CONTRARY, IT FORCES
JOBS ON US—WE USED TO BE FREE!**



PICTURE THE BUSINESS OWNER of the old days: a shopkeeper, a family running a store, a small factory owner employing townspeople who walk to work. In all these cases, the owners were clearly identifiable, typically part of the same community as the workers.

When you hear about a company “going public,” it sounds so collective and democratic: everyone can buy in and be part of the growth and success. But who’s really accountable in this structure, and what kind of decisions does it produce?

I reflected on this during my decade as an employee of a Fortune 100 corporation. Publicly-traded corporations have owners, too, but you have to peel back many onion-like layers to learn anything about them. Technically, every shareholder is an owner with legal rights to a share of the firm. But the total number of shares in a company often extends to hundreds of millions; it would take diligent research to learn anything about everyone involved.

Visible individual investors are rare, though there’s still an occasional wealthy family or trust with holdings big enough to warrant special treatment. More often, share ownership is divided among institutional investors: hedge funds, holding companies, private corporations, evil investment firms—think Goldman Sachs—and the real *dark matter* of the economy, mutual fund participants. The last group includes everyone with a 401K, union-managed retirement fund, or individual retirement account. Fifty years ago, safe-deposit boxes held fancy stock certificates from a short list of companies: “We found a certificate for 100 shares of IBM after he died.” Now

a wide range of people each own tiny pieces of hundreds of companies, and those holdings change daily.

The net effect at the corporate decision-making level is that executives have free rein to invoke the mantra of "shareholder value" with little risk of actual shareholder feedback. Since the shareholders change constantly, focusing on shareholder value doesn't mean answering to actual individuals who might have scruples of some kind. Rather, it means doing whatever it takes to make the company profitable and thus attractive to hypothetical investors. All the "ancillary criteria"—environmental impact, effects on employees and even customers—become secondary to what contributes to the value of each shareholder's stocks.

What I observed at the micro-level was that whenever managers and executives wrestled with emotionally-loaded decisions, they fell back on shareholder value to resolve the dilemma. The investors were an abstract entity that could justify anything; even if there were real people somewhere on the other end of those shares, we could only picture them as a sort of personified profit motive.

Meetings followed a familiar pattern. We dialed into the conference line and exchanged pleasantries with colleagues in other parts of the country—weather, sports, purchases, travel-related conversation—until a critical mass of participants joined the video conference. Aside from the occasional executive support person, everyone on the call earned \$250K to \$850K a year. Most were married and childless; the few with school-age kids had stay-at-home partners and nanny support. They sent their children to private college-prep schools and exercised at country clubs. I'd look around at them and reflect on how their decisions affected so many families of less means.

I remember one in-person all-day session that ran behind schedule; at five p.m. the group discussed whether to continue into the evening or schedule additional time the following

day. One vice president, a divorced father of three in his late forties, mentioned he'd need to get home to make dinner for his kids, ages seven, ten, and twelve. Genuinely thinking she was being helpful, the senior vice president suggested, "Can't you just have a pizza delivered?"

Another phenomenon I noticed was that the further up the organizational hierarchy a person rose, the more and more limited the things he could do to effect change became. The most basic limitation concerned direct human interaction. When you go from directing a group of ten people to directing a hundred and then a thousand, it becomes impossible to have meaningful contact with everyone. You end up doing "road shows" or town hall meetings, and rely more and more on email messages to influence individuals.

The one big move you can make at that level is the classic corporate reorganization. Structural rearrangements are often accompanied by job eliminations, which not only save the company money but also create chaos and divert attention. One CIO I worked for, when asked about a reorganization that would return the structure to what it had been six years earlier, explained, "It's like when you clean out a closet. You take everything out, you put almost everything back, but because you've rearranged things, it gives you a chance to see it differently. The particular structure you use ends up being less important than the fact that you gave everyone a way of seeing things differently."

Ironically, this leader was actually very well liked, in part for a decision he made in his first few weeks. As the first step in downsizing, he eliminated the entire managerial layer immediately below him. The select few that had clawed their way within a step of the top were all let go. No one felt sorry for them—they all got golden parachutes—and it endeared him to everyone further below. He benefited from that goodwill over the next three years as he relocated or laid off another 30 percent of the workforce.

All this hints at the cognitive dissonance in managers' attitudes to their employees. They love them, nurture them, and reward them—scheming all the while to get rid of their positions.

What motivated these leaders? How did they sleep at night? The simple answer is that they were true believers in capitalism. "When we raise the water level, all boats rise"—they embraced this idea to justify the flow of money to the wealthy. They subscribed to trickle-down theories and just about any practice that kept money flowing, especially up and laterally. Their own life experiences reinforced those beliefs. The workers in their organizations often felt the same way, or hoped to. Only when the economy entered free fall did some of my colleagues entertain questions about the system itself; even then, their range of thought remained myopic.

I remember when one vice president sent a note to her organization of about 350 technical support employees. Her message was meant to reassure workers fearing for their jobs as waves of downsizings loomed. She explained how, in her career, she always did certain things to prepare just in case her own job was eliminated—things like paying off her credit cards, selling her vacation homes, and the like. She was married with no children; she'd recently bragged about spending thousands of dollars for one of Bon Jovi's guitars during a trip to the East Coast. Her recommendation that workers "prepare financially and emotionally" resonated the way you might expect.

Ironically, after years of helping execute corporate downsizings and relocating employees' jobs to less expensive locales, I was finally made redundant myself during the 2008 crisis. I knew all about the process—it had been my job to explain company policy to those we were letting go—but I was surprised what a gut shock it was to be on the other side of it: "We're not getting rid of everyone, but we're getting rid of *you*."

For years I'd thought about working for a non-profit company, but the crisis was the worst time to be cut loose. There weren't any jobs available, and the higher your salary is the longer it takes to find a new position. At long last I landed a job with a non-profit healthcare provider.

It didn't turn out to be much different from the for-profit sector. In fact, they were hiring a lot of people from the finance industry—professionals like me who had overseen the streamlining of our corporations and then been downsized ourselves—so they could become more competitive. Now they're restructuring and dismissing employees, too.

A few weeks ago I was in the elevator with a manager who has worked there for years. She was practically giddy about the layoffs: she said they'd make the non-profit more efficient, which would enable it to fulfill its mission statement more effectively. Here it was again, the mantra of shareholder value in a new form. As long as organizations serve abstract ends rather than flesh-and-blood people, it doesn't matter whether those abstractions represent stockholders, customers, or even the common good.



Superstars

Why do we love Lady Gaga—not just the catchy hooks, but the costumes, the rumors, the *mythology*? Why are we fascinated by romantic comedies and talk shows even when they insult our intelligence and contradict our politics? Why do the lives of famous strangers seem so much more *real* than our own lives?

Perhaps we're drawn to them because they embody *our* creativity—the creative potential of all the exploited—purchased from us, concentrated, and sold back. Bruce Springsteen would be just another singer-songwriter without the vocal trainers and production engineers, the technicians who work the lights, and the adoring gaze of millions; together these produce most of the meaning we find in him, as well as the illusion that he is solely responsible for it. Because human beings are social animals, attention *creates* meaning and thus value: when everyone else runs to see what's going on, each of us can't help but do the same.

Thus the collective creativity and potential of a whole society is channeled into a few figureheads. Of course we love them, or at least love to hate them—they represent the only way to access *our own* displaced potential.

The same goes for blockbusters like *Fight Club* and *Avatar* that epitomize the alienation they critique. Stories that once were told around the fire now circulate through the market, including the stories that criticize it. Now even when we

sit around a fire we talk about episodes from movies and television! Whenever we turn on a movie rather than generating our own stories and culture, we are selling ourselves short—not so much by being spectators as by consenting to access the storytelling part of ourselves only through the mediation of the economy.

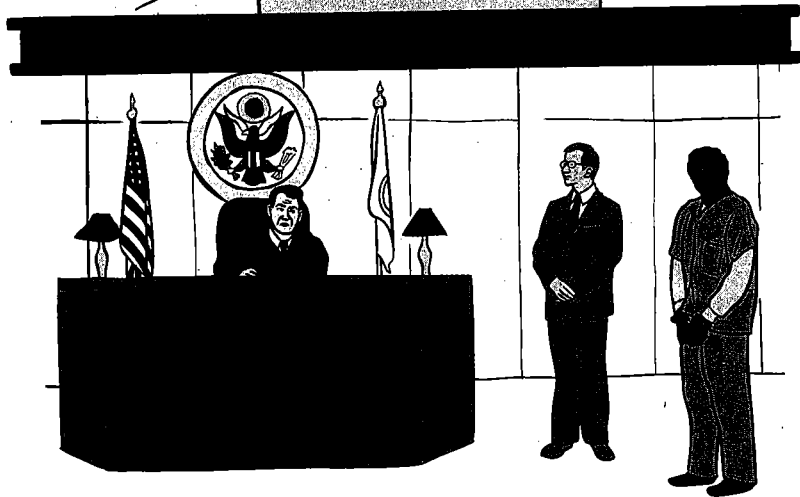
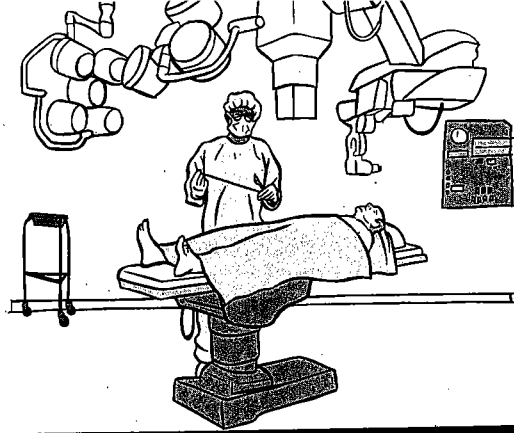
Can we escape this by making our own media, forming audiences without superstars? The more people invest meaning in their own lives and social circles, the more powerful and capable they are likely to be: consider the role that counterculture has often played in resistance movements. But in the age of mass communication, the affairs of any small milieu can feel insignificant by comparison; reality is comprised of *everyone's* points of reference, not just the ones we choose subculturally. Meanwhile, focusing on *representations* of ourselves and each other can produce the same alienation as focusing on the images of strangers.

In a media-centered society, attention is a currency alongside other currencies. It functions as a kind of capital: the more you have, the easier it is to accrue, and after a certain point it seems to flow to you almost automatically. In some venues, the pursuit of *attention itself* has nearly superseded other forms of economic competition—think of graffiti tagging and internet memes. But the attention available on the market is qualitatively different from the attention friends and lovers lavish on one another. Even the most famous stars can't derive that kind of nourishment from their fame; if their high casualty rate is any indication, fame is an *obstacle* to healthy relationships. In this regard, stardom mirrors other forms of success in which a few people accumulate substitutes for what *everyone* has lost.

New decentralized technologies offer almost everybody the chance to be microstars: to propagate images of ourselves in a world in which no one really has time to focus on anyone else in person. Rather than redressing the effects of unequal

distribution of attention, this renders everyone equally small and alone. The alienation generated by the existence of superstars doesn't diminish with the coronation of more stars; it increases.





Professionals

What do lawyers, accountants, administrators, professors, and doctors all have in common? *Expertise*.

There's nothing bad about knowing how to do things. But expertise is distinct from mere proficiency. It connotes privileged access to a sphere of knowledge others can only approach through an intermediary.

Of course, plenty of people are at the mercy of auto mechanics when it comes to repairing their cars. The difference is that you can teach yourself to fix cars, and no one can stop you from fixing your own car—but you can't just read some books and set up shop as a professor. Mechanics, carpenters, plumbers, and other tradesmen are subject to some of the same controls as engineers and pharmacists, but the further up the pyramid you go the more strict and exclusive those controls are.

Expertise is constructed by institutions that regulate and license those who practice a profession, legitimizing them as *professionals*. This excludes amateurs and people who learned their skills in other frameworks. Such exclusion enforces quality standards, discouraging snake oil salesmen pursuing the incentives of free enterprise. But it also ensures that certain skills remain the private domain of powerful organizations, intensifying the divide between these *authorities* and everyone else.

This division elevates professionals as a class, assuring them power, prestige, high income, and more autonomy than most workers. It isn't surprising that professional associations use their influence to protect these privileges and discipline anyone who threatens them, including dissidents within their own ranks. This also guarantees certain educational institutions a monopoly on the market of aspiring professionals.

In contrast to the practical skills associated with less prestigious trades, *expertise* often refers to spheres that are entirely socially constructed. One cannot be a bishop or a lawyer without the validation of the Church or judiciary. Professionalization keeps common people at a distance from aspects of their own society: rather than developing a personal practice of faith or justice, they must rely on experts.

The effects of this specialization extend to our relationships with our own bodies. Once upon a time, healing was practiced by and accessible to the poor. One of the major effects of the witch-hunts of the 14th through 17th centuries was to suppress this popular art; over the following centuries, similar campaigns concentrated medical knowledge and authority in fewer and fewer hands, opening the way for medicine to become a monolithic male-dominated profession. Today our own bodies appear unfamiliar to us, enabling the health care and insurance industries to make a killing keeping us alive.

In fields that were professionalized more recently, it's still easy to see how this has imposed a hierarchical framework on previously grass-roots pursuits. For example, as the movements against domestic violence and sexual assault sought funding from foundations and government agencies, they were transformed into service-providing organizations that demanded proper credentials of their employees. Today the authors of the manuals used by some of these organizations wouldn't qualify for jobs in them.

Professionalization privatizes skills and innovations that once circulated freely, making it impossible to access them except through the economy. It is one of the ways that capitalism centralizes know-how and legitimacy as well as wealth.



Exclusivity is our business.

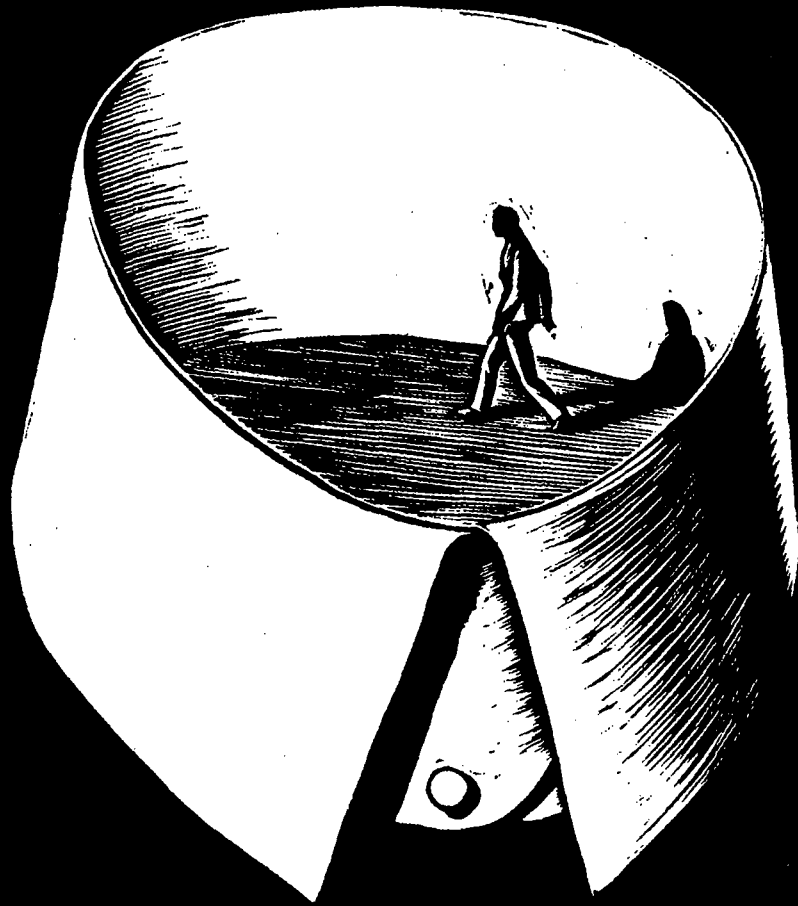


Middle Management

The middle manager is simultaneously a laborer and a representative of the capitalist class. She is forced to behave like an executive without the same rewards.

Like the employees below her, she has to implement decisions made without her input—and when she does well, the credit goes to the ones who give her orders. Like the executives above her, she cannot simply sell hours of her life but must *become* her job, taking her work home with her. It's her responsibility to implement corporate policies, motivate employees, and maintain day-to-day discipline and control. Everyone in middle management hopes to advance quickly to a higher position—but the higher you go in the pyramid, the fewer positions there are.

A few decades ago, when employees might work for the same corporation their entire lives, middle management positions seemed like a step in a slow, steady process of advancement. That dream came to an end in the 1980s, when technological advancements enabled corporations to “downsize” middle managers by the thousand. Yet middle management remains, both as a specific role in the economy and as an existential condition afflicting all but those at the very top and bottom of the pyramid. The ones above us manage us, we manage the ones below us—but how long can *we* manage, ourselves?



“ In the shift from manual skills to the art of selling and servicing people, personal traits of employees are drawn into the sphere of exchange and become commodities in the labor market. Kindness and friendliness become aspects of personalized service or of public relations of big firms, rationalized to further sales. With anonymous insincerity, the successful person thus makes an instrument of his own appearance and personality.

Sincerity is detrimental to one's job, until the rules of salesmanship and business become a “genuine” aspect of oneself. Tact is a series of little lies about one's feelings, until one is emptied of such feelings.

The personality market, the most decisive effect and symptom of the great salesroom, underlies the all-pervasive distrust and alienation characteristic of metropolitan people. Without common values and mutual trust, the cash nexus that links one man to another in transient contact has been made subtle in a dozen ways and come to bite deeper into all areas of life.

People are required to pretend interest in others in order to manipulate them. In the course of time, as this ethic spreads, one learns that manipulation is inherent in every human contact. Men are estranged from one another as each secretly tries to make an instrument of the other, and in time a full circle is made: one makes an instrument of himself, and is estranged from it as well.

— C. Wright Mills

White Collar: The American Middle Classes, 1951



Self-Employment

“Self-employed” describes a wide range of positions—from tutors and babysitters to proprietors of mom-and-pop stores, from the flower vendors on the street corner to the successful artists of the “creative class.” Self-employment is associated with personal freedom; but managing your own business generally makes more demands on your time than working for a corporation, and not necessarily at comparable rates.

If the problem with capitalism is that bosses don't pay workers the full value of their labor, self-employment seems like the solution: if everyone were self-employed, wouldn't that mean nobody could be exploited? But exploitation isn't just a matter of having a boss—it's the result of uneven distribution of *capital*. If all you have for capital is an ice-cream stand, you're not going to accumulate profit at the same rate as the landlord who owns your apartment building, even if both of you are sole proprietors. The patterns that concentrate capital in fewer and fewer hands can play out as easily *between* business entities as *within* them.

So self-employment is not the same as self-determination. Self-employment gives you more *agency* without offering any more *liberty*: you get to manage your own affairs, but only on the market's terms. Being self-employed simply means organizing the sale of your labor yourself and personally taking on all the risks of competing. Imagine how many corporations have made a pretty penny selling goods and

services to aspiring entrepreneurs that quickly went out of business and returned to wage labor.

Like the magnate in miniature, the self-employed worker survives and acquires resources to the precise extent to which she turns a profit. More so than the wage laborer, she has to internalize the logic of the market, taking its pressures and values to heart. The entrepreneur learns to examine everything from her time to her personal relationships in terms of market value. She comes to see herself the way a timber company looks at a forest; each entrepreneur is at once boss and bossed, her very psyche split into capitalist and exploited facets. In the end, it's more efficient for workers to supervise their own integration into the market than for corporations or governments to impose it on them.

Accordingly, today we're seeing a shift from the paradigm of worker-as-employee to worker-as-entrepreneur: rather than simply obeying instructions and taking home a paycheck, even workers who aren't self-employed are encouraged to *invest themselves* in the same manner. Progressive teachers try to engage their students as "active learners" instead of simply indoctrinating them; commanders devolve tactical decision-making to individual units whose training emphasizes "combat readiness" over mere willingness to carry out orders. As jobs become more precarious, work experience becomes an investment aimed at securing future employment—your résumé is as important as your wages. The last self-employed artisans of the old days are dying out, but the entrepreneur might be the model citizen of a world order still under construction. The old-fashioned narrative of independence and self-reliance is absurd when both have become impossible: rather than cultivating independence, the point of modern self-management is to incorporate each individual seamlessly into the economy.

Despite these developments, some still consider locally-owned businesses an alternative to corporate capitalism.

It's naïve to imagine small businesses are somehow more accountable to their communities: business ventures of all kinds succeed or fail according to their success extracting profit *from* communities. Small businesses might gain loyal customers by being a little less predatory, but only to the extent that this succeeds as *advertising*, and only insofar as consumers can afford to pay extra for this luxury. In the world of business, "social responsibility" is either a marketing strategy or a handicap. The dichotomy between local businesses and multinationals only serves to redirect those frustrated with capitalism into supporting small-scale capitalists, legitimizing ventures that ultimately will either accumulate capital at others' expense or be supplanted by more merciless contenders.

Countless societies have existed that didn't believe in private ownership of capital, but no historian has ever documented a society in which capital was evenly distributed among a population of self-employed businessmen. Such a thing could only last as long as it took for some of the businessmen to start profiting off the rest. Relying on small businesses to solve the problems generated by capitalism is less realistic than attempting to bring about the end of capitalism itself.



Factories

The factories that produce most of the goods we think of as necessities today emerged at the end of the 18th century with the onset of the Industrial Revolution. This transformed manufacturing, agriculture, transportation, and almost every other aspect of life.

From the very beginning, mechanization sparked resistance. Several centuries of agricultural privatization had already driven most peasants off their land, and now new technologies were reducing skilled craftsmen to beggars. The stinking, noisy factory towns must have seemed like a scene from hell itself, sucking in the dispossessed and constructing an infernal machine from their bodies. In response, the Luddites burned mills and machinery, posing such a threat that at one point more British troops were deployed to fight them than were ranged against Napoleon.

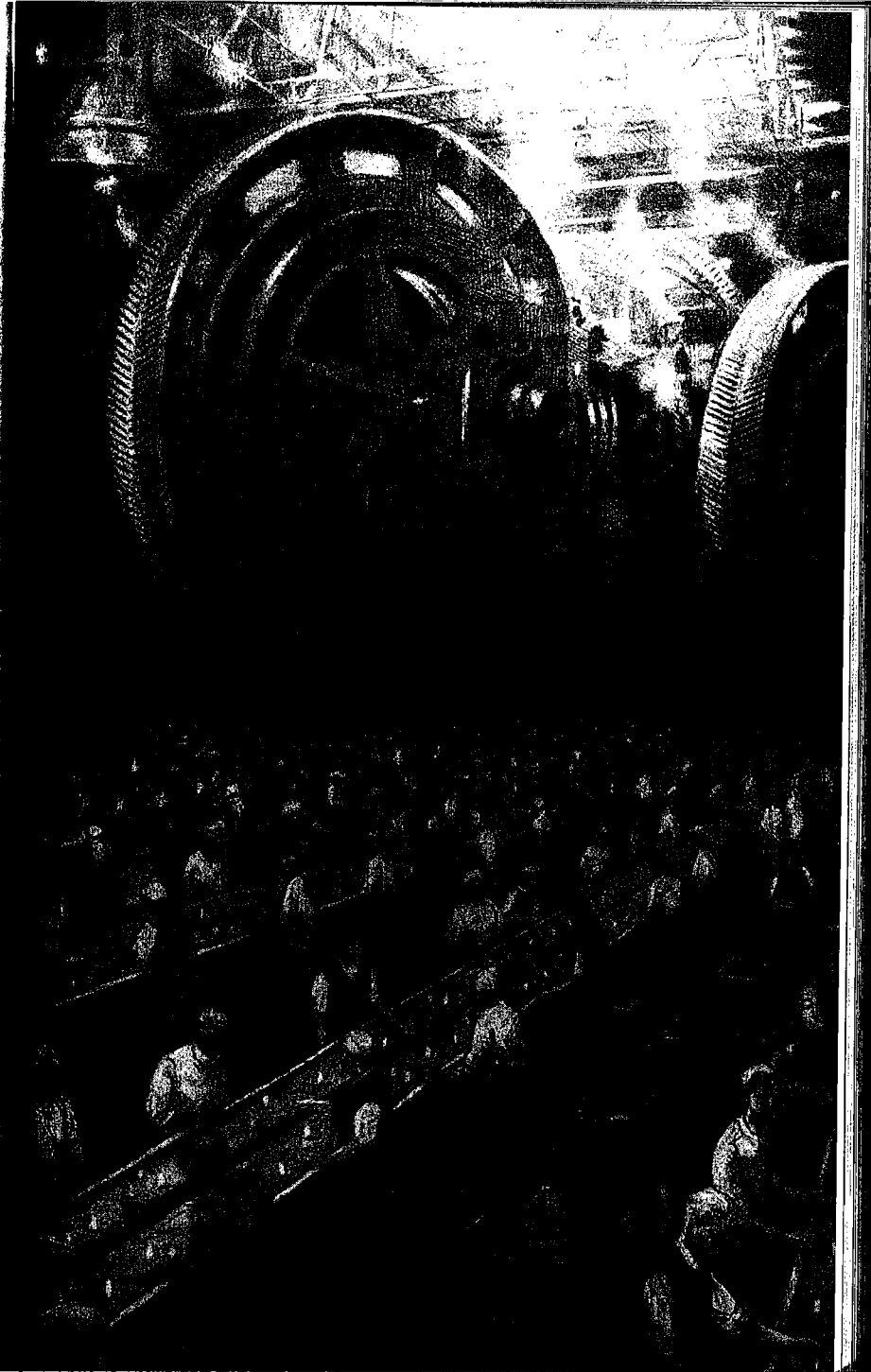
The factory system was a mixed blessing for the capitalists who created it. On the one hand, it consolidated their power as the owning class: artisans working at home with their own tools simply couldn't compete. This enabled capitalists to control workers' activity directly, whereas before they could only buy the products of labor. Moreover, industrialization gave the capitalists of a few nations a tremendous advantage over their competitors abroad, setting the stage for a brutal new wave of European colonization.

On the other hand, mechanization required an unprecedented concentration of workers, both in the factories

themselves and in the urban centers where factories were located. This concentration could have explosive results, as it did in 1871 when workers and poor urbanites rose in rebellion against the French government to establish the short-lived Paris Commune. Even between such upheavals, capitalists were vulnerable to strikes, and they never knew when a workplace disturbance might explode into an insurrection.

Factory owners had another problem, too. They could produce more goods than ever before, but they were reaching the limits of market: there simply weren't enough wealthy people to buy everything they could produce. Since every hour of labor made them a profit, employers compelled the downtrodden populace to work as much as possible. But as resistance grew and returns dwindled, capitalists had to find a new way to maximize profits. Instead of trying to squeeze even more hours of labor from employees, they set out to squeeze more production out of every labor hour. Using the unprecedented powers of supervision that the factory gave them, they reorganized the work process to make it ever more efficient and intensive.

In the early 20th century, automobile magnate Henry Ford hit on the winning combination of assembly lines, standardization, and cheap products, inaugurating the era of mass production and consumption. Ford looked at the factory itself as a machine and set out to make workers into more efficient cogs in it. This made tasks increasingly specialized and repetitive, so workers had less and less of a sense of the total context of their labor. Over the next few decades, as mass production and mass consumption became the norm worldwide, this alienation came to be mirrored in society at large, which became a sort of social factory operating according to the logic of the assembly line. Schools mass-produced interchangeable workers ready to take up posts anywhere; automobiles inscribed new channels of commerce on the landscape in the form of highways and suburbs.



Of course, worker populations were still dangerously concentrated, and this intensification of work had the potential to spark an intensification of resistance. The use of automation made it difficult to foster competition on the shop floor the way Ford's predecessors had. Worse, workers were so averse to the mind-numbing experience of the assembly line that they kept quitting in droves; Ford was losing money constantly training new replacements.

His solution was to buy off the workforce as a whole by giving his employees a share in industrial prosperity. Starting in 1914, Ford paid his factory workers twice the going rate, granted them eight-hour workdays, and offered them a profit-sharing plan so they could buy the same Model Ts they produced. The resulting expansion of the market for automobiles enabled Ford to absorb the cost of high wages by increasing production and sales year after year. This compromise was soon taken up across the industrialized world; in effect, this marked the invention of the modern middle class, along with modern leisure time. Capitalists had made virtue of necessity; forced to grant money and free time to the exploited, they invented mass consumption so the money and time they conceded would eventually come back to them.

Raising wages helped Ford thwart an attempt to unionize his factory. But in the long run, one result of his compromise was that unions, long the outlaw opposition to capitalism, finally found an essential role in its functioning. By forcing employers to keep wages high enough that workers could afford consumer goods, they kept capitalists from destroying their own consumer base. By focusing on the wage contract, unions channeled worker struggles away from outright revolution into institutionalized collective bargaining. Union bureaucracies arose alongside corporate bureaucracies, staffed by professionals whose chief interest was advancing their careers. Unions ceased to oppose

the intensification and expansion of work itself—what was good for *work* was good for unions, whether or not it was good for workers.

This professionalization of labor struggle took place in “developing countries” as well, transforming struggles against work into struggles for a greater share of what it produced. Ironically, wherever the capitalist class had not developed enough to implement Ford's innovations, these were imposed by the bureaucratic representatives of labor struggle. In Soviet Russia, for example, “Fordism” was embraced as a model for speedy industrialization. Josef Stalin proclaimed approvingly that “American efficiency is that indomitable force which neither knows nor recognizes obstacles” as he presided over a brutal transition to mechanized agriculture at the cost of millions of lives. It's possible to see the Bolshevik revolution as an exotic version of the Fordist compromise, in which workers' struggles were channeled into supporting a new bureaucratic ruling class in return for a share of consumer goods.

In any case, compromises within capitalism rarely last long. Starting in the 1960s, capitalists faced a new round of crises as their strategies for economic expansion once again reached their limits and a new generation of workers broke with the unions to rebel against work. The youth movements that shook the globe from Paris and Prague to Chicago and Shanghai often framed their project in utopian terms, but they were revolting against something concrete and familiar: their parents' truce with exploitation. The costs of this truce were becoming apparent in the destruction of the natural world and the alienation of daily life. At the same time, the industries that had benefited most from the Fordist compromise—the ones manufacturing automobiles, household appliances, and other durable goods—were beginning to decline as they found fewer and fewer new buyers for their products.

And so, like Ford before them, capitalists reorganized the processes of production and consumption to make them stabler and more profitable. Aided by new communication technologies, they spread manufacturing out across the entire planet, sidestepping unionized or rebellious workforces and exploiting whoever was most desperate. Employers scaled back formal long-term employment in favor of more flexible forms of labor, in order to unload the risks of the market directly on workers. Economies of scale, in which corporations saved money by mass-producing a few standardized commodities, were supplemented by economies of scope, in which the same infrastructure was used to produce a wide array of items. Consumer markets diversified accordingly, and the mass-produced individual—a conformist who had nonetheless posed a real threat to public order in times of upheaval—was replaced by an infinite range of different consumer identities. Thus the labor force that had been so dangerous when it was united became fragmented in every way.

Once again, these changes in production and consumption were inscribed upon society and the earth. In the US, the social factory no longer produces workers who intend to invest their whole lives in one career; the booming industrial cities of the previous century have become a desolate Rust Belt dotted with cafés and universities.

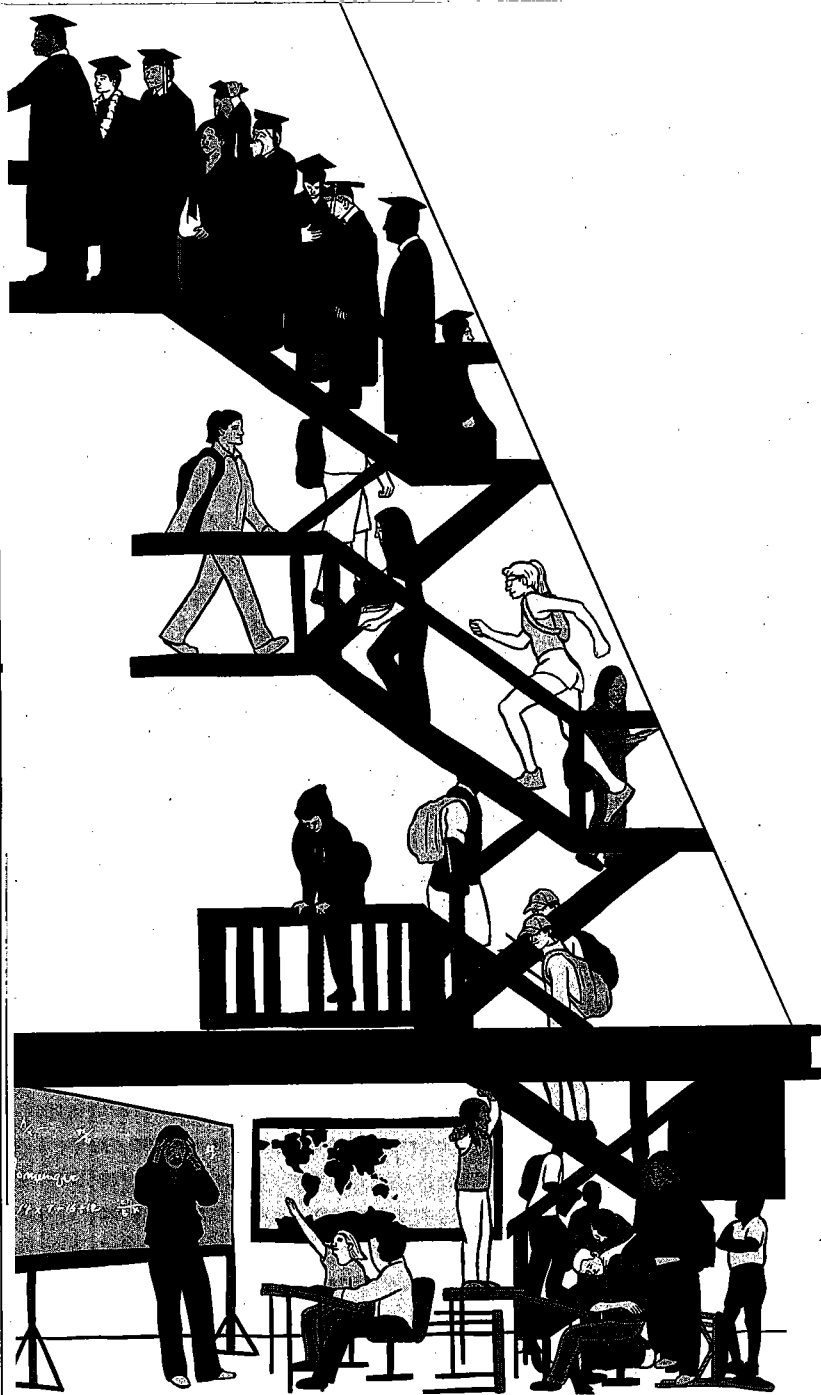
Today there are still factories, but computerized equipment and data-processing enable them to employ fewer and fewer workers. The increasingly superfluous workforce has been absorbed by the service sector in wealthy parts of the world; in poor countries, it is left to fend for itself. Just as Ford modeled the factory on the machine, the assembly line provides the model for global supply chains, networks of large and small manufacturers contracted and coordinated by giant corporations: raw materials can be made in India and Brazil, assembled in Hong Kong, and sold in Los Angeles.

Unlike the factories of old, these networks aren't vulnerable to the dangers posed by a concentrated workforce; if one node of this vast assembly line becomes rebellious, its role can be transferred to another node as far away as the opposite side of the globe.

Paradoxically, this "post-Fordist" economy revives forms of labor that seemed to disappear with the ascendance of automation. Since major industries no longer need most of the people that capitalism has dispossessed, workers can be had for cheap in sweatshops around the world—low-tech, miserable workplaces that require little investment in specialized machinery. Such sweatshops are ideally suited to the fluid demands of contemporary production, which might require sneaker stitching one day and T-shirt sleeves the next. They are often the only way to meet the demands of a consumer market based on the novelty and uniqueness of a million different products.

In this context, unions are woefully outflanked and outmoded. Institutionalized regulation of wage labor no longer seems necessary to stabilize the market, so their usefulness for capitalism has ended; production no longer depends on the rigid demographic concentrations that once made them such a threat to business, either. Anticapitalists are still casting around for new forms of resistance that could take the place of the union and the strike.

ra-tion-al-ize (răsh' ə-nə-līz') *v.* -tr. 1. Attempt to explain or justify (one's own or another's behavior or attitude) with logical, plausible reasons, even if these are not true or appropriate: *she couldn't rationalize her urge to return to the cottage.* See note at LIE. 2. Make (a company, process, or industry) more efficient by reorganizing it in such a way as to dispense with unnecessary personnel or equipment: *his success was due primarily to his ability to rationalize production.*



Teachers and Students

Anyone who has spent time with small children knows how much they love to learn. From the very beginning, they imitate everyone around them. Without this instinct enabling every new generation to pick up the knowledge and skills of the previous ones, our species would have gone extinct long ago.

It takes a lot to beat this natural curiosity out of children. You have to take them away from their families, isolate them in sterile environments with only a few overworked adults, and teach them that learning is a *discipline*. You have to send them to school.

It wasn't until the 19th century that mass education came into its own in Europe. The family, the oldest socializing institution, no longer sufficed to prepare children for their roles in a changing society—especially with working families increasingly fragmented by the industrial revolution. Once limits were put on child labor, kids had to spend the day *somewhere*. Governments saw compulsory schooling as a way to produce a docile population: obedient soldiers for the army, compliant laborers for industry, dutiful clerks and civil servants. Social reformers saw it differently, as a way to uplift humanity—but it was the governments who got to implement it.

Compulsory education spread alongside industrialization, and eventually education became an industry in its

own right. The state-managed incarnation of the industry still functions to keep young people off the streets and program them with standardized curricula. The private incarnation has become a profitable sector of the economy: abstracted out of daily life, education is a commodity to be bought and sold like any other.

In a mechanized world, in which self-checkout at the grocery store and electronic check-in at the airport are replacing the jobs that used to keep citizens integrated into society, what can be done with all the surplus workers? One solution is to postpone their entry into the workforce. Today's aspiring employee spends more time than ever before studying to gain an advantage, a longer list of credentials, another selling point on her résumé. This helps send the message that the misfortunes of the unemployed and unsuccessful are their own fault—they should have gotten more education.

When power was chiefly hereditary, only the wealthy and powerful sent their children to school. In the current credit-based economy, in which many workers live beyond their means in hopes of bettering themselves, it's much easier to aspire to wealth and power—for a price. If you want a decent job, you have to pay thousands or tens of thousands for the prerequisite degrees. This traps students in decades of debt, forcing them to sell themselves wherever the market will take them—a sophisticated form of indentured servitude. The more overeducated the work force, the pickier employers become; and in a volatile economy, workers have to return to school again and again.

Today degrees are openly discussed as investments in capital. A degree is worth a certain amount of potential future income, and some degrees are more valuable than others. Now there's talk of decreasing student loans to students seeking degrees in less profitable fields such as the humanities. This follows the logic of the market, since the ones who receive those degrees are less likely to be able to repay loans—even

if those fields of study can improve human life in ways that defy financial calibration. Meanwhile, austerity measures are cutting away the last vestiges of the university as an oasis of learning for its own sake.

Of course, millions of young people have no hope of going to college. Early in life, children are put on one of two education tracks according to social class; these can take the form of private and public schools, suburban and inner city schools, or classes for “advanced” students alongside classes for *everyone else*. For the majority foreordained to fail, the school system is a gigantic holding tank; the ones who rebel are shuttled directly from detention to prison. Many schools now resemble prisons, with police officers, metal detectors, and other mechanisms to normalize authoritarian control from an early age.

Despite the glut of college graduates on the market, some liberals still maintain that the solution to poverty and other problems is more education. But the further up the pyramid you go the fewer positions there are; no amount of public education can change this. At best, graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds might replace those in privileged positions, but for every person who climbs the social ladder someone else has to descend it. Usually, more education just means more debt.

Another liberal precept is the notion of academia as *the marketplace of ideas*. The marketplace metaphor is apt enough: like human beings, ideas have to compete on the uneven terrain of capitalism. Some are backed by chancellors and media moguls, dollars by the million or billion, entire military-industrial complexes; others are literally born in prison. Despite this, the ones that rise to the top are bound to be the best—just as the most successful businessmen must be superior to everyone else. According to this school of thought, capitalism persists because everyone from billionaire to bellboy agrees it is the best *idea*.



But students don't develop their ideas in a vacuum; their conclusions are bound to be influenced by their class interests. The further you advance in the education system, the wealthier the student body is likely to be, especially with tuition rising while government grants decline. Consequently, reactionary ideas tend to accumulate academic prestige. If some conservatives still regard universities as hotbeds of radicalism, this is simply because the class interests of professors are not as reactionary as those of executives.

This isn't to say that wealthy children are born looking out for number one. It takes at least as much social engineering to produce entitled managers as it does to produce subservient employees. Most of this occurs subtly. For example, the curriculum for honors students includes nothing about how to grow or prepare food, make or mend clothing, or repair engines; the implication is that if these students do well, there will always be poor people to do these things for them. Thus the education that prepares them to hold power simultaneously incapacitates them when it comes to meeting their basic needs outside the economy, making any alternative appear genuinely life-threatening.

Though teachers are on the front lines imposing discipline on the poor and legitimizing the privileges of the rich, they're not really to blame. Lots of teachers are terrific people. Some can be great mentors or friends outside the constraints of school. Many have given up the chance to make more money because they believe teaching is important even though it pays poorly. But by and large the roles they are forced to play in the classroom prevent them from making the most of their gifts and their desire to do right by the next generation. Here as elsewhere, the system is powered by those who think they can reform it.