

Free Work

Call for papers for an *ephemera* conference
in collaboration with Essex Business School, University of Essex

Berlin, Germany, 12-13 May 2011

Deadline for abstracts: 28 February 2011

How do we understand the relation between freedom and work? For some, ‘freedom’ and ‘work’ are inevitably contradictory terms, while for others new forms of work such as knowledge or creative work offer the opportunity of freeing ourselves. In times of unemployment and job precariousness, the freedom to work is of great concern, especially when working for ‘free’ – whether as an unpaid intern or a professional required to work overtime – is increasingly becoming an essential component of contemporary working life.

Many thinkers have conceptualised the relation between freedom and work. For Karl Marx, a clear incompatibility exists between the realm of freedom and the realm of labour. The sphere of production is one in which labour is determined by necessity and external expediency, and we can only hope to organise it collectively. True freedom, defined as ‘the development of human powers as an end in itself’, is at odds with the realm of labour, although ‘it can only flourish with this realm of necessity as its basis’ (1991: 959). It is this insight that drives hopes for a *freedom from work*, in a leisure or post-work society (Aronowitz et al., 1998).

A similar idea guides Hannah Arendt’s (1958) distinction between labour and work. For Arendt, labour is governed entirely by biological need, whereas work exceeds the realm of necessity to include the freedom to produce a world. Much of the hope of the nineteenth and twentieth century lay in attempts to transform labour into work and thus allow for the possibility of free work. But Arendt saw the opposite trend: the twentieth century, she said, is best understood as a ‘society of labourers’, which seeks to reduce work (and action) to ‘a job necessary for the life of society’ (1958: 5).

In Max Weber’s (2002) protestant work ethic, we see the quest for free work infused with a theology of redemption, with *freedom* to be gained *through work*. In contemporary business gospel, we once again recognise the theme of redemption through work. The knowledge worker, or ‘creative class’ (Florida, 2002), is thought capable of finding freedom from earthly demands in a realm of pure expressivity where work cannot be distinguished from play. The internet is the latest in a line of technologies sustaining a hope for a technology-enabled *freedom at work* (e.g. Blauner, 1964).

Where *freedom in work* is promised to all of us, and work even necessitates the exercise of our creativity, innovation and authenticity at work, it is nonetheless often unpaid. So contemporary capitalism relies on incorporating the free labour of those who produce culture in the digital economy (Böhm and Land, 2009; Terranova, 2000); it appropriates the work of ‘culturepreneurs’ for the branding of the ‘creative city’ (Lange, 2005; Lanz, 2009); and develops techniques of crowd sourcing that blur the boundaries between creative potential and corporate interest (Arvidsson, 2007).

The possibility of free work is also conditioned upon its socio-spatial opportunities. ‘Free’ spaces such as the digital commons or abandoned, vacant city areas that seem less determined by ownership, capital, or institutionalisation enable alternative working practices of artistic, activist or open source communities (e.g. Sheridan, 2007). Yet, these productive, innovative and creative free work forces taking place in a space beyond monetary value creation seem to be increasingly instrumentalised in line with the ‘new spirit of capitalism’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005).

Freedom to work today also means workfare, precarity, sweatshops and child labour. As the French multitudes take to the streets, their 35-hour-week is extended and their retirement age is increased. Meanwhile, work in the humane workplaces of the new economy comes with hidden costs (Ross, 2004), and the post-bureaucratic organization makes freedom a privilege for those with potential and pushes all others into vicious cycles of opportunism (Maravelias, 2007). It is perhaps no wonder that here some of the most radical responses to contemporary forms of work involve attempting to free the soul from work, to move from alienation to autonomy (Berardi, 2009), or to insist on communism as the necessary condition of freedom (Badiou, 2010).

Contributions

We invite contributions to this conference that seek to discuss all the ways in which freedom and work are juxtaposed today. Possible topics for investigation might include:

- Facebook, cyber-slavery and other forms of digital labour
- Artistic work and production in the creative industries
- Socio-spatial conditions of possibility for ‘free work’
- Value creation through ‘free work’
- ‘Free work’ communities (e.g. ‘Linux’, artist collectives, etc.)
- Origins and examples of user-driven innovation and social production (e.g. the skateboarding industry, or ‘Threadless’)
- The blurring of work and play in corporate structures
- Concepts of (free) work and play in the situationist movement
- ‘Generation Praktikum’, internships, gap years. ‘1-Euro Jobs’ and other forms of contingent and precarious (non-)employment
- Redemption through work
- Self-realization and self-alienation in work
- Exploitation and control in the name of freedom

The deadline for abstracts is 28 February 2011. The abstracts should be submitted to ephemera@fek.lu.se. Full papers will be due by 1 May 2011. The best papers of the conference will be published in a special issue of *ephemera*.

Further Information

Further information about the conference can be found on the conference website: <http://www.ephemeraweb.org/conference>. To discuss potential contributions, please contact any of the organisers.

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