

[Excerpts from] **The Death of Homo Economicus: Work, Debt and the Myth of Endless Accumulation** (London: Pluto Press, 2017)

by Peter Fleming

“Man dies at office desk – nobody notices for five days!”

The Theatre of Work

A few years ago a disturbing story appeared in the media that perfectly summarised what work means for many today: ‘Man dies at office desk – nobody notices for five days’. The case was unnerving for one reason mainly. People die all the time, but usually we notice. Are things so bad in the modern workplace that we can no longer tell the difference between the living and the dead? Of course, the story turned out to be a hoax. An urban myth. As it happens, each country has its own variation that still fools people when they periodically appear.

In Finland the dead guy is a tax inspector. In the USA a publisher. In other countries a management consultant. We might even embellish the story ourselves. Perhaps the dead accountant not only went unnoticed for five days but was rewarded with a promotion for all the extra hours and loyalty, possibly making vice president. In all variants of the myth the said worker is never a woman, which is interesting for its own reasons. Isn't it strange that so many of us who encounter this apocryphal story genuinely shrug and mumble ‘yeah, that's about right’?

Why does it resound so well with our experiences of employment in late capitalist societies today? The most obvious reason for our nonchalance concerning the dead man at his desk pertains to the sheer amount of time that jobs are extracting from our lives at the moment, so much so that people are flirting with death in order to get things done. The dead-man-working narrative reminds us that the otherwise bizarre idea of toiling non-stop for hours or even days on end has quietly become the new normal. Behaviour that our grandparents would have deemed insane is now rather pedestrian.

For example, the average British worker spends 36 days a year answering work emails. London workers in particular receive around 9000 emails each year.<sup>1</sup> As a result, work spills over into private time. One recent survey revealed that 80 per cent of employers consider it perfectly acceptable to contact their employees outside business hours. And then there's the commute. Londoners waste 18 months of their lives commuting, which is often expensive and stressful.

Overall, this labour intensification, with the aid of mobile technology and new management systems (such as zero-hours contracts), seems to indicate that employers are once again attempting to increase absolute surplus labour by lengthening the working day. For example, a 2015 survey of over 9000 full-time employees from around the world found that few office workers consider the 40-hour work week realistic when it comes to getting their jobs done effectively.

Indeed, almost 40 per cent said they had experienced an increase in working hours over the last five years. One third of respondents felt their work/life balance was in serious jeopardy. The tragedy of human effort For this reason, paid employment is reflected or echoed in almost everything we do in the present economic paradigm. The obsession runs deep like some unshakable addiction. We genuinely live in a workers' society, and homo economicus has been shaped into an all-too-human vessel to carry its message. The compulsion to work is no longer only contained to office hours. It has seeped into everything else, restructuring our everyday imagination, how we perceive our future and past. Even our sex lives increasingly revolve around jobs given that so many of find long-term romantic partners in the workplace.

One recent report revealed the emergence of so-called nursery consultants who're hired by mum and dad to train toddlers, imbuing them with social skills that will increase their chances of landing a good job. The disciplinary forces of a cut-throat labour market have entered the crib, it would seem ... along with its prejudices concerning the meaning of life and society. This cultural fixation with work comes at a cost, of course, which is why the dead man slouched over his keypad seems so apt for capturing the realities of the high-performance work ethic, personified by the individualistic, self-reliant and driven office worker who is now quite unwell. Job-related illness is a growing epidemic in the UK and USA, exacerbated by stress and an overwhelming 'to do' list that never ends. Making matters worse, in times of recession we are more willing to put up with horrible workplace environments, which only adds to the pent-up frustration.

Let's face it. The tyranny of office email is now so out of control that even the multinational corporation is starting to have second thoughts about its utility. Some French companies, for example, have discouraged its employees from logging on after office hours. In a similar vein, a number of German firms automatically erase incoming emails when an employee is away on holiday. The human body's inability to fulfill the glorified ideal of homo economicus \* without getting sick or making errors undermines the extraction of surplus value. The 2013 death of Bank of America intern, Moritz Erhardt, testifies to this – he died after working 72 straight hours, which caused a major scandal in London. Matsuri Takahashi, a young graduate recruit at the large advertising firm Dentsu, committed suicide after clocking up 105 hours of overtime in a month.

No, this frenetic behaviour is more about busy looking busy. This is why contemporary employment has something of a ceremonial feel about it, becoming a sort of theatre or spectacle. Not only are we working more now than ever (or searching for it if unemployed) but a good deal of it is unnecessary. We are obliged to appear like a worker as much as actually be one, whether we're sweating in a business for nothing (as part of the UK government's 'back to work' programme) or employed in high finance.

The research seems to bear out this observation. A study of management consultants in the USA found that 35 per cent employed in this occupation actually 'faked' an 80-hour workweek. For various reasons these individuals pretended to sacrifice themselves at the altar of work. They still got everything done. In this respect, perhaps entire occupations might be considered phoney, something David Graeber recently called 'bullshit jobs'. Pointless security guards, 'atmosphere coordinators' (people hired to create a party vibe in bars) and chief learning officers in the corporate world might be classified as such. You don't hear about these people because who wants to boast they don't do anything at work?

Their working lives are mindlessly boring, utterly pointless, and without meaning, their abilities are utterly wasted. They are the Living Dead.

Work is not only ceremonial, something to be performed and observed within a power hierarchy, but the ritual is one that signifies a stressful waste of potential. Far away from the principles of utility, it is now a mistake to think of employment as strictly related to biological necessity – as if sending useless emails all day is akin to hunting and gathering. In the wreckage economies of the Western world (and beyond) work has assumed the form of a self-referential rite. As long as the visible cues and triggers are respected. As jobs become ultra-ritualised it's the hours people put in at the office (or online) that is seen as the 'output' rather than the concrete results those hours achieve,

Our specific job grants us access to manmade vouchers we call money. We then redeem these so we can then purchase life. How many vouchers we obtain and what we have to do to get them is the political question par excellence in our society and its highly skewed class relations. Work today is simply an ideology, designed to lock in a particular class relationship and naturalise the private ownership of the means of production. It does this by falsely evoking the ruse of physiognomic necessity: if we work in order to live, then only a fool would argue against the need to build society around jobs.

As one commentator argues in relation to the decision by camp commandant Rudolf Höss to use 'Arbeit macht frei' (Work will set you free") at the gates of Auschwitz: He seems not to have intended it as a mockery, nor even to have intended it literally, as a false promise that those who worked to exhaustion would eventually be released, but rather as a kind of mystical declaration that self-sacrifice in the form of endless labour does in itself bring a kind of spiritual freedom. It's only in this post-2008 capitalist restoration period that we see the idea displayed so openly. Work is the perfect vehicle for conveying the 'culture of danger' that is so central in the neoliberal age, making it difficult to see what about you is not related to your job.

This is how the work ethic functions today. Occupational roles are detached from their basis in productive utility and work becomes the wandering reference point for everything else. Not a concrete activity but an abstract and diffuse prism through which all of life is myopically evaluated and managed. Overwork is an obvious outcome. In the meantime, homo economicus impossibilis struggles between the unreal fantasy that now structures the world (e.g., labour market policy) and the unreal reality that emerges when economic theology tries to make its madness real.

### Homo Economicus

In the late 1950s and early 1960s a small group of economists began to formalise their own version of human capital theory. Jacob Mincer, Theodore Schultz, Gary Becker and later on, Robert E. Lucas applied the principles of neoclassical economics to individual behaviour, proposing that people shouldn't be considered citizens, students, patients or employees, for example. Instead they're human capital. Human capital(ists) are competitive individualists, preoccupied with investing and enhancing in their own economic value. From this point of view, life itself is a personal and permanent commercial project that requires business ambition to generate future income and avoid losses.

According to [human capital theory economist] Gary Becker, we often assume that capital only refers to things like Apple stock, plant and banks accounts. However, such tangible forms of capital are not the only type of capital. Schooling, a computer training course, expenditures on medical care, and lectures on the virtues of punctuality and honesty are also capital. That is because they raise earnings, improve health, or add to a person's good habits over much of his lifetime. Therefore, economists regard expenditures on education, training, medical care, and so on as investments in human capital. They are called human capital because people cannot be separated from their knowledge, skills, health, or values in the way they can be separated from their financial and physical assets.

One of the first economists to theorise human capital warned his audience at the American Economic Association meeting in 1960 that treating living human beings as 'property or marketable assets' might seem distasteful to the average person. The trick is to emphasise the importance of owning one's individual prospects, the freedom granting powers of self-investment and its impact on wider prosperity. Gary Becker extended the argument in his discussion of employee training, dividing human capital into two types. Specific human capital are skills highly particular to a job and non-transferable to other firms. Whereas general human capital are abilities that can be used in different organisations or/and industries and are unbound

Becker then asks an important question. When human capital is transferable (or general) as it increasingly is, who should pay for its development? Probably not employers since that kind of investment might one day literally walk out the door or be poached by a rival. In competitive markets, 'firms would provide general training only if they did not have to pay any of the costs ... hence the costs as well as the return from general training would be borne by trainees, not by firms'. Schultz' address to the American Economic Association reluctantly comes to similar conclusions about education. Once a student is reconfigured as human capital, it stands to reason that the initial investment ought to be made by them alone since they are the primary beneficiaries.

Human capital theory provides the ultimate neoclassical retort to the Marxist slogan that workers should seize the means of production. If each person is already their own means of production, then the intractable conflict at the heart of the capitalist labour process must logically dissolve. As it turns out, according to Schultz, all workers are in fact consummate capitalists: 'labourers have become capitalists not from the diffusion of the ownership of corporation stocks, as folk law would have it, but from the acquisition of knowledge and skill that have economic value'.

### "The Brand Called You"

Given the basic premise of human capital theory forged in the early 1960s, we can easily observe how it smoothed the way for ultra-responsible autonomy: where each individual human capitalist becomes entirely responsible for his or her economic fate. By the 1990s human capital theory had found a wide audience, especially in the business world. The pursuit of individual self-interest creates way more shareholder value than any slavish adherence to a collective identity. This is why, according to Peters, it is best to treat employees as if they were their own micro-enterprises. Organisational members are encouraged to discover 'The Brand Called You'. This intangible asset can be leveraged and capitalised upon at the crucial moment for those who understand both the external and internal job market.

This is certainly telling of a sea change in popular books about organisations, management and business. But how exactly does ultra-responsible autonomy play out in practice? It can do so in several ways, I suggest. Freelancing, self-employment and agency work associated with on-demand contracts are obvious examples we have already discussed. But organisations might manage their permanent workforce along the same lines too.

Once again the employee is somehow external to the organisation, which is used to good effect. Academia partially follows this flexi-work model. My employer is largely unconcerned when, where and how I prepare for a Tuesday afternoon lecture, be it in the middle of the night or the weekend. Indeed, it would be counter-productive to insist I clock in at 9 am on Monday morning and be at my desk present and accounted for. As long as I arrive to the lecture hall and do a satisfactory job (which, of course, is measured rather rigorously!) my employer is happy.

Unlike managers of yesteryear, Ressler and Thompson suggest, businesses don't worry that ROWE workers are going to shirk their duties if nobody is watching them all day: 'It's not about giving people more time with the kids. ROWE is not about having more time off ... you might even work more'. It is with the individualistic contract-based business model that we see human capital theory really come into its own. As mentioned earlier, such contractualisation exemplifies the narrow manner in which human capital theory interprets self-interest. People are now monadic and self-contained enterprises rather than members of a wider group.

For example, in Western economies there has been a boom in self-employment over the last ten years, with a staggering 14.6 million people registered in the USA in 2015.<sup>38</sup> In the UK, the self-employed workforce has grown by 45 per cent since 2001, standing at almost 5 million workers.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, it is estimated that in 2014 about 1.8 million 'on call' or 'zero-hours' contracts existed, a figure that probably underestimates the true extent of their presence in the hotel/restaurant, education and healthcare industries.<sup>40</sup> The so-called 'gig economy', whereby contractors perpetually move from job to job like journeymen or a musician, is said to capture the future of work in OECD economies.<sup>41</sup> But one thing is clear in this new environment. Whereas homo economicus was thought to be a person who fervently pursued commerce, today the direction of exchange is reversed. Now he or she is quietly stalked by a predatory and hostile economy.

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