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Demotivational Training

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An entrepreneur once found himself in a state of despair at the lack of commitment shown by his workers – only he called them his "co-workers." He had tried everything to boost their enthusiasm, to encourage inventiveness and creativity. He had traveled all the way to Japan to learn the secrets of the chauvinistic business policies there. He had hired the most expensive motivational consultants; the staff was treated to elaborate shows fervently preaching the virtues of team spirit; role-playing games and Buddhist seminars were offered, the entrepreneur didn't even balk at the expense of a company retreat at the North Pole, complete with a festive banquet on arctic pack ice – but it was all for naught. The more money he threw at trying to inspire enthusiasm in his staff, the more sluggish and indifferent they seemed to become. It's true that he not only tried the carrot, but also applied the stick – the most obvious slackers were fired and replaced with younger candidates – but this only made matters worse. Out of fear of losing their jobs, the remaining employees took pains to avoid attracting any negative attention, but they didn't try to stand out in a positive way either. Strikes and demands were not an issue, but neither were any suggestions for improvement or productive decisions forthcoming. It appeared as if everyone had conspired to simply work to rule, doing just the minimum amount possible to

get by. And yet, particularly in this industry, the active participation and creative power of each and every staff member was vital to survival. The supreme law of business is: innovation or death. Whoever does merely a run-of-the-mill job is an agent serving to bring on destruction and doom. But how was one to spark these people's passion?

One day the entrepreneur took a vacation back in the place where he was born. In the village where his forefathers had led their backward, unremarkable existence, he suddenly remembered an old man who was still alive, whom everyone regarded as particularly wise. He decided to ask him for advice. At least this consultant's suggestions were available for free.

When the entrepreneur told him of his problems, the old man answered: "No wonder all these false prophets have failed. You can't train a person to be motivated any more than you can teach him to be free. In both cases the training process itself eliminates any possible free will. Whoever is forced to *_act_* motivated cannot possibly *_feel_* motivated."

"But then what am I to do?" asked the entrepreneur.

"You can inspire respect and emulation by setting a good example, by demonstrating your own model behavior. You should treat your co-workers as you wish them to treat you. They should enjoy the same affluence as you do, rely on the same security in sickness and old age, have sufficient time for leisure and socializing and above all: they must find fulfillment in what they do. Then you won't have any need for motivational trainers and your people will remain loyal to you."

"But that's impossible," the entrepreneur replied. "All these things would substantially raise payroll, weaken management, waste time and make investors nervous, and then how would I ever be able to keep up with the competition?"

"Excuse me, said the old man, but you asked me how to make

people loyal to you, and that's the answer I gave you. You didn't ask me to tell you how to be financially successful, something I know nothing about and which, by the way, doesn't interest me in the slightest."
"But it's a question of both things: a healthy working environment and competitiveness!"
"Now I think I finally understand what your problem is. You're trying to find a virginal whore." With that, the old man burst out laughing and the entrepreneur slunk away, gloomier than ever. In the village square the witty remark was soon on everyone's tongue, and as the entrepreneur walked by, they all turned to ask him: "Well, have you found your chaste hooker yet?" On the flight back the entrepreneur ruminated on the situation. Could it be, he asked himself, that global capital, now that it had conquered all exterior obstacles, had finally come up against an internal limit, namely: the tendency for motivation levels to plummet?

The senselessness of work – in quantitative terms

The most common work-related illness in all industrialized nations is referred to as "musculoskeletal disorder", also known as RSI (repetitive strain injury) syndrome. The symptoms are severe chronic joint -- and especially back -- pain, often in connection with depression or stress. Every year this syndrome shows a general increase of 20 per cent; in the service industries a rise as high as 50 per cent has been recorded. Although women as well as people who work at computers are more often affected, no occupational group is spared entirely. And there is as yet no effective treatment available. That's why the German Federal Institute for Occupational Safety and Health advises doctors to "inform their patients that back pain is 'normal'." The primary goal of treatment

should be "minimal utilization of the medical care system and the return to the workplace." In short: employees should suffer in silence. All of the studies conducted on this phenomenon have come to the same conclusion: that the cause of the pain can be attributed to psychosocial factors in the workplace, for example "subjectively perceived occupational demands and controls." The French National Agency for the Improvement of Working Conditions, ANACT, puts it even more bluntly: joints become ill when "the meaning of certain movements is no longer sensed." The disorder of the musculoskeletal system is thus an **illness involving actions that are emptied of sense.** Launching preventive measures would thus mean questioning how work is organized and above all whether doing the work makes any sense at all, something the responsible authorities are naturally not about to do. Instead, pharmaceutical companies are now at work coming up with the ultimate drug to help workers subjectively deal better with damaging on-the-job conditions. The environment is not to be adapted to fit the human beings, but the human beings adjusted to fit their environment. Along the same lines, the German Association of Company Doctors has now drafted a fitting program to accompany pension reform: "After 12 weeks of endurance training, 60-year-old men can achieve the same stamina level as 40-year-olds who have not undertaken training." The breeding of new workhorses is no longer limited by age.

Counterproductive remark

What, then, is productive work? Symbolically speaking, our concept of work is still colored by the biblical curse that impresses upon us the necessity to sow and to harvest if we want to eat. We have to "plough through" in order to "earn our daily bread." Even

as late as the 18th century the physiocrats still considered agriculture to be the only productive work. The tradesman did not perform productive work but rather "hired" work, since he depended on surpluses supplied by the primary work carried out by the farmer. The problem is, according to this definition not even three percent of Europeans today are doing productive work! Although the majority of the earth's inhabitants are still occupied with agriculture, this line of work has sunk beneath the horizon of the market society. The dominant production model has long since detached itself from the cultivation of the earth for food. Even if you don't plough your acre, you can still harvest your frozen pizza and catch the chicken flu.

With the general spread of manufacturing and the political economy, the concept of production was extended to cover all tasks related to the "natural metabolism." Whatever that is actually supposed to mean is wide open to interpretation. After all, dropping an atom bomb is also a powerful metabolic exchange with nature. And it's not only in this extreme case that the question arises of whether it might be appropriate to replace the word "production" with "destruction" instead – in order, for example, to be able to speak of a fundamental contradiction between destructive forces and the means of destruction. It is easy to forget that the unlimited reproducibility of goods is based on the outright looting of non-renewable resources. Nonetheless, a consensus prevailed for two hundred years: production encompassed all fabricated commodities and thus stood as the fixed and uncontestable center of society.

Today, the production of goods, just like agriculture, has disappeared into the invisible hells of Asia and South America. The western intelligentsia rejoices in having done away with the working class. At the same time, in Shanghai alone over two billion pairs of shoes are being manufactured each year. Should we

take this to mean that the inhabitants of the centers of capitalism are now freed from productive work? No, because a third production model has been invented for them: "immaterial" production. Not a trace remains anymore of the natural metabolism – unless one conceives of neurons and bytes as part of nature. And yet, just as the transformation of gold coins into electronic funds did not touch the true nature of money, dematerialization has changed nothing of the compulsive character of work – even the element of bodily exertion remains.
As Slavoj Zizek remarked, it's not so much objects that are being marketed here, but rather prefabricated phases of life. I buy my physical activity at the gym, my need to express myself from my psychotherapist, my access to information through the Internet, my image in prestigious clubs and restaurants. That which is produced in this sector – i.e. both reproduced and modified – are clearly the social conditions themselves. The individual products and services are mere milestones marking a uniform life pathway, signs of belonging to a universal market. This is why the willingness of each person to equate his own life with the constant flow of goods is of such central significance. If this identification with the logic of the market were to be broken, then the productive straightjacket would be drained of its entire legitimation. Anticapitalism begins directly with the question: Do I really want to live this way? And what am I willing to sacrifice for it?

Addiction and breaking the habit

The "strange delusion" against which Paul Lafargue launched a polemical attack in the first lines of his *The Right to Be Lazy*: "the love of work, the furious passion for work," is today a

scientifically proven fact. There's no denying anymore that he was a visionary, even more so than even he himself was aware.
Workaholism is now recognized by mainstream medicine, if only because it gives rise to higher and higher costs each year. It is an addiction that is also acknowledged by those affected. In 32 cities throughout Germany, local "Workaholics Anonymous" groups hold regular meetings. These were studied in depth by Bremen socio-economist Holger Heide. Over the course of twenty years Heide analyzed the destructive effects of overwork, until he came to the conclusion that the blame could not be placed only on exterior coercion. There is a relationship between financial and social pressure and an "inner compulsion," an inner irresistibility. There are many people who are "successful" in the business sense but still seem to be constantly frustrated, embittered and exhausted. The times when Lafargue could attribute to the bourgeoisie "unbounded luxury, spicy indigestibles and syphilitic debauches" are long over. Only Hollywood stars can still afford such pleasures these days. Instead, it's the abstract character of wealth to which the business elite becomes addicted. You eventually have your fill of caviar and womanizing, but never, ever of stocks and Swiss bank accounts.
Of course, there are much greater numbers of people whose careers are not so successful and for whom work is linked exclusively with fear. Fear of their boss's demands, of mobbing by their colleagues (workaholics are apparently the most asocial people there are), of their own failure to achieve, of a possible dismissal, yes, even fear of fear itself. And they try to escape from this unbearable reality through work, of all things. According to Heide, they succumb to a kind of "overexploitation of their own life energy."
And finally there are those who have been kicked out of the working world, and have fallen into a deep hole. Their whole lives once revolved around work, and now, either unemployed or retired,

they have no idea what to do with themselves. They feel superfluous. Time, which they now have plenty of, mutates into hour after hour of agonizing boredom. On top of it all, the message they keep hearing again and again is that what they really need is a job. Yes, all they need is work – just like a junkie needs heroin! And yet no one puts on demonstrations demanding "Heroin for everyone!"

Recently Oskar Negt remarked: "Half of the population is working themselves to death, while the other half is bored to death." In other words: the first half needs an ever-increasing dose of the drug work to keep pace with their addiction, while the second half is suffering from withdrawal symptoms. They are two sides of the same coin. And we won't make any progress if we demand that everyone should get the same dose, ideally accompanied by an ecological replacement therapy.

Are we over-generalizing here about a mere marginal phenomenon? How many workaholics are out there anyway? This question – and here's the crux -- cannot be answered. And the reason is because workaholism does not represent a disturbance in the economic landscape, but rather the normal state of things, at least as long as the addicted are still able to work. They only impinge on our consciousness when their case becomes pathologically acute, i.e. when they are forced to call in sick. Much more attention is paid instead to the non-addicted or less addicted, who are decried as idlers, layabouts and freeloaders.

What relationship do the phenomena of addiction have to labor and market processes? This is the where the psychological converges with the sociopolitical plane. I again quote Heide: "The capitalist system not only fosters addiction, it 'lives' from addiction, and it is essentially a system of addiction. Capitalism as a system of addiction generates and reproduces neediness and does this without limit, because boundlessness is the essence of capitalism." Work in

capitalism knows no end, no Thanksgiving. Constantly and at an ever-increasing pace, new products must be put on the market, regardless of whether they are actually useful or better than those that already exist. The only function is the multiplication of capital. Achieving this end, so vital for capital users, requires an increasingly intensified mobilization of human resources. But this cannot be achieved through sheer exterior force; the boundless neediness must also be internalized by those who are doing the work. Addictive behavior is thus promoted and rewarded.

Naturally, all of the new products flooding the market must not only be marketed, but also sold. Here is where the wage earner's neurotic search for compensation comes in again, this time in the form of addiction to consumption. We all know the vicious circle: "Why am I earning money, if not to be able to afford to buy myself a new digital camera, vacation home and racehorse? How can I work less? I have to pay off my digital camera, vacation home and racehorse!"

One of the main features of addiction is insatiability. In order to achieve the same high with greater frequency, the dose must be continually increased. When we're ravenous for something, all the well-meant diet tips or culinary pleasures in the world can't help us, so long as we are unaware of our addiction. There is never a fixed level that spells satisfaction. What the society of work actually creates is deficiency.

Once we have comprehended the prevailing conditions as an ever-spiraling cycle of addiction, we realize that the battle against this situation must be fought not only on the economic and political planes, but also psychologically and culturally. This, incidentally, is something the dealers in the drug of work know all too well, as they try through costly motivational strategies to secure the loyalty of the work junkies. We're willing to wager that they won't succeed.

Fallow land as spatial metaphor

Where a center emerges, a periphery is also created. As traffic in goods intensifies in the shopping malls, the surrounding area becomes fallow land. Formerly busy streets lie deserted and desolate. But as soon as one turns away from the blinding light of commerce, one can discern quite a bit in this seeming nothingness. The free space describes the possibility of that which is missing in relation to reality. Empty storefronts and industrial ruins are both evidence of the past and omens of something that's beyond the market. They are often converted for purposes not quite clear by so-called interim users. Rooms thus temporarily freed from the claws of their market value gain a kind of aesthetic ambivalence. Against a backdrop of minimalist decor there develops an inscrutable sociotope, which harbors much more diversity than does the predictable monotony of the flow of goods.
Land lying fallow is not only an intermediary space, but first and foremost an intermediary time. Originally fallow land referred to "land at rest in the crop rotation system." Seen in this light, fallow land is also a spatial metaphor for the new working world. Concentrated nodes of intensive exploitation leave more and more people lying fallow. The re-establishment of full employment is just as realistic or desirable as the notion that all empty houses could be converted into shopping centers. We know, however, that fallow land requires a certain amount of protection against overexploitation and monoculture. If this is neglected, then a hard crust forms on the surface and the soil quality diminishes. The necessity of letting a field grow wild for a time corresponds to the need to be able to think and act beyond the constraints of the market. Allowance must be made for moments to breathe deeply, for stillness and aimlessness, both in our personal biographies and

in the urban organization. This paradox was already pointed out by Georges Bataille: that useless also has its uses. Periphery and center depend on one's point of view. If the periphery sees itself as the main setting for possibilities, then it stops being peripheral. There are more things on heaven and earth than all the supermarkets in the world will ever offer.

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