Philosophers for Change

The sharing economy: an alternative to capitalist exploitation?

(https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/share_hieronymous-bosch.jpg)

[Credit: School of Hieronymus Bosch, Tondalus' Visioen.]

by

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Political consciousness of systemic social problems produces opposite responses in groups differently situated in a social hierarchy. From the standpoint of exploited and oppressed groups, the recognition that they are determined by systemic socio-economic and political forces manifests itself as (more or less developed) demands for a different social system. From the standpoint of the ruling class and its ideological supporters, recognition of the same systemic problems (or, perhaps more accurately, recognition that systemic problems have become so widely obvious that they can no longer be plausibly denied) manifests itself as creative attempts to creatively name novel elements of the unchanged system in ways that make the change sound systematically transformative. Occasionally, these opposite strategies cross one another, as when the name of what system opponents take to be an alternative and the creative naming practiced by those trying to save the existing system are the same. I propose to examine the phenomenon known as the "sharing economy" with these considerations in mind. To avoid damaging political confusion, the referent(s) of the name must be carefully examined to see a) whether system opponents and system-supporters mean the same thing by the term, and b) whether the name really does refer to an alternative social system, and, if so, whether it is likely to solve the problems its supporters believe it will.

The answer to the first question is ambiguous. There is much overlap, but not identity, in what system opponents and system supporters refer to by the term "sharing economy." The overlap centres on the technological platforms of social media and peer-to-peer networks which open up new possibilities for identifying common interests and linking people with goods or skills to exchange. The difference concerns the extent to which these possibilities can be realised within capitalism or constitute the rudiments of an alternative to it. Thus, system opponents and system supporters do and do not mean the same thing by the sharing economy, but both are convinced that the technologies involved are crucial to its nature. The second question is not as difficult to answer, but, as we will see, there is still some ambiguity. Even in the best sense of the term, I will argue, the sharing economy cannot solve the systemic problems typical of capitalism. While "to share" is a verb widely assumed to name a universally valuable moral disposition, a more careful analysis reveals that sharing is not always completely good. Even if it were always good, I will further argue, it is not the best moral foundation for the institutional structure of a democratic life-economy alternative to capitalism. While sharing and the technologies that allow it to occur beyond the spatial and temporal confines of local communities can be an important element within a democratic life-economy, there is no technological fix to the problems of global capitalism, and solution to the problem of exploitation, oppression and alienation demand an end to the structure of material dependence of life on commodity markets that sharing on its own cannot guarantee.

I will develop this argument in three steps. In the first, I will attempt to bring some clarity to the idea of "sharing economy," highlight what system opponents and supporters see in it, and uncover the hidden moral ambiguity at the heart of sharing as a social practice. In the second, I will focus on the way in which 'sharing economy" is understood by capitalist system supporters, exposing the ideological function of "sharing" in this use and the capitalist truth behind the ideology. In the third I will return to the problem of sharing as the moral foundation of an alternative economy, and argue that alone it cannot satisfy the key conditions an alternative would have to satisfy to prove itself morally and economically superior to capitalism. Instead, the moral foundation of a democratic life-economy is universal need-satisfaction and its institutional infrastructure is not peer-to-peer networks but democratically governed public institutions that ensure universal provision of natural and social life-requirements to each and all.

(https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/share_studentsforliberty-org.jpg)

[Credit: studentsforliberty.org.] **I:**

Sharing as Moral Disposition and Economic Practice

While system opponents see in the sharing economy a strategy of de-commodified exchange and system supporters see in it a means of extending commodified exchange, both are agreed that the sharing economy relies upon the technological foundation of peer-to-peer networks established through digital communication software and devices. As Tom Slee says in the opening of his important critique, "the sharing economy is a wave of new businesses that use the Internet to match customers with service providers for real-world exchanges."[1] The range of services and goods offered is vast and varied, but can be grouped into four sets. Judith Schorr, a (critical) supporter of the transformational potential of the sharing economy, identifies these sets as "recirculation of goods, increased utilization of durable assets, exchange of services, and sharing of productive assets."[2] While capitalist system-opponents like Schorr see peer-to-peer networks as transformational because they allow for the precise expression of needs to others who might be able to satisfy those needs through the use of existing goods or voluntary labour, system-supporters see these same networks as means of creating new markets. Nevertheless, the system-supporters regard the disposition at work within the networks as sharing, because the aim of the person marketing the service or product is to find unmet needs and satisfy them.

Rachel Botsman, an enthusiast of the marketized sharing economy puts the point clearly: "At its core, its about empowerment … about empowering people to make meaningful connections, connections that are enabling us to rediscover a humaneness that we've lost somewhere … by engaging in marketplaces like Airbnb … that are built on personal relationships versus empty transactions."[3] Note that she ignores the cash transaction that consummates the relationship in favour of the initial moment of what she sees as human social contact. Her support for the practice is rooted in her belief that the technologies bring people together as humans first, and only secondarily as buyer and seller. Thus, she thinks this relationship is "human" and not empty (i.e., commercial) because it is not a generic exchange

(like in a store, where one finds a product, hands the cash over, and leaves) but more precisely calibrated to individual tastes and interests of the purchaser and rooted in a real exchange of personal information prior to its consummation as sale. Nevertheless, the indisputable fact that the exchange is consummated by the transfer of money from service-requirer to service-provider raises suspicions about the "human" *bone fides* of the marketized sharing economy. In order to test whether these suspicions are justified, we must inquire more carefully into the meaning of the verb "to share," examine the moral disposition from which it arises, and explore any hidden ambiguities the disposition and the practice might contain. We can then return to the economic dimension of the problem to see more clearly to what extent (if any) the marketized sharing economy is based upon "sharing" in any morally meaningful sense.

When we share something with someone we give to them something they lack without expectation of any reciprocation on their part. Sharing may stem from a request for help, or it may be gratuitous; it may concern an object of pressing need or an object of desire; we may give something we have in abundance or something we have barely enough of for ourselves, but in all cases that which makes an act an instance of sharing is its non-reciprocal nature. Simply put, we give without expectation of receiving anything back in return. If we ask for money for the good in question we are not sharing, we are selling; if we ask for an equivalent good in exchange for the object we are not sharing, we are bartering; if we ask for a favour in return for the object we are not sharing but laying the basis for a *quid pro quo*.

(https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/share_rmmagazine-com.jpg)

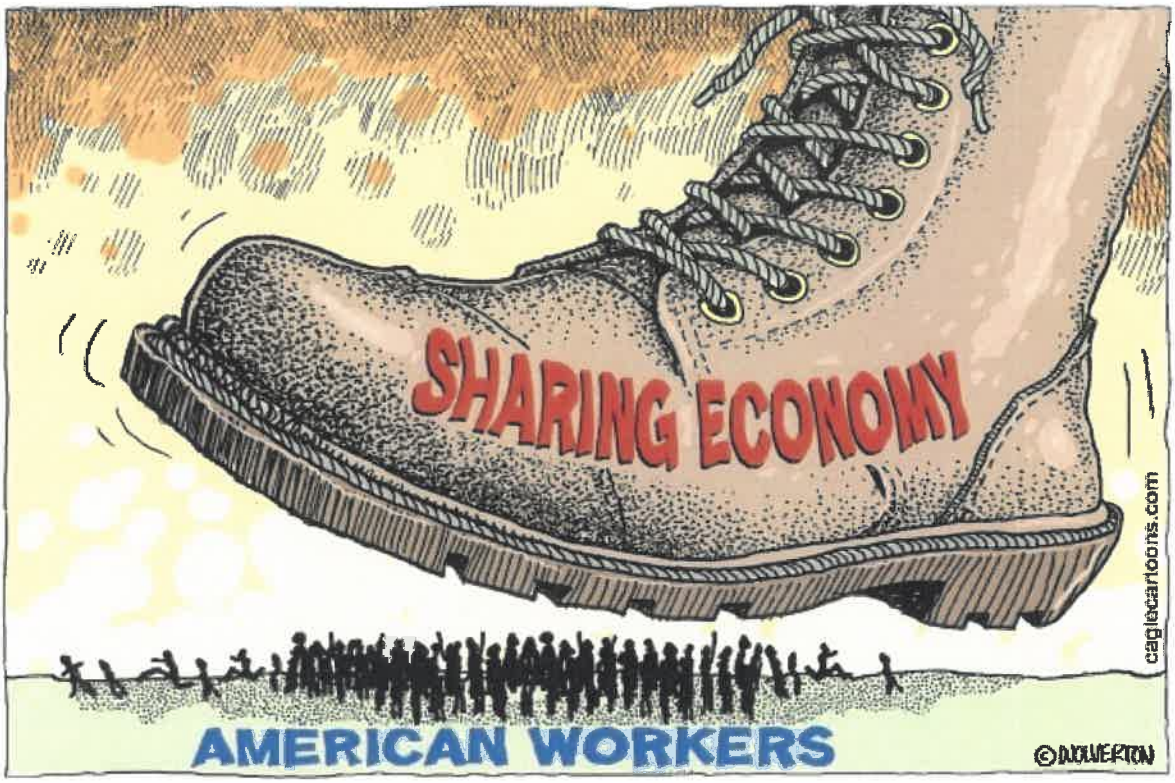
[Credit: rmmagazine.com.]

Sharing is generally regarded as a sound moral disposition that a proper education should cultivate. To share requires us to pay attention to other people`s needs at least as much as our own. A capacity to share is a

sign that people have grown beyond a narrow selfishness and a society of sharers seems to be a society of people who care about each other's well being. Capitalism stands in sharp contrast to our ordinary moral dispositions in so far as it demonizes sharing as a lost opportunity to exploit other people`s needs. Marx condemned capitalism in his early philosophical works precisely because it turned need into an opportunity to exploit others. "Under private property," he wrote, "... every person speculates on creating *new* need in another , so as to drive him to a fresh sacrifice, to place him in a new dependence."[4] Before him, Adam Smith decried as morally objectionable (although socially useful) the "natural selfishness and rapacity" of the rich, in their struggle to "satisfy their own vain and insatiable desires"[5] For such a person to share would be unthinkable, while to *sell* that which others would share is their life-goal. Sharing is approved as a virtue, then, because it is *other-regarding* and proof that people are able to rise above the egocentric concerns that drive market relationships and devote themselves to the good of others without a secret selfish agenda underlying their action. Sharing is proof that when we pay attention to others in need we can recognise and respond to the harm that their state of deprivation causes them *as harms* that we want to heal, and not as opportunities to increase our private wealth. Sharing thus stems from a recognised *obligation* of human beings to help one another when they are in need.

I do not contest the virtuous character of the other-regarding focus of a sharing disposition or the bonds of obligation that our needs establish between us. However, a complete estimation of the moral value of any disposition must include an examination of the content of the act as well as intention that motivates it. That is, we must always apply a life-value test to any disposition and a life-value test always involves concrete examination of the effects of a given intention or disposition on the life with which it connects. In the case of sharing, therefore, we can say that *attention* to the needs of others is life-valuable, because it is an expression of care for their well-bring, but we cannot say that in every particular interest sharing, as non-reciprocal giving, is good in abstraction from the question of what it is that is shared (what is the content of the act of sharing). When we add an examination of content to our examination of intentions and dispositions, it becomes clear that sharing does not always establish an unambiguously good relationship between people.

Let us take two examples to illustrate my point. In the first example I am sitting on a park bench eating a sandwich when a homeless person approaches me and tells that he is starving. Out of a caring disposition, I share my sandwich with him. In the second case, two junkies are sitting on a park bench with enough heroin for both but only one needle. They decide to share the needle. In the first case, the hungry person is fed (albeit only temporarily), while in the second the junkies put themselves at higher risk of contracting HIV or hepatitis-C by sharing the needle. In both cases the caring, other-regrading disposition is active, but in the second case, rather than benefitting the other who lacks a needle of his own, the first junky puts his friend at risk (even if unwittingly). The point is clear: sharing is an unambiguous good only in the case that a) it stems from a caring disposition, and b) the content of the sharing act, that which is shared, is life-valuable. An object is life-valuable when it meets a real need. A real need is any object or relationship or practice which, if we are deprived of it, we suffer objective harm in the form of the impairment of life-capacities to move, to think, to feel, to mutualistically relate to others, and to build and create things that others need and from which they can benefit.[6]



(https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/share_wolverton.jpg)

[Credit: Wolverton.]

Now let us turn to the question of a sharing economy in general and its goodness conditions. A sharing economy in general would be a system of economic relationship based upon non-reciprocal giving (as opposed to barter or sale), and it would be good, from the example above, just in case that which is shared across and throughout the economy were *needed* goods, services, and information. The fact that there is a caring disposition at work in the economic relationships that connect people in a sharing economy is not enough: they must also share only such goods as are needed for the health, well-being, development, and enjoyment of our sentient, cognitive, imaginative, practical, and relational capacities of the members of that economic system.

There are examples from the history of economies that by and large operated on the basis of sharing. The city in which I live is a two hundred year old European settlement on the traditional lands of the Three Fires Confederacy of First Nations Peoples (the Ojibway, Odawa, and Potawatomi). At public gatherings it is becoming more common to acknowledge the pre-colonial history of the city, often by asking an elder from one of the First Nation's communities to speak. At a play I attended recently the elder explained the traditional ownership of the land, and then added that she wanted to remind everyone of the traditional hospitality that the people of the Three Fires Confederacy had shown the people of all nations. The principle of this hospitality was "one dish, one spoon."[7] The life-value essence of the principle is clear. Everyone must eat in order to live; whatever differences might characterise people as a result of particular cultural histories are erased by deep physical needs. The purpose of resources is to satisfy needs (and not to be hoarded or used to establish power over others). Hence, where people gather and are needy, and there are resources to satisfy those needs, then the obligation of the person or group who controls the resources is to share them with *all* who need them, regardless of their cultural membership.

The principle that underlay the Dish and Spoon Treat is a principle of what I will call a universal life-

valuable sharing economy. The principle mandates that natural resources are life-resources, good for the sake of enabling the lives of those who require them. They are to be distributed on the basis of the need for them and not on any other basis unrelated to need: ability to pay, willingness to be subordinated to the political authority of the group that controls the resources, or cultural identity. The universality of the principle was an achievement born of conflict and reflection upon the way in which exclusionary control over resources (at least in part) provoked the conflict. The agreement to share ended the struggle over the area's natural resources and helped to achieve peace. Yet, nothing in the logic of sharing, giving without expectation of return, *requires* that it be universal in this way. If the Three Fires Confederacy decided to share only with other indigenous groups and not with European colonisers, theirs would still have been a sharing economy, just one open only to people of First Nations. By the same principle, if a family group is willing to share with members but not with others, that exclusivity does not mean there is no sharing economy within the family, but only that it is restricted to members.

(https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/bank_victo-ngai.jpg)

[Credit: Victo Ngai.]

These exclusions cause no harm if those in need can get the resources they need elsewhere: Europeans could have ended their colonial project and others could turn to their own family. When societies are multi-cultural and riven by lines of class and racial and gender conflict, however the possible partiality of sharing can become pernicious. White male stock traders my share information amongst themselves that helps them get rich; rich white homeowners may share information that helps them effectively keep black people out of their neighbourhood, to take only two examples whose reality is well-known. There is no contradiction here to the value of other-relatedness that makes sharing a virtue, only its restriction to an in-group and use for pernicious ends. Since sharing is a voluntary act, it is up to the person who decides to share with whom they will share. If they are racists they will share with white people but not with

black people. That restriction makes them racists, not selfish. So a sharing economy could, in principle, also be a racist economy, if the principle is not universal but says: share with your kind. If every human society contained only one's own kind, this exclusivity might not be a problem. But those are fictitious; all human societies contain differently identified people with shared human needs. In those cases, an ethic of partial sharing will leave some out-groups (the racially or ethnically or sex-oppressed) without that which they need, if the preponderance of resources is in the hands of a dominant class. The point is that "sharing" alone is not necessarily the foundation of an economy that ensures universal life-requirement satisfaction. Hence, even in the cases where the sharing disposition is real, it does not follow that sharing alone will ensure the solution to the systemic problems of inequality and need-deprivation that capitalism causes.

The conclusion that a sharing economy constitutes an advance on capitalism must be evaluated in light of three questions: 1) are the contents shared life-goods, through the appropriation and use of which fundamental life-needs are satisfied and essential human life-capacities enabled; 2) is the principle of distribution through sharing universally applied, i.e., do people share with whomever needs the resource, or are there identity or class-based limitations on who shares with whom; and 3) are universally required life-resources collectively controlled and shared out by a democratic decision-making process that focuses on who needs what most urgently, or is sharing a function of arbitrary decisions of a ruling group that controls the majority of life-resources and who is free to decide with whom to share and for what purposes (to get good press, to get tax-breaks through charitable donations, and so on)? Hence the superiority of a sharing economy to capitalism can be compromised in three general ways: either that which is shared is not a life-good, or the sharing is not universal, or the sharing is only of a small subset of total life-resources which in no way compromises, but may in fact help to protect, the private ownership and control over the preponderance of universally required life-resources which is the material foundation of ruling class power.

In this section I have defined sharing as a disposition to give without expectation of return. This disposition presupposes the capacity to overcome egocentric selfishness and direct one's attention in a caring way to other people. The laudatory rhetoric that abounds in discussions of the sharing economy is largely rooted in the belief that sharing is a virtuous disposition because it recognises and seeks to satisfy the needs of others. This section also briefly discussed a real example of a universal sharing economy, that is, an economy in which life-goods were distributed to all who needed them because they need them and not because of any particular characteristic they shared with the community in control of the resource. However, a careful examination of the virtue revealed that its life-value as the foundation of a complex economy was subject to a number of qualifications. A sharing economy could be a democratic life-economy, but only if that which is shared are life-goods, they are shared with all who need them, and the sharing is a function of a community-wide democratic decision and not a class-specific charity decision. At present, peer-to-peer sharing does not *necessarily* violate any of these principles, but nor does it satisfy any *just because it is carried out over a social media network and is mediated by shared interest.* Hence, theorists like Schorr who see in peer-to-peer networks the outlines of a new global sharing economy that solves the structural problems of capitalism *might* not be wrong, but they do need to build into their arguments the sorts of qualifications that I have been exploring here.

The matter is quite otherwise with the commercial sharing economy that receives equal amounts of praise as a beneficent alternative to the old-style cash transaction. Where money is concerned there is no sharing, but exchange. The application of the term "sharing economy" to networked commercial transactions is thus a misnomer. I will now turn to examine this dimension of the problem.

(https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/share-william-bell-scott.png)

[Credit: William Bell Scott.]

II: "Creative Destruction" Not Sharing

Sharing is not, strictly speaking, exchange because there is no return for that which is shared. The businesses that rely upon peer-to-peer networks *to build markets for their products and services* are engaged in commercial exchange of products and services for money, and, therefore, not sharing. The Uber's and AirBnB's of the world do not constitute an alternative to the capitalist economy, but only a new business that exploits regulatory gaps to increase its profitability. They are an example of what Schumpeter called the "creative destruction" essential to the survival of capitalism, not a humane evolution of economics beyond it.

Creative destruction is essential to the survival of capitalism because as capital accumulates, that is, as it becomes fixed in factories, built environments, and typical business patterns there are less and less opportunities for profitable investment. If accumulation were permanent, then capitalism would collapse under the weight of its own patterns of development, as Marx argued. Schumpeter was interested in the problem of why this self-undermining did not occur. His answer was that as the rate of

profit becomes threatened by a given round of accumulation, entrepreneurs emerge who discover cracks in the given business patterns and institutions and exploit them with new practices, techniques, and technologies. If these insurgent practices prove profitable, they will destroy accumulated capital and create new spaces for investment. Eventually, the entire business landscape is transformed, novelties settle into new structures of capital fixation, setting the stage not for collapse because of the falling rate of profit, as Marx believed, but a new round of creative destruction. The history of capitalism is a story of "industrial mutations that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure *from within*, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one. This process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism. It is what capitalism consists in and what every capitalist concern has got to live with."[8] There is no reason, in principle, why this process cannot go on forever, according to Schumpeter, presupposing as it does only the inventiveness of human beings and their ability to apply the products of our creativity in ways that exploit hidden opportunities to transform ossified patterns of economic life.

There is little point disputing about the future of capitalism. It will survive or be transformed into a different system not according to some fixed law (of the falling rate of profit or creative destruction and self-renewal) but according to the outcomes of the social struggles its contradictions constantly engender. What is certain is that *up to this point in time* the process of creative destruction is real and has allowed capitalism to renew itself, but always at the (at least short term costs) of the interests of workers whose lives and livelihoods are also damaged or destroyed by technological and organizational innovation. When we examine the capitalist use of peer-to-peer networks from the standpoint of workers in existing industries affected by the new business models, it becomes clear that they have nothing to do with rediscovering the "humanness" we have lost "somewhere along the way," but driving down the costs of doing business in the industries they are taking over.

(https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/share_flickr-ouishare.jpg)

[Credit: Flickr/Ouishare.]

No one should romanticise older forms of capitalist labour. Taxi driving or hotel work is low-paid, low-benefit work even where it is unionized. Still, what victories workers in these industries have managed to win are seriously threatened by the Uber's and AirBnB's of the new business landscape. Their genius, if we want to call it that, is to present themselves as software platforms for peer-to-peer communication, and not taxi companies or lodging services; as sellers of this technological platform to independent contractors, and not employers of labour. On this basis they have managed to escape from regulatory regimes designed for older business models and thus—at least for a time, until new rounds of labour struggle catch up– exploit these regulatory gaps to enhance their profitability. Hence, it is not the technology *as such* that explains (for example) Uber's success, and certainly not that it has tapped into an ancient sociality and desire to share long-suppressed by capitalism, but that its owners have discovered a language to explain their business that puts it outside of regulations its business model renders obsolete.

Enthusiasts do not see the matter in this way but instead tend to fetishize the technology at the expense of understanding the actual human reality of how needs link us into basic forms of social relationship. Instead of understanding needs as organic-social requirements of human beings that must be satisfied through manifold forms of physical, symbolic, and caring labour, they are understood as functions of social media networks. Consider for example Steven Johnson's explanation of need-satisfaction: "When a need arises is society that goes unmet, our first impulse should be to build a peer network to solve that problem."[9] As Slee explains, "to satisfy a need " does not refer to social labour that will meet the need but rather "to build an Internet software platform, a web site and/or mobile application on which

consumers and service providers can create a presence and exchange goods and services."[10] The actual labour through which the good or service is produced, and thus available as a need-satisfier, is presupposed. The work that it takes to satisfy the need *appears* to derive from the technologically mediated exchange relationship (with the technology as the active agent and the human beings the passive beneficiaries of technology) while the material reality is masked. This mystification repeats the problem that Marx diagnosed as the "fetishism of commodities."[11] Focussing on exchange relations, classical political economists presented commodities—products of human labour-as endowed with a magic power to increase their own value. In reality, Marx demonstrated, their value is the result of human labour in the production process. In both cases, the productive and creative force-labour-is presented as the predicate of an active subject (the commodity, technology) which, in material reality is the creation (the predicate) of labour. At the same time as the productive and creative power of labour is falsely subordinated to a fetishized understanding of one of its products, the exploitative and alienating conditions in which people work is hidden behind an ideological understanding of voluntary and self-directed exchange.

When we look at the matter of peer-to-peer exchange in capitalism from the standpoint of labour, the older forms of exploitation and alienation re-appear. Let us continue with the case of Uber. Having distinguished itself from the old taxi industry, it exempts itself from its costs. As Slee explains: "Uber enthusiasts attribute the company's success to its technology and the efficiency with which it matches drivers and riders, but this misses much of the story. Uber's success also owes a lot to avoiding the cost of insurance, sales tax, mechanical vehicle inspections, and providing a universally-accessible service … Uber's success comes from being parasitic on the cities in which it operates."[12] There is no sharing here, but only cleverness in working around the old regulatory regime.

(https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/share_-flickr-wayne-s-grazio.jpg)

[Credit: Wayne S. Grazio.]

Creative destruction allows capitalism to renew itself, but it also undermines existing forms of making a living, throwing workers in old industries out of work and putting downward pressure on wages. This process is abundantly clear in the case of the on-going mutation of capitalism we are studying. Again, the rhetoric highlights self-empowerment and self-employment: labour is purportedly freed from the shackles of exploitative industries and dominating hierarchies to sell itself to whomever has a need to buy it. The reality is simply a new form of exploitation and domination. As Kevin Roose discovered, at the root of most workers' participation in the new business model was desperation: they turned to selling their labour over peer-to-peer networks because they had lost a full-time job. So,

> *A huge precondition for the sharing economy has been a depressed labor market, in which lots of people are trying to fill holes in their income by monetizing their stuff and their labor in creative ways. In many cases, people join the sharing economy because they've recently lost a full-time job and are piecing together income from several part-time gigs to replace it. In a few cases, it's because the pricing structure of the sharing economy made their old jobs less profitable. (Like full-time taxi drivers who have switched to Lyft or Uber.) In almost every case, what compels people to open up their homes and cars to complete strangers is money, not trust.[13]*

Work in the capitalist peer-to-peer economy is rooted in the same alienation from the means of life-support and development as was (is) work in the older industrial economy studied by Marx.

(https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/greed_expanded-eye.jpg)

[Credit: expanded-eye.] A Dickensian economic reality

is thus "sharewashed" into a fantasy of free social interaction. Sharewashing is an ideological practice analogous to greenwashing. In both cases, capitalist destruction of nature and the exploitation of labour are represented as environmentally friendly and empowering. In fact,

> *What is behind this urge to call working–and not just any kind of work, but difficult, low-paying, and often dangerous work–'sharing?' Simply put, TaskRabbit, Sidecar, Lyft and similar companies are at the forefront of the precarization of the US workforce … Remember how many workers used to have unions, pensions, health insurance? And now they don't? The erosion of worker power doesn't stop there. Precarious workers lack job security, lack protections like worker's comp[ensation], unemployment benefits, health insurance, and even minimum wage laws.[14]*

Progressive economist Dean Baker concurs. His study of new peer-to-peer businesses concludes that "the new sharing is largely based on evading regulations and breaking the law."[15] The creativity of the business model lies less in finding a new and transformative use for peer-to-peer software than in exploiting gaps in models of regulation designed for older industries. Hence, the truth of what the business and technology press calls the sharing economy is a mutation within capitalism which presupposes and extends its exploitative and alienating effects on workers: creative destruction, not sharing.

To sum up the critique of the capitalist appropriation of the term "sharing economy" I want to stress three points. First, since sharing is non-reciprocal exchange (giving with no expectation of receiving anything in return) monetized exchange (paying for a product) is not sharing, *by definition.* So, if the transactions in the capitalist sharing economy are mediated by money, there is no sharing, and the use of peer-to-peer networks to enable monetized exchange is a mutation within capitalism and not an alternative to it. Second, although it is at its core capitalist, peer-to-peer monetized exchange is a new way of buying and selling which has upset older regulatory regimes and business practices. It is another example of the 'creative destruction' which allows capitalism to grow beyond stagnant forms of accumulated capital. Finally, this capitalist reality is hidden from view behind a fetishistic understanding of technology as the active power of satisfying needs. As was the case with commodities in general, labour as the truly active and creative power (and the exploitative and alienating structures and forces within which it is confined) is overlooked, allowing supporters to present alienation and exploitation at the level of production as voluntary and free relationships at the level of exchange. The question remains: even if it were possible to free peer-to-peer sharing from its monetized capitalist form, is the sharing disposition a sufficient foundation for the democratic life-economy the world needs as a solution to the endemic problems of capitalism?

(https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/share_wallpaper24x7-com.jpg)

[Credit: wallpaper24x7.com.]

III: The Limits of Sharing and the Need for Universal Public Provision of Essential Life-Requirements

My argument is directed against the ideological appropriation of the value of sharing by supporters of capitalism, and not against the life-value of the moral disposition to share *life-requirements*. By analogous reasoning, my argument is directed against the subordination of the power of the technology to ramify peer-to-peer networking across the globe to capitalist exchange relations and not against that technological power as such. Thought of in abstraction from its capitalist confines, social media and peer-to-peer connections are rooted in human sociality and express novel forms of interaction and relationship. They also have great potential—as Yochai Benkler in particular has argued, to free the dissemination of (at least the symbolic) products of human intelligence from commercial market forces. Since computers and the networks that link them so drastically reduce the cost of producing and distributing symbolic content, they have the potential to free creative labour from subordination to dominating commercial enterprises and markets; to allow it to be shared freely, in the real sense of sharing. The "liberation" of creativity from "the constraints of physical capital" Benkler argues,

> *leaves creative human beings much freer to engage in a wide range of information and cultural production practices than those they could afford to participate in when, in addition to creativity, experience, cultural awareness, and time, one needed a few million dollars to engage in information production. From our friendships to our communities we live life and exchange ideas, insights, and expressions in many more diverse relations than those mediated by the market. In the physical economy, these relationships were largely relegated to spaces outside of our economic production system. The promise of the networked information economy is to bring this rich diversity of social life smack into the middle of our economy and productive lives.[16]*

Benkler does indeed capture the promise of sharing *information* through social media networks, and thus glimpses one side of what non-alienated labour in a democratic life-economy would look like. But he leaves the biggest problem undiagnosed, and thus unsolved.

(https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/share_stephanie-mcmillan.jpg)

[Credit: Stephanie McMillan.] While one can disseminate information almost cost-free across computer networks, our capacity to produce information and to create *depends upon our being alive and the means of life-maitenance remain physical*. Not only do they remain physical, they are, under capitalism, the private and exclusive property of the ruling class, to which others must pay money if they are to access that which they need to live. Benkler does not challenge this depth structure of material dependence, nor the commodification of universal life-resources, and so long as that is not challenged, then the liberating potential of information and symbolic sharing across peer networks will remain constrained, because the power to engage in symbolic labour is constrained by the need to work in the physical economy in order to survive.

Hence the question that must be asked is: can (and should) life necessities be shared. Is sharing the solution to the problem of the structural dependence of life on individuals being able to pay for commodities, as in capitalism? It is obvious that food and water cannot be shared across computer networks, so is the solution to re-create something like the sharing economy of the Three Fires Confederacy in the more complex conditions of twenty-first century national and international

economies?

I argued in Part One that the moral value of sharing is subject to two qualifications. First, the goodness of sharing depends not only upon the subjective disposition to give that which another requires without expectation of return, but also upon the life-value of the object shared. Sharing was good in those cases where the subjective disposition was exercised in acts of sharing goods and services which people required in order to live and develop their life-capacities, but not completely good in those cases where the object that was shared was harmful. Second, sharing is better to the extent to which the disposition to share is treated as a universal obligation rooted in the recognition that all human beings need fundamental life-requirements and worse to the extent that the sharing disposition is restricted on the basis of particular identities (of family, or ethnicity, or race, etc). The disposition to share is always good, but the reality of sharing is not always universally good in all respects, if that which is shared is harmful or the sharing of life-goods is restricted to members of an in-group.

(https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/esopassociationblog-org-pig.jpg)

[Credit: esopassociationblog.org.]

As the example of the principle of resource distribution in the Three Fires Confederacy proved, it is possible to organize an economy on the principle of unrestricted sharing of life-requirements. Despite this demonstrated possibility, I want to argue in this final section that sharing is not the best moral foundation for a democratic life-economy. The idea of a "democratic life-economy" develops out of my

reflections on an unexamined problem in Marx's principle of distribution in a communist society: "from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs."[17] The potential problem is that nowhere does Marx argue fully that needs must be restricted to natural and social life-requirements and abilities to forms of self-realization that contribute to the good of others by helping to satisfy their life-requirements. I attempted to solve this problem by re-thinking Marx's principle of distribution from the perspective of McMurtry's life-value onto-axiology. Hence "democratic life-economy" combines the fundamental principle of life-value onto-axiology: that things, practices, relationships, and institutions are good to the extent that they satisfy our life-requirements and enable the expression and enjoyment of our life-capacities in life-serving ways, with Marx's (and the subsequent socialist tradition) stress on the need for working class self-emancipation and collective control over universally required life-resources and productive enterprises.[18] A good economy is one in which all affected by economic decisions deliberate in their workplaces and in wider social planning bodies to determine how the fundamental purposes of life-support and development can best be served over the open-ended future of human life.[19] In its abiding commitment to ensuring access to the means of life-support and development a democratic life-economy learns from indigenous forms of universal sharing economy, but its institutions are not based upon the moral disposition to share, but on the principle of guaranteed universal need-satisfaction. The difference requires explanation.

When sharing is good it satisfies a fundamental need. But what are the conditions in which the need for sharing arises? Clearly, if sharing is a way of responding to an unmet need, then the need for sharing arises in cases of deprivation. Typically, we share when we encounter, *per accidens*, someone who is lacking something that they require. Within any given indigenous community, the distribution of resources is based upon membership in the community and fulfillment of social function, not on recognition of unmet individual needs. If the society is healthy and prosperous, there would not normally be any people with unmet needs, because their belonging to the community ensured access to the resources that their lives required. The 'dish and spoon principle' arose out of a situation of conflict. Sharing was a means to resolve the conflict and to ensure that no one, regardless of who they were, would be deprived while they were in the territory of the First Nation's parties to the treaty. If no one were ever deprived, there would be no need to share, as everyone would get that which they needed from the ordinary operations of the economy. It is true that these economies were not based on the private and exclusive control over universally required life-resources, and in that sense we could say that they believed that the resources of the earth and water were shared (i.e., no one person or group's private property). But this sense of "shared" is distinct from the sharing disposition discussed in Section I.

Let us now examine how matters stand in the contemporary world. In capitalism, where need-deprivation is common, the sharing disposition is cultivated as an individualized means of responding to market failures to ensure need-satisfaction. The need-deprived person stands in a relationship of dependence with the more "fortunate" person with greater material means, and is typically grateful when the wealthier person shares something of what he or she has. The sharing disposition is still good in so far as it responds to an unmet need, but, as a principle of distribution, it *presupposes* systemic deprivation. If everyone had that which they required (as in a well-functioning indigenous community) there would be no need to share. Thus, the problem with sharing as the moral basis of a democratic life-economy is that the need to share presupposes deprivation, whereas a democratic life-economy could only exist if universally required life-resources were collectively controlled; i.e., if the material foundations of social dependence were overcome.

(https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/share_joe-magee.jpeg)

[Credit: Joe Magee.]

The principle and institutions of a democratic life-economy are not posits of a utopian theory. Concrete examples of them exist even in capitalism. Wherever there are adequately funded and democratically governed (as opposed to bureaucratically managed) public institutions, there is an example of the principles and institutions of a democratic life-economy. Let me return to my example of the junkies from Section I. Imagine that these people have access to a community health care clinic adequately funded through taxes and governed by former drug addicts who have experiential understanding of the complex problems addicts face. It would be a stretch of the term 'sharing' to describe the way in which the clinic is funded. There is no individuated subjective decision to share a certain amount of resources with a specific group of people; there is a collective decision to tax at levels that allow the funding of a set of public institutions designed to satisfy fundamental needs, and this clinic is a member of the wider set of public health care institutions. Rather than accidental recognition of unmet needs, public institutions develop out of prior understanding of the set of needs that must be satisfied if people are to live and live well, and a social commitment to fund institutions which ensure universal public provision of the goods and services all citizens require. Provision is taken out of the hands of subjective decisions and guaranteed at the level of basic institutions. All partiality is ruled out at the level of institutional design. There might be people who would not want to share their resources to help addicts overcome their addiction. Their subjective opinions cannot derail the clinic, because it is embedded in a set of tax policies that fund the institutions whose legitimacy is guaranteed by a more universal social commitment a comprehensive health care system.

There is another difference between sharing and the value basis of a democratic life-economy. Sharing is non-reciprocal giving. When I share a good with you, I do not have any expectations of receiving anything back in return. In a democratic life-economy, by contrast, the goal of meeting needs is two-fold. On the one hand, needs are met without precondition because without their satisfaction life is impossible. On the other hand, in so far as need-satisfaction not only enables life, but the development of sentient, cognitive, creative, and relational capacities, i.e., the basic powers and abilities of human

beings out of which our particular talents and projects develop, and it is through these projects that we contribute back to the "life-capital" we have used in our own development, there is an expectation (indeed, a necessity) that people give back to the stores of life-capital from which they have drawn. Life-capital is "life wealth that can produce more life wealth without loss."[20] Fresh water supplies, arable land and its crops, but also health care systems and schools, cultural institutions that provide space for the preservation or production of art or the history or communities, language more generally, and scientific understanding that allows us to better comprehend the dynamics of the world and to intervene in them in less destructive ways are all elements of life-capital. If no one gave back to these stores of life-capital, or if the naturally occurring stores are consumed at rates in excess of which nature can restore them, then the material and cognitive resource base upon which life depends, as well as the creations which make it meaningful, would disappear. So cultivating both the desire and ability to give back is also a goal of a democratic life-economy, whereas, in the case of sharing, nothing is expected in return.

It is true that some of these goods can be share–an art historian can lecture for free at a community centre, or a scientist can make her results available for free on the internet. But ensuring universal access on the basis of need must be a matter of public policy and not subjective disposition, for two reasons.

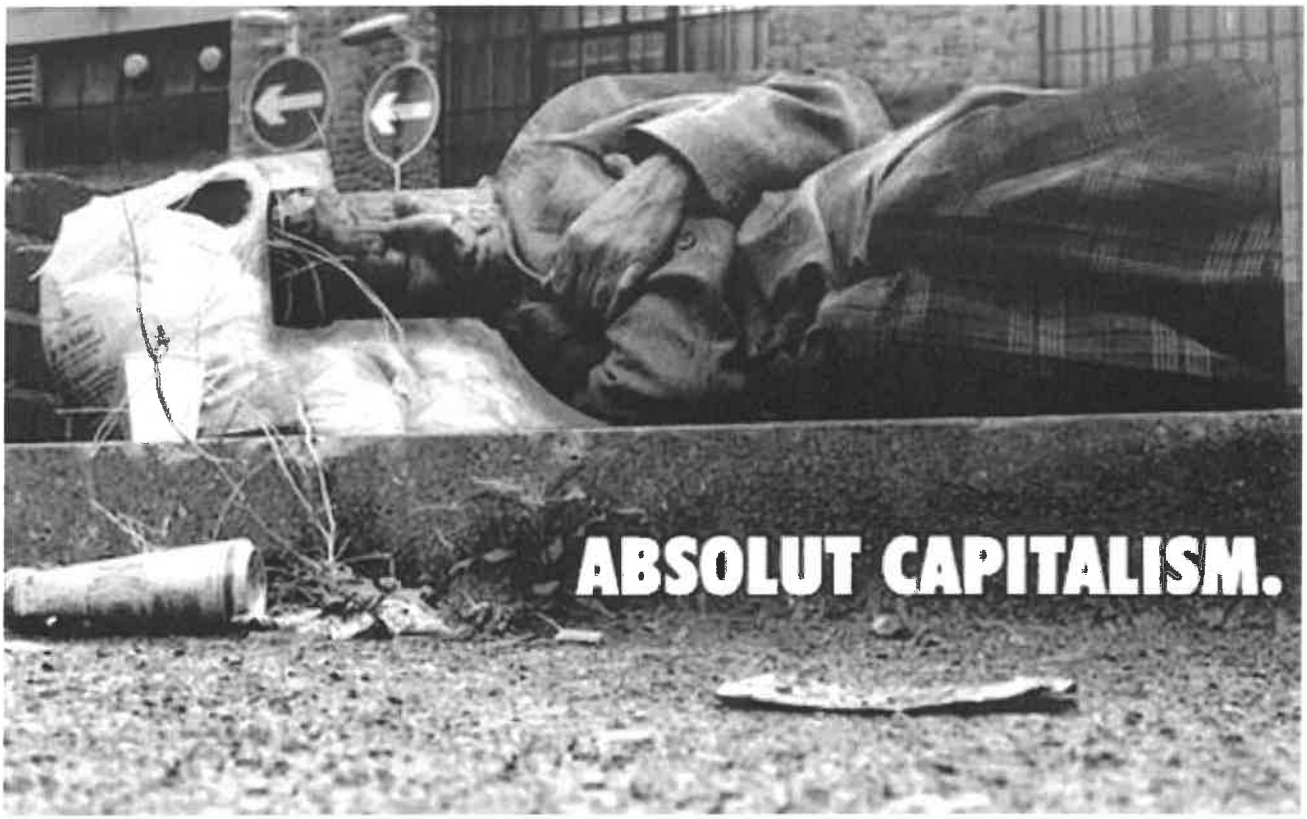
(https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/share_lesivo.jpg)

First, the scale of modern societies and the typical size of their populations, and the range of the goods life requires, means that ensuring access to these goods will require public institutions with a mandate to deliver the same quality service or good to all citizens. Let us take the example of education. A fully funded public education system from kindergarten to graduate school would ensure that every citizen had access to as much education as they had the aptitude and interest to acquire. Its complete decommodification would eliminate class as a determinant of level and quality of education. On the other hand, allowing top schools to charge what the market will bear, and consigning everyone else to random searches of the Internet for what information or free on-line courses they can find, introduces a fundamental inequality into society. The citizens shut out of university might be able to find information on-line, but they will lack access to libraries, lab space, and face-to-face communication with professors through which much if not all of the desire to do the work that learning requires derives. Sharing in this case, although real, would not satisfy the fundamental need for education.

Hence, much more than sharing is required for the construction of a democratic life-economy. I will close with what I take to be five fundamental conditions its *full* construction would require. However, readers must note that the evaluative criteria for social development should never be all or nothing, but always better or worse, more or less. That the conditions for the existence of a democratic life-economy cannot be built tomorrow does not mean that elements of them cannot be built tomorrow, and if they were, life would be better to that extent than it is today. With that in mind, the five conditions are:

1) Collective control over the universal means of life-maintenance and development (land, water, mineral and energy deposits, etc.,); 2) de-commodification, through the strategy of universal public provision, of life-requirements in which individual taste plays no role (clean water and sanitation, health care, education, for example), and remuneration for labour at wage levels sufficient to enable the purchase of other life-goods where individual taste makes a difference (clothing, housing, for example), constrained only by the need to take into account the material-environmental limits on resource consumption; 3) non-alienated work which is democratically governed and which enables the compelx of human capacities that make life meaningful, purposive, and enjoyable and whose products contribute in manifold ways to the satisfaction of others needs, constrained again by considerations of sustainability; 4) the gradual reduction and elimination of the desire for and production of consumer products that serve no life-function and which waste scarce energy and resources as part of a collective project of simplification of demand for the sake of maximization of experience and life-value activity; 5) the progressive cultivation of subjective commitment to principles 1-4 through philosophical and political reflection and argument, not authoritarian coercion or command.

As virtuous as sharing might be when it is universally expressed, it cannot on its own satisfy any of these five conditions. The real project for the future is not a sharing economy, therefore, but a democratic life-economy, whose construction will require not only virtuous dispositions, but also political movements capable of overcoming the structures of material dependence that allow capitalism to dominate and alienate people.



(https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/share_americanzen.jpg)

[Credit: americanzen.]

End notes:

[1] Tom Slee, *What's Yours is Mine,* (Toronto: Between the Lines), 2016, p.9.

[2] Juliet Schor, "Debating the Sharing Economy," *Great Transition Initiative* (October 2014), **http://www.greattransition.org/publication/debating-the-sharing-economy (http://www.greattransition.org/publication/debating-the-sharing-economy)** (accessed, June 18th, 2016).

[3] Quoted in Slee, *What's Yours is Mine,* p.20.

[4] Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844," Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works, Volume 3, 1843-1844,"* New York: International Publishers), 1975, p. 306.

[5] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments,* Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1976, p. 304.

[6] John McMurtry, *Unequal Freedoms,* (Toronto: Garamond), 1998, p. 164.

[7] The principle recalls the name of a late eighteenth century treaty between the Three Fires Confederacy and the Haudenosaunee (a.k.a. Iroquois). The treaty ended a period of prolonged warfare over the fur trade during the 1790's. The treaty agreement at that time was to establish peace and friendship and share the resources in this part of Southern Ontario. Thanks to Russel Nahdee, director of the Turtle Island Centre for Aboriginal Education at the University of Windsor for explaining the history of the principle to me.

[8] Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy.* New York: Harper and Row. 1942, 83.

[9] Slee, *What's Mine is Yours*, p. 23.

[10] Ibid.

(https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/share_geo-coop.jpg)

[Credit: picture of Ayn Rand, geo.coop.]

[11] Karl Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers), 1986, p. 76.

[12] Slee, *What's Mine is Yours*, p. 59.

[13] Kevin Roose, "The Sharing Economy Isn't About Trust, It's About Desperation," **http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2014/04/sharing-economy-is-about-desperation.html (http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2014/04/sharing-economy-is-about-desperation.html)** (accessed, August 9th, 2016).

[14] Anthony Kalamar, "Sharewashing is the New Greenwashing," **http://www.opednews.com/articles/Sharewashing-is-the-New-Gr-by-Anthony-Kalamar-130513-834.html (http://www.opednews.com/articles/Sharewashing-is-the-New-Gr-by-Anthony-Kalamar-130513-834.html)** (accessed August 9th, 2016).

[15] Quoted in Schorr "Debating the Sharing Economy," *Great Transition Initiative* (October 2014), **http://www.greattransition.org/publication/debating-the-sharing-economy (http://www.greattransition.org/publication/debating-the-sharing-economy)**. (accessed, June 18th, 2016).

[16] Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks*, (New Haven CT: Yale University Press), 2006, pp. 52-3.

[17] I discuss the relevant principles more fully in Jeff Noonan, "Self-constraint, Human Freedom, and the Conditions of Socialist Democracy," *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, 25(4), 2014, pp 85-101. For a fuller discussion of the sets of needs that I take to be basic for a fully human, good life, see Jeff Noonan, *Democratic Society and Human Needs* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press) 2006, and Jeff Noonan, *Materialist Ethics and Life-Value*, (Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press), 2012.

[18] John McMurtry, *Philosophy and World Problems Volume 1: What Is Good? What Is Bad? The Value Of All Values Through Time, Place And Theories*, (Oxford: EOLSS Publishers), 2011, p. 213.

[19] A plausible model for a democratically planned economy has been developed by Pat Devine. See Pat Devine, *Democracy and Economic Planning*, (Cambridge: Polity Press), 1988.

[20] John McMurtry, "Breaking Out of the Invisible Prison," *The Bullet*, No. 1085, Feb 25th, 2015. **http://www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/1085.php (http://www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/1085.php)** (accessed, March 2nd, 2015).

(https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/greed-wealth-money-business_natmonitor-com.jpg)

[Credit: natmonitor.com.]

[*Thank you Jeff for this essay.*]

The writer is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Windsor. He is also President, Windsor University Faculty Association in Windsor, Ontario, Canada. His most recent book is *Materialist Ethics and Life-Value*, (McGill-Queen's University Press), 2012. More of his work can be found at his website: **http://www.jeffnoonan.org (http://www.jeffnoonan.org)**

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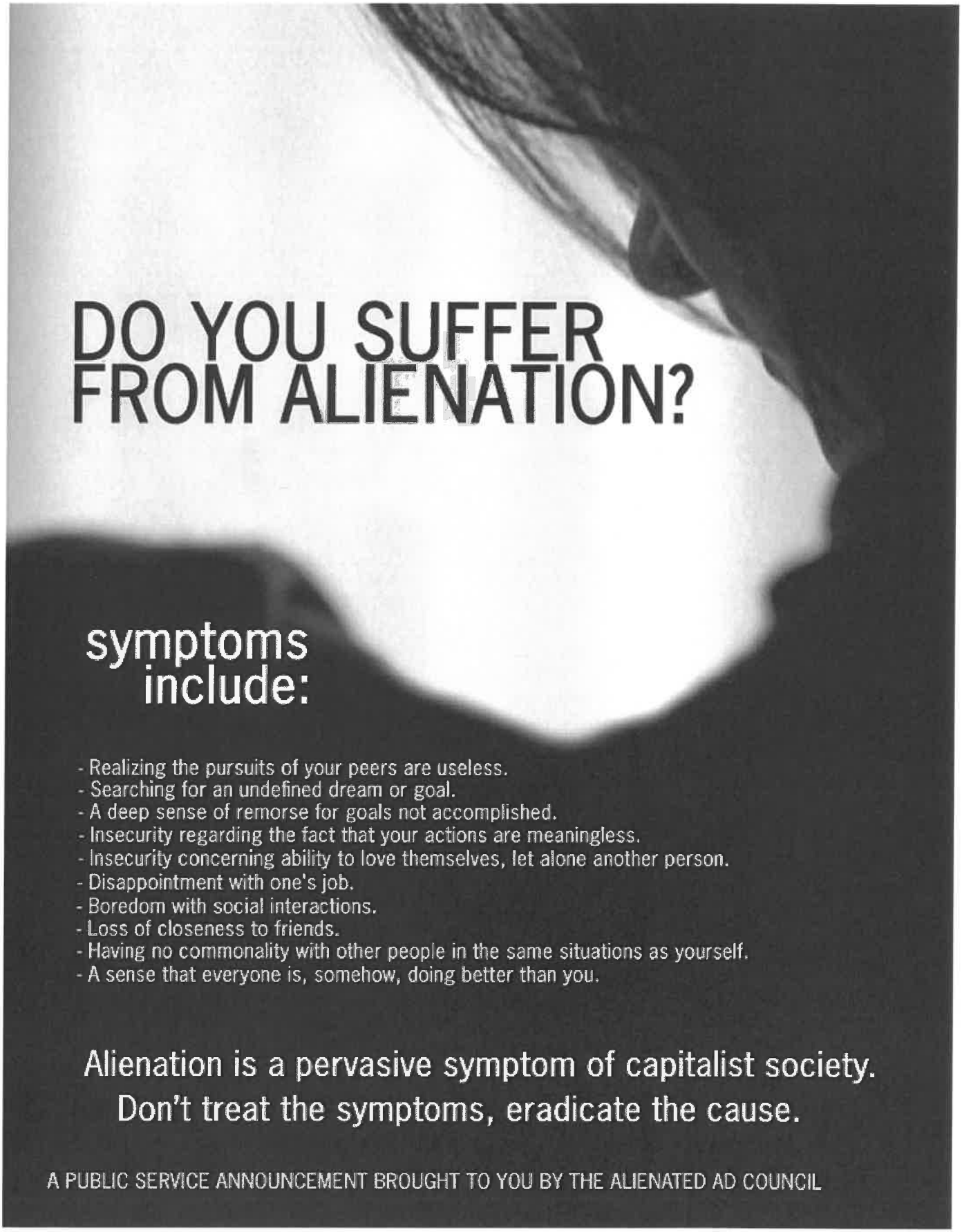
SEPTEMBER 27, 2016SEPTEMBER 27, 2016 SANJAY PERERA# CAPITALISM, # CAPITALIST LIFE CRISIS, # DESTRUCTIVE ENERGY OF CAPITALISM, # EXPLOITATION, # GREED, # JEFF NOONAN, # LIFE VALUABLE, # LIFE-COHERENT, # LIFE-VALUE, # MARX, # MONEY, # MONEY VALUE, # NEW PARADIGMS, # PEER-TO-PEER, # SHARING, # SHARING ECONOMY, # UBER, # WELL BEING

Philosophers for Change

Freedom and de-alienated labour



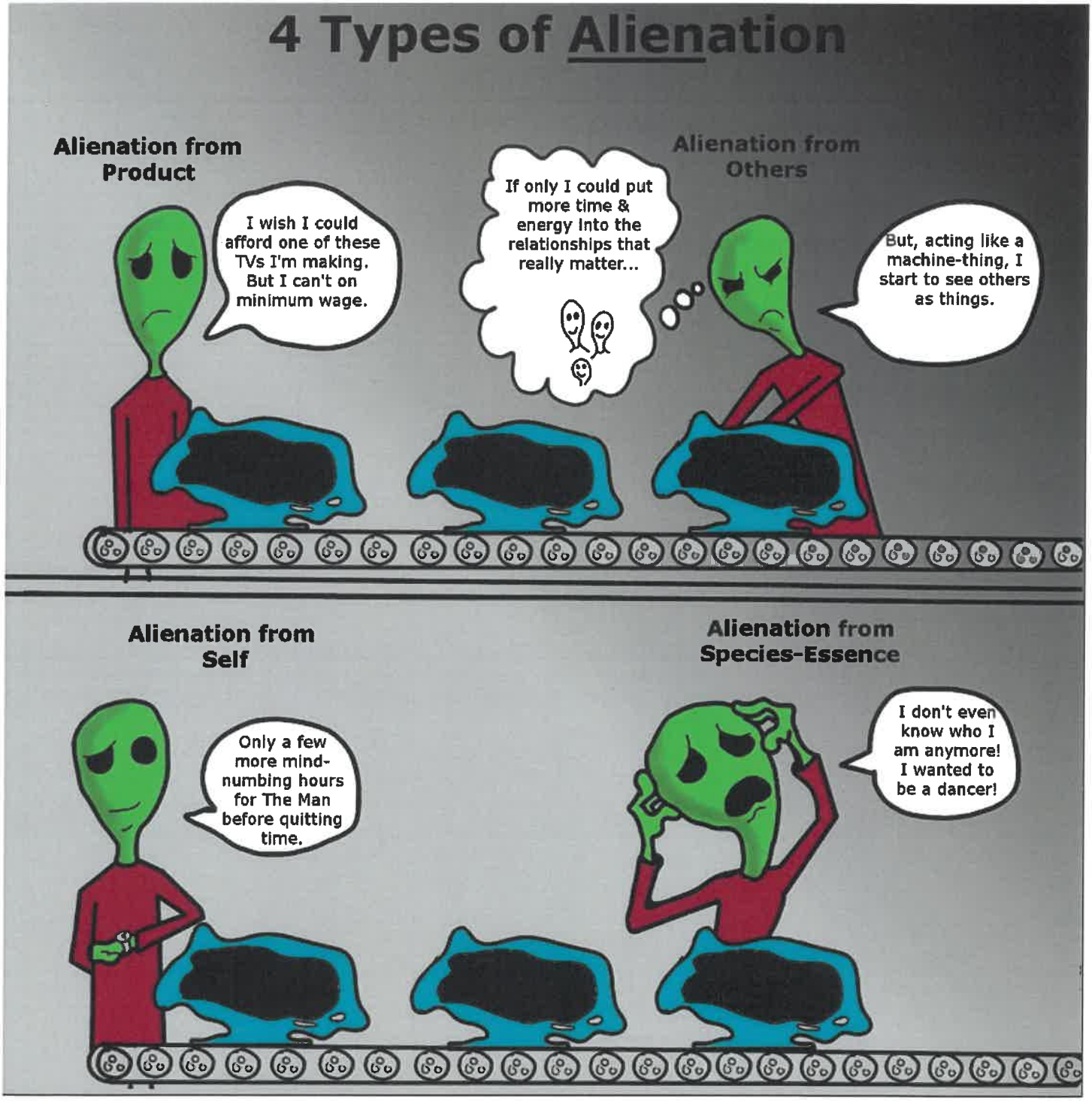
by Jeff Noonan

There is a long-standing tension in the socialist movement which dates back to Marx and concerns the extent to which the value and freedom of human life depends upon replacing human labour with mechanised and automated systems. In his earliest philosophical writings Marx argued that alienated labour constricted and deformed human capacities, but that a socialist society would de-alienate labour. Once under workers' control and freed from the capitalist form of division between mental and manual labour, labour would no longer be shunned, but embraced as a subjectively desired vital need.[1] Later, however, in the midst of a burgeoning industrial revolution, Marx would argue (without ever explicitly repudiating his earlier humanist defence of de-alienated labour) that the expansion of the realm of freedom depended upon fully utilising machinery to "do for us" what we formerly had to do with our hands and minds, so that as much time as possible could be freed from labour of all sorts.[2] Underlying this tension is a deeper normative issue concerning human freedom: is positive human freedom best expressed in our productive and creative capacities realized for the sake of contributing to the satisfaction of social needs (labour), or our capacities for non-instrumental experience and activity undertaken for the sake of our own enjoyment (play, in the broad sense of the term)? If we conceive socialism as a society whose value system and institutions are consciously structured so as to satisfy the material and social (including temporal) conditions of human freedom *that are not met under capitalism,* we can pose the question implied by this tension as: should socialist society be organized to maximise opportunities for de-alienated labour, or for play?

Dialectical thinkers might want to forestall any answer to this question by objecting to the dichotomy it asserts between work and play. They would be right to voice this objection, and, at the end of the day, I will argue that a socialist society should aim to expand opportunities for both de-alienated labour and play (and that technological development is *one* factor that helps make this goal a material possibility). However, two economic and political problems and one deep philosophical concern issuing from them necessitate posing the question initially as a choice *between* de-alienated labour or play. First, there is the on-going concern amongst some bourgeois economists and social theorists that the rapid development of artificial intelligence and automated, autonomous systems will create a permanent structural unemployment crisis[3]. Second, since there is no capitalist solution to this crisis, its possibility is one more reason to re-think the socialist project in search of ways of re-building it as a credible and *desired* alternative, and a growing number of socialists have argued that the movement needs to openly embrace freedom from labour as its goal. From the possibility of a long-term jobs crisis and the need to re-invent the socialist movement follows the third, more profound issue: what is the meaning and value of human life in an age where automated systems really can do much of what (in Marx's age) it appeared *only* human beings could *ever* do? Expressed politically, the philosophical question asks: if socialism is about satisfying the natural and social conditions of human freedom, what exactly is it that we should do with that freedom if it is the case that technological development could abolish the social need for labour?

In this essay I will try to answer this question with the argument that socialism should not abolish the social need for labour, even if it becomes one day technically possible to do so, because labour—making ourselves real for others through our productive-creative activities in ways that contribute to the satisfaction of their needs—is a *necessary* element of a meaningful and free human life. I will defend this claim in three steps. In the first I will consider a debate between Nick Dyer-Witherford (who defends the idea that a socialist future should be a future without labour) and Michael Albert, who argues that labour will always be necessary, but also good, if de-alienated. The debate about the politics and economics of labour points us toward the underlying normative issue: the relative value of labour and play in human life. The second section will consider this problem. While I will conclude that both labour and play are essential elements of a meaningful and good human life, I will also argue that a

world in which all life-activity is play would not be more free and valuable than one in which there were opportunities for both. There are peculiar forms of life-necessity which structure labour but not play which are, I will argue, of irreducible importance to the meaning and value of human life. The second section will focus on explaining these positive life-necessities and why they ought not be overcome, even if it became technologically possible to do so. In the final section I will examine three recent examples of workers thinking and struggling creatively with problems posed by technological change not so as to stop it, but to work with it to create new spaces for meaningful, de-alienated work within capitalism. While these examples are not fully developed alternatives to capitalism, and some have been, at least in the short term, failures, they are concrete (albeit undeveloped) examples of ways in which social wealth and technological capacity could be reconfigured to better satisfy human needs, to create more social time and space for both de-alienated work and play in a socialist future.



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[Credit: Mitch Francis.] **I:**

Exit Strategy

Marx's thinking about the relative value of mechanization was informed by the absolute scarcity of resources he saw all around him in nineteenth century Europe. The vast increase of productive capacity appeared to him as a necessary condition of satisfying even basic human biological needs, and he was, in his day, correct. One hundred and fifty years after the publication of *Capital*, the undeveloped state of productive forces is no longer a problem. While there is still absolute deprivation of basic needs, this crime is not caused by lack of productive capacity, but inequality in the appropriation of natural

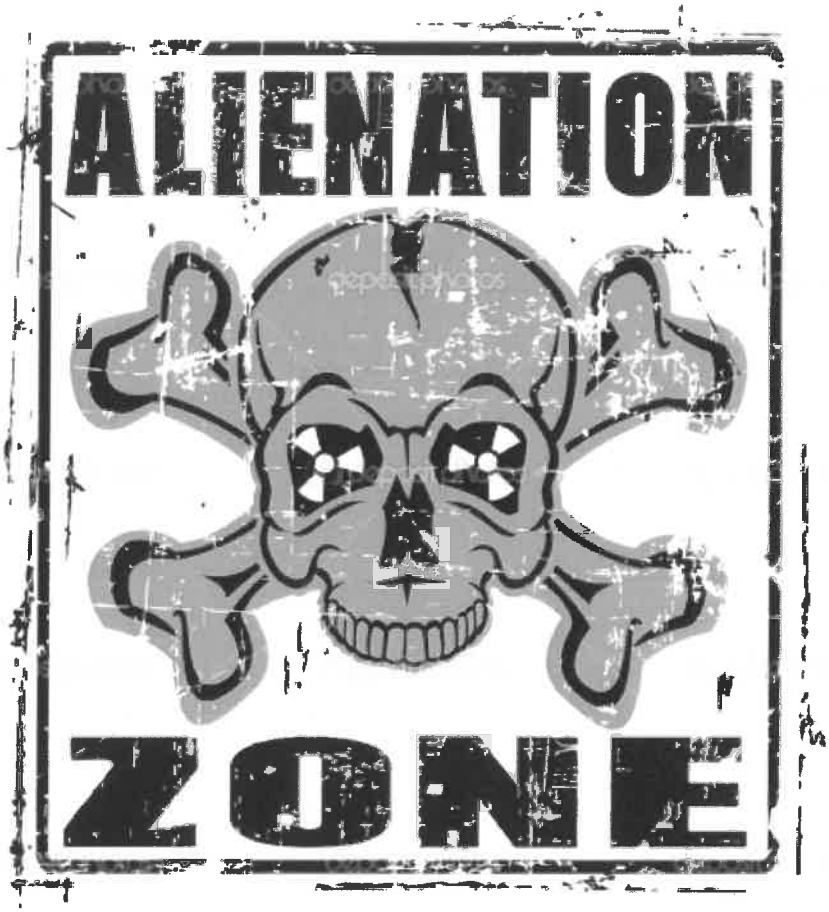
resources and social wealth, a fact which is in turn caused by the class structure of capitalism. As regards the level of development of productive forces, the problem here is not underdevelopment, but distribution. That is, considered globally, existing levels of production and technological development are more than sufficient to ensure the satisfaction of our basic needs, but these are combined with zones where, for historical reasons, the productive and technological infrastructure is archaic. Trotsky perceptively called this situation, evident even in the early twentieth century "combined and uneven development."[4] The importance of this idea today is that it highlights the fact that what we face is not a technological-productivity problem, but a distribution problem (of technology, productivity, and life-requirement satisfying wealth and resources) caused by a class problem: the private and exclusive control of natural resources and social wealth by the ruling class. Hence, the solution is not more technological development in the abstract, but the eventual overcoming of this class structure and its replacement with collective, democratic control over life-resources for the sake of comprehensive satisfaction of fundamental natural and social needs.

The deeper issue today is thus freedom, not survival: how much technological development and to what purpose is conducive to human freedom. Further, if we define human freedom not simply as absence of constraint, but as the positive realization of our life-capacities in life-valuable ways, how much technological development is conducive to the widest and deepest possible development of those capacities? Should technological development be allowed to follow its own path towards artificial intelligence and autonomous systems that could potentially do away with the need for all productive and creative labour, freeing us *from* labour *to* play as the substance of our active lives? Or should it be developed within a value-frame that constrains and limits it to reducing socially necessary labour time and taking over meaningless, mundane work only? To help answer these questions let us begin by examining a recent brief but informative debate between Nick Dyer-Witherford (author of, amongst other important texts, *Cyber-Marx*) and Michael Albert, the creator of the Parecon (participatory economics) model of an alternative democratic economy.

Dyer-Witherford criticises Parecon for "not being utopian enough" because it does not demand full automation and total freedom from work but instead affirms the value of democratic workplace management, the elimination (so far as possible) of the division between mental and manual labour, and necessary labour distributed to individuals as job complexes (instead of confining activity to one single job or a series of single jobs). Dyer-Witherford situates his critique of Albert in the historical ambivalence the socialist movement has shown towards work which I also noted in the introduction:

> *Historically the Left has had difficulty deciding how much of this nexus to reject. State socialism replaced the market with command planning, but did not break with the society of work. On the contrary, it made of Marxism a new and nightmarish economic reductionism, glorified the toil that built the so-called workers' state, and enforced that toil with totalizing discipline. It was against this conversion of communism into a giant workhouse that the libertarian Left fought.[5]*

Dyer-Witherford is correct to critique the structure and experience of labour under Stalinism, surely every bit if not more alienating than work under capitalism.



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[Credit: barryessex.]

For Dyer-Witherford work as such and alienated work seem to be identical. He argues that the failure to break with the society of work leaves human energies and talents submerged in repressive and joyless tasks at the same time as technological development have made a total break with work increasingly materially possible. The re-vitalization of the Left thus demands taking up the dreams of the libertarian Left, but now, no longer as dreams but a practical program that technological development can help realize. "Parecon is a long way from the graffiti scrawled by students in 1968: *'ne travaillez jamais.'* That slogan … was an expression of another sort of Left utopianism [that] goes by a variety of names: the refusal of work, 'zero work' or 'autonomism.' For the sake of simplicity I will call it a strategy of exodus. Exodus aims not to reorganize the society of work, but to defect from it."[6] Note carefully that Dyer-Witherford explicitly rejects the re-organization of work. It does not matter to the value of work in human life whether it is democratically managed or not, whether it is creative and demanding or not. The mere fact that people *have to work* in a given society means that such a society is not fully satisfying the conditions of human freedom, because human freedom demands freedom from all imposed social necessities. If we define play as self-motivated and self-affirming activity undertaken by choice and not social necessity, then what Dyer-Witherford supports is a society of play that opens up once the need to work has been finally and fully overcome.

Since human beings are mortal, our time for life-valuable experience and activity is limited. Time lost to repressive and damaging activities can never be regained. Hence the imperative to be active in free, life-

valuable ways as much of our life-time as possible. Time spent at work is never free or life-valuable, in Dyer-Witherford's view, and so the real struggle must be to free life-time from work. "What is missing from this [Albert's] vision? Time off … time away. Time off from work … time for play, for aesthetics, for sex, mysticism, conviviality, idleness, carnival, and learning. Struggles to maximise free time- rather than to provide incentives for long, onerous labour—have historically been crucial to the Left."[7] Even democratically managed and creative labour is still labour and, therefore, an illegitimate constraint on free time in Dyer-Witherford's view.

If one asks about practical matters, about how such a society can be built, the answer would be: gradually. Dyer-Wihterford's arguments against Albert are brief and not designed to make a fully convincing *practical* case for his totally liberated society. Such programs do exist. Srnicek and Williams, for example, have recently developed a detailed program that they urge the Left to adopt. This program includes the expanded use of technology to vastly increase labour productivity. Increased labour productivity can generate the wealth necessary to pay everyone a guaranteed basic income (GBI) which will gradually free people from both the social need to work and the psychological compulsion that drives people to work in capitalism even if they do not have to do so.[8] Overcoming the society of work is thus envisaged as a gradual process but one which, when complete, will result in a society whose members never *have* to do anything (apart from the basic things we need to do to stay alive). I will return to the practical problems of decreasing and re-distributing socially necessary labour time and GBI in the concluding section. In this section I want to remain focussed on the deeper normative issues.

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[Credit: Darkow.]

Thus, before

turning to Albert's response, let us consider Dyer-Witherford's list of experiences and activities that he believes require "time off" work in light of my distinction between work and play. While I agree that we do need time off for self-directed activities, it is not at all clear to me that everything on this list is best understood as play rather than de-alienated labour. Let us take aesthetics: first, if there is to be art to enjoy, artists must make it, and surely making art is de-alienated labour, not play. Moreover, appreciating, learning from, and valuing art requires cultivation of taste and judgement, and cultivation I would argue, is work upon the self. Learning is certainly a form of labour, and, when properly organized, not alienated. Even sex can be understood as a form of de-alienated labour, not in so far as it can be a paid profession, but in so far as it requires work upon the self, both in order to make oneself attractive enough to another to become an object of their desire, and in order to make oneself a pleasing and fun lover. The distinguishing characteristic of labour is that labour always has an intended objective outcome which constrains, but in a productive way, the particular expression of our capacities. As I try to make my argument I cannot just list words at random but must attune what I say to the best charitable re-construction of my opponent's position. That is certainly labour, but it is labour that I desire to do, that defines me as the person I want to be (at least in my public life as a philosopher). But it is hard—harder than some quite demanding manual labour I had to perform at earlier periods of my life.

There is a further difference between labour and play that must be noted and which follows from the preceding analysis: there is no social life-necessity attached to play, in the sense that no one else needs you for the games you like to play, but we do, in general, need one another for the work we do. The ties of mutual need from which labour follows is the real material basis of its life-value, and it is ignored by Dyer-Witherford in his rush for exodus. The contribution that labour makes to the on-going biological life of human beings raises even mundane physical labour above mere drudgery to make it a component part of good lives. Since good lives presupposes life, and labour of all sorts helps to sustain life, it is not only highly creative labour that can be de-alienated, but hard physical labour too. That does not mean that some class of people should be confined to taxing physical labour, but it does suggest, as I will argue in more detail in the second and third sections, that a much wider range of labour activities than might initially be thought can be de-alienated and made component parts of good and meaningful lives. We might not want to automate transportation, or recycling collection, or sewage treatment even if we could, because, suitably re-organized, the labour done within them is life-valuable.

Albert does not respond to Dyer-Witherford in exactly these terms, and his response, like Dyer-Witherford's critique, is compressed. Nevertheless, the continuity between his rejoinder and my position is clear. He begins by noting an ambiguity in Dyer-Witherford's position, and proceeds from that ambiguity to make his substantive normative objections. "If he means that we should get rid of alienated labour, get rid of subordinated labour, get rid of unequally rewarded labour, and also strive to increase the average quality of labour, I very much agree. But if he means … that we should get rid of labour period, I think he is out of touch with reality- out of touch not only with reality's material requirements, but also with the positive virtues of self-managed labour"[9]. As I have argued, Dyer-Witherford does not distinguish between alienated and de-alienated labour, but does argue for an end to all labour, on the seeming assumption that it will all appear alienated once technological alternatives exist. Hence he falls victim to Albert's second charge, with being "out of touch" with the way in which labour is essential to the construction and elaboration of the human world, and the positive virtues of de-alienated labour recognized as essential to life and good lives. In the second section I will explicate the positive virtues of de-alienated labour by examining more closely the different meanings of "necessity" and the positive contribution some forms of necessity play in meaningful human lives.

(https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2017/01/heidegger-thecharnelhouse.jpg)

[Credit: Picture of Heidegger, taken from thecharnelhouse.]

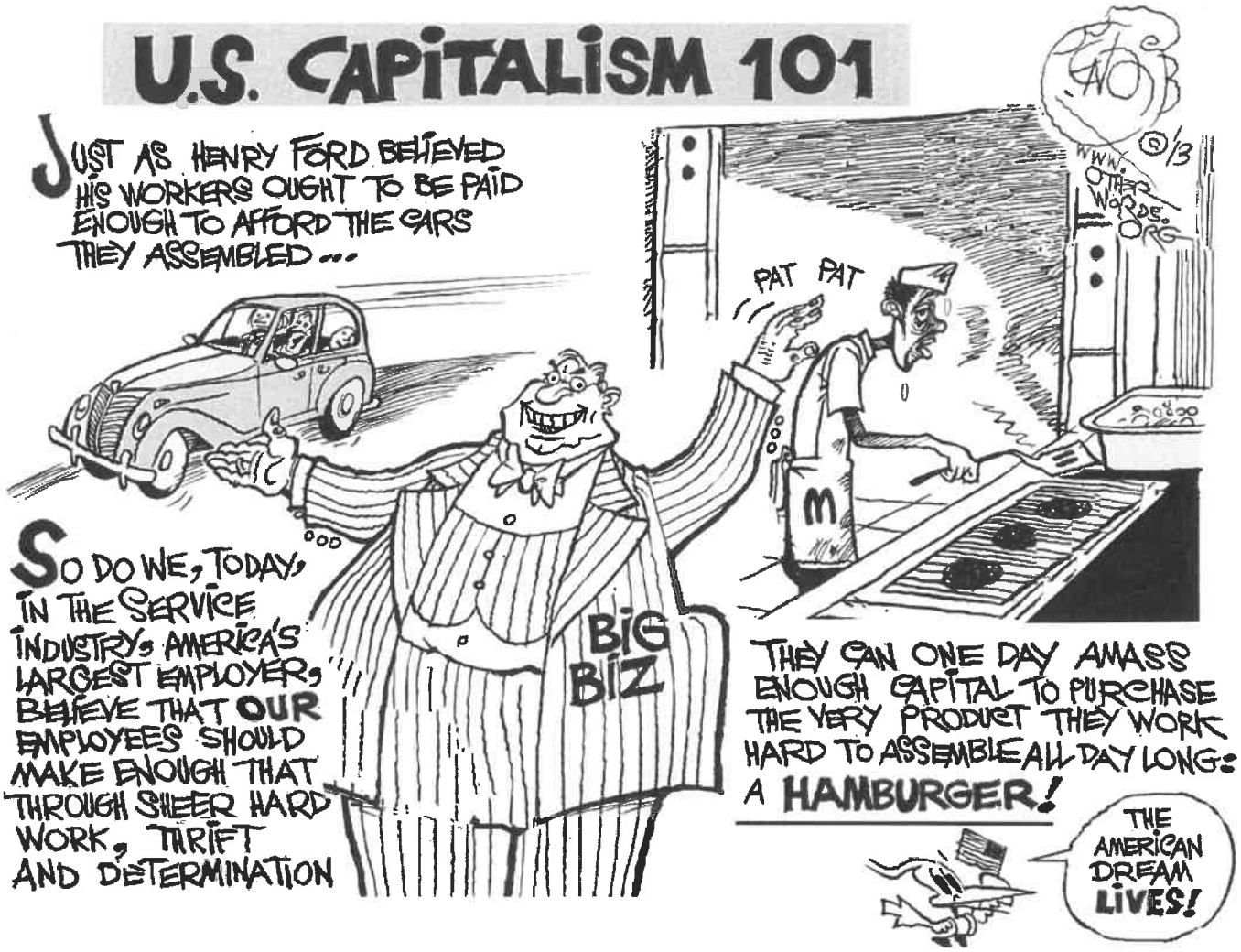
II: The Positive Virtues of De-Alienated Labour

Human beings do not live on that which they find ready at hand in nature but transform natural resources through labour. Collectively, and over the whole of human history, a series of socio-cultural worlds has been built in which human creativity is realized (but also constrained by various forms of oppression, exploitation, and alienation). Hence labour is a material necessity in two senses: it is necessary for the perpetuation of life (natural life-necessity) and the construction of the social worlds in which truly human lives are possible (social life-necessity). Truly human lives are any in which various excellences are possible, either immediately, within the given society, or mediately, in a changed form of

society that has moved beyond oppression, exploitation, and alienation. Natural and social necessity compel human beings to labour. Unless we believe, with the Old Testament, that labour is a punishment for sin, we should not conclude that just because labour is necessary it is a constraint on freedom. Dyer-Witherford does draw this conclusion, claiming that we should prefer play to work wherever technological development frees us from the necessity of work (wherever we can make machines do for us that which we formerly had to do for ourselves, as Marx put it).

Even if– *per impossible* for the moment, but perhaps not in the near-future– make machines do everything for us we formerly did for ourselves: try court cases, diagnose and cure disease, pilot airplanes, compose music, teach philosophy– my argument maintains that we ought not automate labour out of existence, precisely because good lives *require* the experience of responding to certain forms of positive life-necessity. What anti-work critics of capitalism, from Paul Lafargue in *The Right to be Lazy* in the nineteenth century to Srnicek and Williams and Dyer-Witherford in the twenty-first century fail to grasp clearly is that the enemy of freedom is not *life-necessity*, but imposed political and economic necessities that stem not from the demands of life and good living, but from the need to maintain a given oppressive, exploitative, and alienating system. Play—activity completely under the control of the player, and therefore free from all forms of necessity—cannot replace the value of alienated labour, precisely because it lacks the pull of life-necessity. As I noted and repeat here: play has a vital place within the complex of experience and activities that enter into good lives in general, but it is a supplement to, not a replacement for, de-alienated labour. Let me first explicate the problematic form of necessity and then return to a more careful explanation of the different forms of life-necessity essential to life and good living.

In any society in which a minority class lives by exploiting the labour of a majority class there will be a difference between the life-value and the system-value of the labour. In class societies these two forms of value are inverted. Instead of labour serving the universal life-interest as its first priority, it serves the particular political and economic interests of the ruling class. This inversion of value is proven empirically by the fact that the lives of workers will be sacrificed in order to maintain the given system of rule. They will be imprisoned or killed for rebelling, thrown into unemployment if their work cannot be profitably employed, or go without food if they cannot afford to pay market rates. There is a form of necessity at work here: the rulers regard it as necessary to maintain their rule, and so they organize social life so as to ensure the demands of this extrinsic (from the standpoint of the universal life-interest) form of socio-historical necessity are met. This form of extrinsic socio-historical necessity compromises human freedom in three ways: (1) for the rulers, it means that energy must be expended to maintain an ideological and violent apparatus which does nothing but oppress other human beings, thus squandering resources and talent in activities that have no life-value; (2) for the workers, it means that their lives are contingent upon social, economic, and political dynamics beyond their collective, democratic control, making them the pawns and playthings of reified social forces and the class power that stands behind them; and (3) it constrains their range of experience and activity to forms of realization that are profitable, which, in actual capitalist history has meant de-skilling divisions between mental and manual labour and an overall "degradation" of work. [10] That which Dyer-Witherford and other exodus theorists rightly react against are these impediments to the full development of human experiential and practical freedom. However, they are wrong to think that the sorts of life-necessity involved in (de-alienated) labour are the real problem (the class structure and reification that alienates labour is).



(https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2017/01/alien_bendib.jpg)

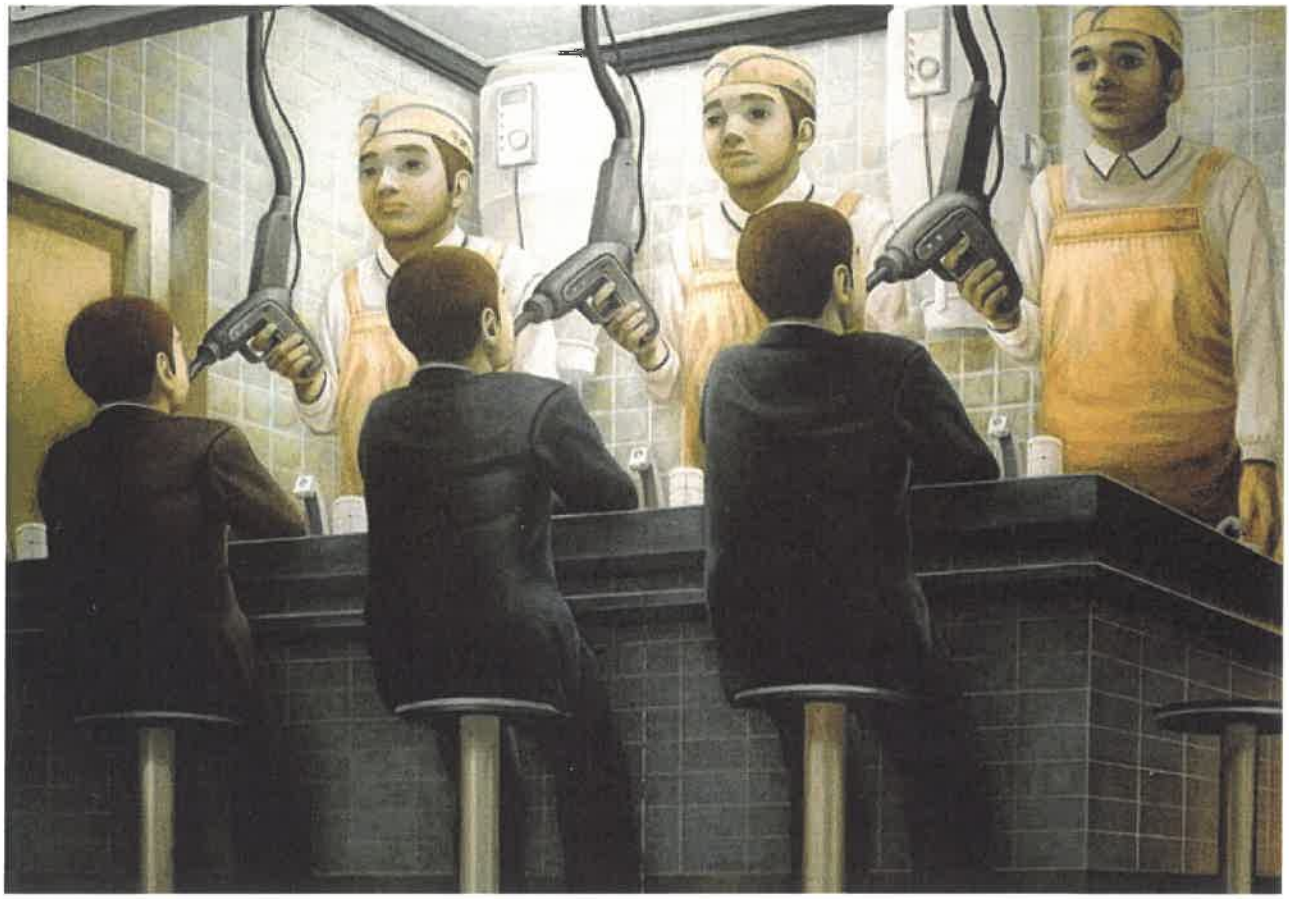
[Credit: Khalil Bendib.]

The first forms of life-necessity found in de-alienated labour are a natural and social life-necessity. For our purposes their commonality-both contribute to the maintenance and development of human life—are more important than their differences (natural life-necessity refers to the survival of our biological organism and social life-necessity refers to the cultivation of our properly human capacities). De-alienated labour which follows from either is *necessary* because without it people would either die or fail to develop their capacities in fully human ways. Thus, without the labour of farmers, we would lack food to eat. Without the labour of teachers, we would not be able to realize our cognitive and imaginative capacities. If we freed farming from its industrial-capitalist form or teaching from its bureaucratic organization both would still be *necessary* in the specified sense, but not repressive wastes of time. On the contrary, if socialists retain a commitment to positive freedom, then de-alienated labour that helps to satisfy natural and social life-necessities is a fundamental expression of positive freedom.

By positive freedom I mean individual freedom as the realization of our defining experiential and creative capacities. A free society is one which ensures that the natural and social conditions of self-realization are comprehensively met. Historically, people have struggled not only for representative institutions and freedom from total deprivation, but also for societies in which their talents and capacities can be cultivated and developed; in which they can become real for other citizens through the labour they contribute to others' well-being. Because this work contributes to the well-being of others, and, as social beings, we feel affirmed in our own self when our importance to others' is reflected back to

us, engaging in de-alienated, life-necessary labour is an affirmation of the self and an expression of positive freedom. As proof consider the ways in which people will rush to the aid of others in an acute crisis without any thought of being paid for their efforts, or how friends willingly help each other on the weekends around the house or in the neighbourhood, even when the work is physically demanding. What these examples illustrate is that human beings feel an inner motivation to be active, helpful contributors. Where this motivation is lacking we should look not to the demands that such activity places upon the self in the abstract, but the field of forces in which that activity is structured. If the activity is shunned as an oppressive burden, one must first examine whether that is because the activity is deformed by alienating social relations and institutions. If it is, then the task should be to free it from those alienating relations through social change that aims to change institutions, not eliminating its life-necessity by turning it over to automated systems.

The inner motivation that we feel to be helpful and contribute is perhaps the most general and undeveloped form of the second form of life-necessity involved with de-alienated labour. This second form is the irresistible pull of vocations and duties. In English vocation is synonymous with "calling" a verb which very clearly explains the type of necessity I am referring to here. When we are called we feel compelled to respond. Objective circumstances might impede our ability to do so, but we do feel inwardly the need to do so, and it troubles us when we cannot. When we read the biographies of artists or great sportspeople or doctors or pilots, we often encounter phrases like "I knew from childhood I had to become …" or "I would rather have died than not become…" These phrases are the verbal expression of the inner life-necessity of the vocation. The pull of the vocational call goes beyond the natural and social life-necessity that characterises de-alienated labour in general and is typically associated with highly demanding, uniquely individuating forms of life-activity. However, I think the distinguishing feature of a vocational calling is not that it summons the special few to rarefied heights of achievement, but that in it we experience an *inner need* to make of our life something that is more than individually enjoyable.



(https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2017/01/tetsuya_ishida_01.jpg)

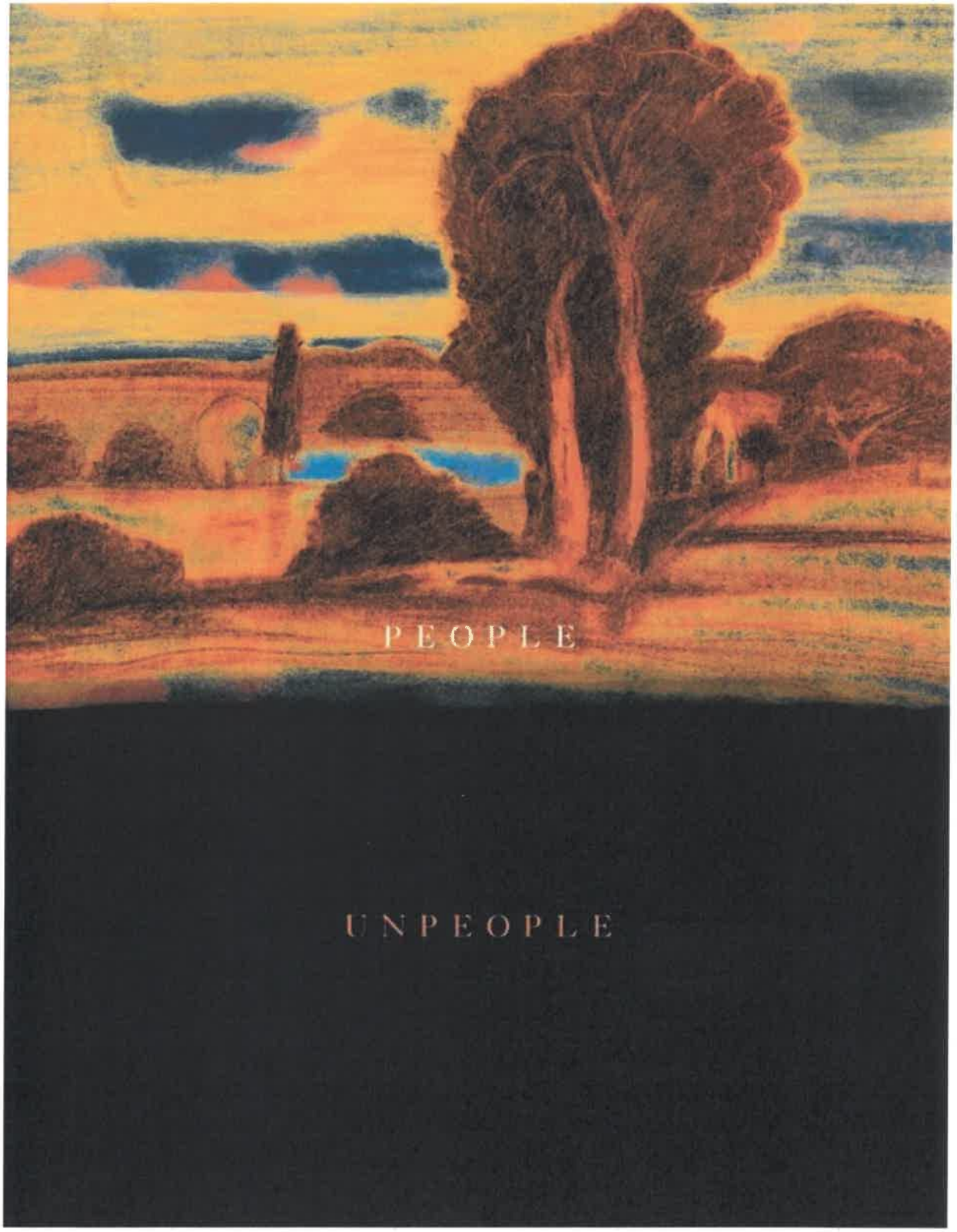
[Credit: Tetsuya Ishida.]

The vocational calling connects meaningful life to a struggle against internal and external barriers to life-valuable achievement. It is this that elevates human pleasure above mere hedonistic enjoyment and affirms the positive virtue of struggle and pain as signs of growth, development, and seriousness of purpose. Again, the value of socialism in this regard is not to free people of these struggles to pursue their vocations, but rather to free the struggle to pursue their vocation from alienating social impediments. As McMurtry argues, a life-valuable society must mandate "the *vocational good* of enabling and obliging each to contribute to the provision of these universal life goods consistent with the enjoyment of them."[11] Even if computers could compose music worth listening to or perform operations or provide nursing care we ought not turn those jobs over to them completely, as if they were meaningless functions towards which we can afford to be indifferent. These are paradigm examples of vocations whose successful pursuit even in alienated conditions provides human life with substance, which makes it not only objectively life-valuable, but subjectively life-valuable, i.e., felt as such, and judged worthwhile *because and not in spite of* the difficult efforts to make oneself adequate to the demands of the job.

One can make an analogous argument in regard to moral duty. I am not thinking of particular moral codes that can be dogmatically followed, but rather the general human ability to consider the interests of other people (whether immediately present as a specific individual, in the generality of fellow citizens or human beings, or as potential beings not yet born but which, as future *human beings* will have the same life-interests) and behave in a way that is responsible to them. If there is one side of the human personality that is self-interested and materially driven towards immediate pleasures, then we have to work against it in order to be responsible to others. If there were no other side to ourselves than the self-interested, there would be no felt inner struggle to behave responsibly rather than self-interestedly.

These inner struggles are essential to our being human: if the lion is hungry, she hunts and kills, but the human does not similarly eat whenever he wants (unless he is a glutton) but only when it is appropriate. We could always try to lie to escape responsibility for a personal failure, but we do not always do so, even when we could get away with it, because we think it is shameful to be so weak as not to own up to our mistakes. This inner feeling is more than the repressive super-ego getting in the way of 24/7 fun, it is the voice of our deepest humanity, proof of our moral connection with others, our identifying the good of our individual life with what we do with and for others and not just for ourselves. Greed (celebrated in capitalism) has been repellent to most moral philosophers through the ages (including Adam Smith) precisely because it turns the whole rest of humanity into an enemy, denying the deepest bonds that make life and good lives possible. Would we really want to exist free of this need to recognise the equal value of other lives and recognition of the shared life-interest that allows us to be responsible in the face of it?

In all these cases, it is service to the life-necessity that makes the activity valuable. To free human beings from this life-necessity, of having to serve each other through the ways in which we realize our capacities in de-alienated labour on the world and ourselves, would be to impoverish it. The good life is not easy in all respects: it demands that we find new problems and challenges. The inner drive by which we seek them out and overcome them is the drive towards de-alienated labour. It is, as a motivation for creative, life-serving, affirmative labour, the inner cause of our positive freedom, i.e., the active expression of ourselves in nature as transformative, constructive powers. Play, while intrinsically valuable and a necessary component of good lives lacks, this outer and inner life-necessity. We need to play in order to be whole individuals, but no activity that we would associate with play (games, aimless amusements, pass-times, hobbies) is necessary in the ways in which non-alienated labour is necessary. Without opportunities for serving others through the ways in which we make ourselves real, our lives lack meaningful connection and purpose. Without opportunities for play our lives would be less enjoyable. But an enjoyable life can become vacuous and ultimately tiresome: pure enjoyment easily becomes pure boredom where there is nothing that calls you to demanding activities. Thus, whatever the future of technological development holds, socialists must keep in mind the central and irreplaceable role that non-alienated labour plays in a meaningful and good life. Where opportunities to make concrete in-roads against capitalist structures of alienation open up, the goal should not be to free time from labour completely, but to free time for de-alienated labour *and* play. I will conclude with some examples of struggles occurring or possible in the present that explain how those goals can be progressively achieved.



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[Credit: Pinterest]

III: The Struggle for De-Alienated Labour

Arguably the most transformative struggle of the workers movement, judged from the standpoint of the quality of everyday life of workers, has been the struggle to shorten the working day. Since labour under capitalism is alienated and exploited, time re-claimed from alienated labour without loss of real

income is lifetime reclaimed from capital. Since human beings are mortal, those living now cannot afford to postpone the goal of freedom until a final revolutionary victory, but everyone must always struggle with achievable ends in view. Where concrete gains are possible, they must be seized, both for the sake of immediate, lived freedom, and as plateaus of confidence form which deeper inroads against capital's hold over life can be made. Hence, the first concrete shape of struggle for de-alienated labour should be a revival of the workers' movement's struggle to shorten the working day.[12]

The inclusion of this demand might seem surprising, coming as it does at the end of a paper which has argued in favour of the value of de-alienated labour. However, there is no contradiction between shorter working hours and the struggle for meaningful work. First of all, the overall aim of the workers' movement must be to overcome capital's hold on life. Hence, where there are no prospects for complete social transformation, workers need to struggle for what they can achieve in the present to expand the matrix of life space and time for free, life-valuable activity. Second, not all de-alienated labour need be paid labour. As I have noted, much of what Dyer-Witherford excludes from his concept of labour should be included as de-alienated labour. Work upon the self, creative activities pursued outside of paid labour, and the general cultivation of talents and capacities necessarily require conscious effort and are essential to a fully meaningful life. More time outside of paid labour is (potentially) more time for life-valuable non-alienated labour and therefore a gain for working people. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, reducing working hours for each worker does not necessarily entail a reduction in the amount of life-valuable labour that needs to be performed in a society. Hence, a reduction in individual working hours can mean—if there is a sufficiently sophisticated plan in place and a sufficiently powerful workers' movement able to implement the plan—a re-division of labour such that more people have more access to life-valuable work (leaving the real meaningless drudgery to automated systems). If an artificial intelligence can be designed to 'answer" phones and solve technical problems then we should turn the phone banks of the world's call centres over to them, while resisting nurse and doctor bots, self-driving cars and airplanes, and data banks that claim to be able to replace teachers. With more life-valuable labour to go around, and with more time to pursue non-paid de-alienated labour, the overall effect will be to expand the life-time and space of freedom for working people.

In order to ensure that the reduction of working hours does not come at the cost of real wages, the struggle for a shorter working day and week must be coupled with the struggle for a Guaranteed Basic Income (GBI). Perhaps surprisingly, the idea of a GBI is becoming increasingly popular in official policy circles as governments struggle to contend with a labour market which is no longer producing sufficient numbers of well-paid, secure, full-time jobs.[13] If—as appears to be the case–we are witnessing a structural change in labour markets, a GBI suddenly becomes attractive as a means of real income support. Governments can "top up" wages through a GBI program, thus allowing workers to maintain their standard of living while allowing labour markets to evolve under new and ever changing technological conditions.

(https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2017/01/alien_freudquotes.jpg)

[Credit: freudquotes.]

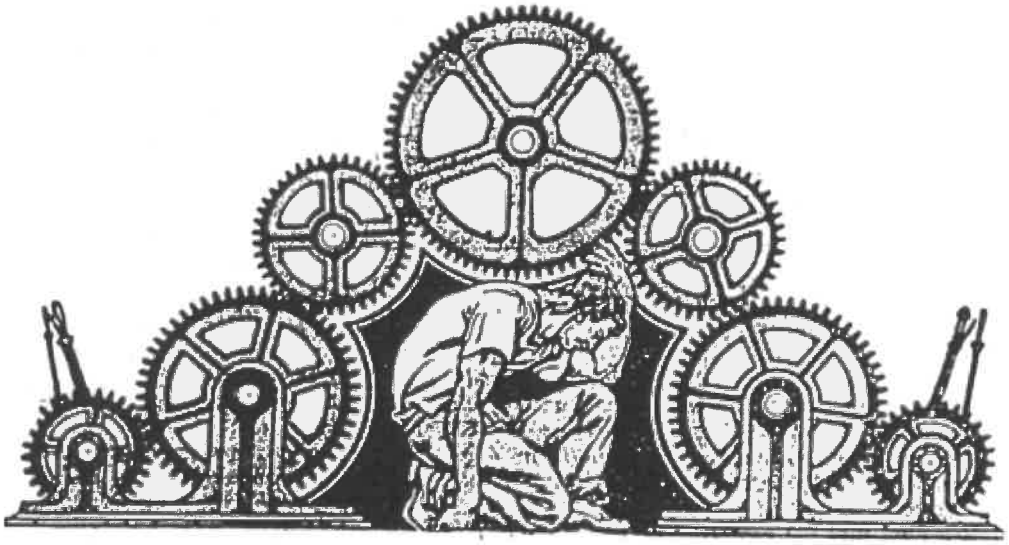
When an idea that emanated from the Left suddenly gains traction amongst the policy planners of the ruling class, suspicion is always in order. There is a hidden danger in the idea of the GBI, the danger that it becomes a means of intensifying rather than relaxing the hold of labour and commodity markets over our lives. The danger is brilliantly explained by long time Canadian anti-poverty activist John Clarke:

> *If people are moving between poverty wages and poverty level benefits more frequently in a precarious job market, perhaps they can be more effectively prodded into the worst jobs with less intrusive benefit systems. A less rule bound delivery of poverty income, that gives people a chance of retaining their housing, may be needed to keep them job ready. Linked to this, of course, is the huge boost to the employers of a BI [Basic Income] system that constitutes a form of wage top up. Provided the payment is meagre, it will not impede the flow of low paid workers but it will mean that their employers receive a subsidy that absolves them from having to pay living wages or come under pressure to increase the amount they do provide … the great advantage of neoliberal BI is that the inadequate and dwindling payment it provides turns those who receive it into customers in the marketplace. In my opinion, BI … in the context of an intensifying agenda of austerity and privatization, it is … really about the commodification of social provision.[14]*

In other words, the danger is that the rate of the GBI is set at such a low threshold that people cannot live any sort of human life on it, and will be forced to remain in still tight labour markets, fighting over the low-wage work available.

Thus, in order to ensure that the struggle for reduced labour time and a GBI are in fact conducive to the freeing of life-time from alienated for the sake of life-valuable, de-alienated labour, it must be taken out of the hands of government policy experts and made a demand of an active, militant, and globally inter-linked workers' movement which is also capable of contesting for power and control within the factory and office. A GBI 'from above" will not solve the problem of alienated labour, and could in fact make it

worse. A GBI from below, combined with shorter working hours, would have a profoundly transformative effect on workers' lives, even if it falls short of being fully revolutionary when compared against the idea of a socialist society in which all decisions about economic life would be made democratically with the shared life-interest in mind. The GBI from below cannot be achieved unless workers are once again able to put pressure on capital where capital makes its money: on the shop and office floor. The only way to achieve that goal is through new organising drives and new tactics of struggle. Those are practical issues best dealt with in local contexts by engaged activists. At the same time, the other side of workers' movement renewal is broadening the range of demands that are brought to the bargaining table. In the context of rapid and potentially life-destructive replacement of labor by automated systems, the required expansion of demands must include the right of workers to participate in the determination of investment priorities.



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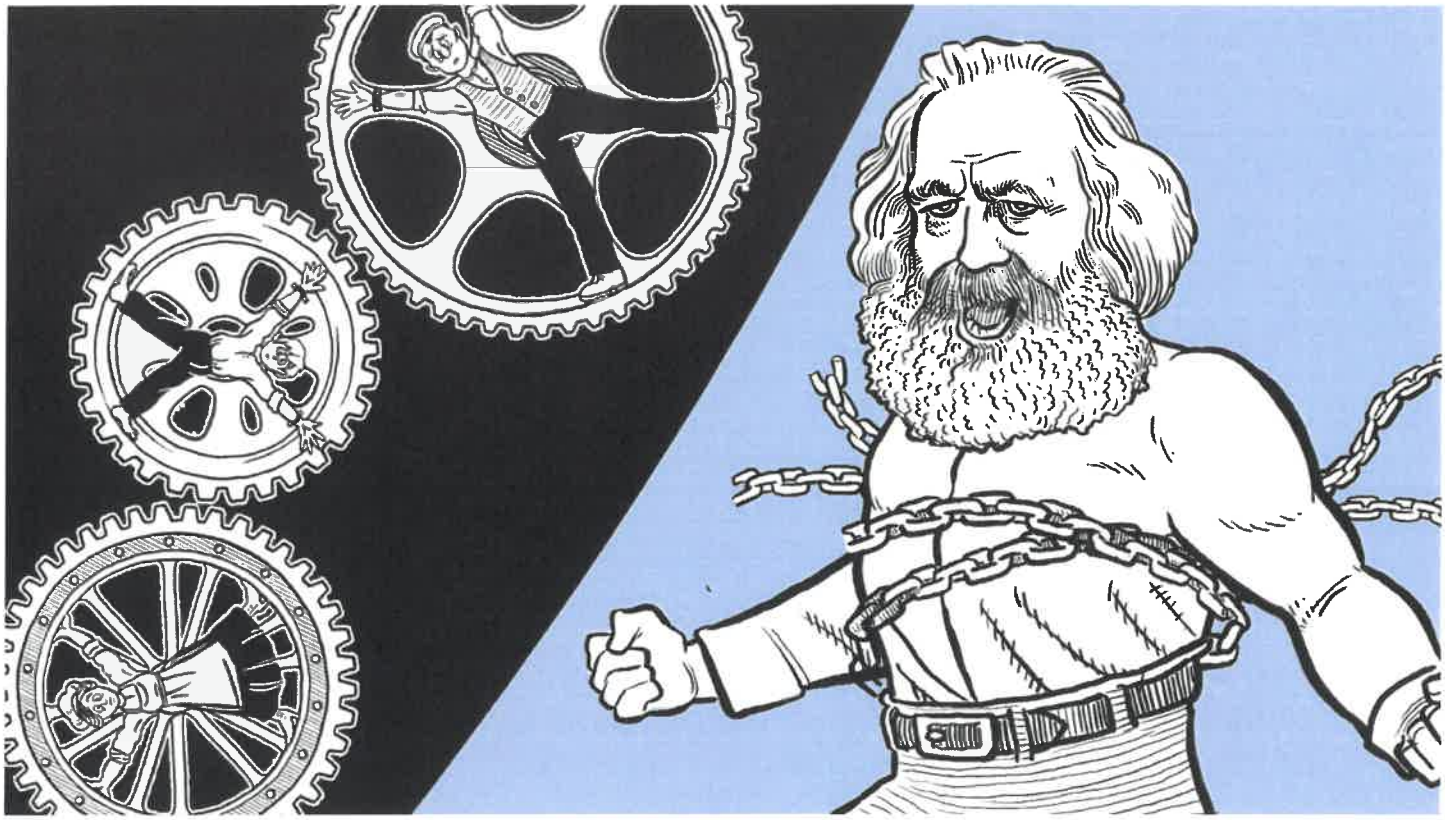
This idea does not derive from abstract philosophical reflection on the problem of labour movement renewal, but (in my case) from reflection on the most recent round of bargaining between the union that organises Canadian autoworkers, UNIFOR, and the Big Three Detroit auto companies. In a move that was controversial, UNIFOR made new, job-creating investment a priority for this round of bargaining, and was successful in so doing. The move was controversial because it was achieved by making serious concessions on pensions (allowing the companies to shift new employees to a defined contribution from a defined benefit plan) and it did not involve any serious efforts on the part of UNIFOR to mobilise workers for a more militant struggle to protect and extend benefits and wages *for all* workers *as well* as gain a say for the collective voice of workers in the determination of investment priorities. These criticisms are sound, but at the same time they do not call into question what I think is the more important long-term issue: the principle that workers must have a say in the investment decisions that companies take. The principle is nicely articulated by Bill Murnighan, currently UNIFOR's director of research. That which UNIFOR was trying establish, he maintains, was the principle that workers "contemplate directly challenging capital's right to unilaterally decide where, and when, to invest" in order "to directly use the union's *own* power to challenge corporations' right to close factories and eliminate jobs."[15] In Murninghan's view, UNIFOR in 2016 successfully proved that unions could demand and win some degree of control over corporations' investment decisions.

This principle—and UNIFOR's limited success in realizing it– is vitally important in the context of rapid technological change. Corporations not only decide where to invest, but how much to invest in technological systems that either de-skill or replace labour. The principle suggests that workers need to fight for those investments which implement technologies in ways that either preserve or create new forms of life-valuable labour even as more routine and mundane tasks are automated. The almost unlimited variety of human activities and the rapid pace of technological change make a general discussion of how this principle could be implemented in specific workplaces impossible. What is important is to state the principle clearly and then rely upon the practical intelligence of unions and other workers' organizations to find the ways to concretely realise it in specific, local contexts. Of course, gaining a say in investment is far from the socialist goal of democratic governance of the economy, and labour under capitalism can never be fully de-alienated. But the logic of better and worse is unattractive only to ultra-Left dogmatists, who have nothing to offer but slogans.

The final example of struggles to de-alienate labour today is also from recent Canadian trade union history. In its last round of bargaining with Canada Post, the Crown corporation that runs the Canadian postal service, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (long one of the most militant and progressive unions in the country) bargained around a plan to transform the post office in line with, rather than against, the grain of technological developments. As digital communications have caused mail volumes to shrink, they have also made access to technology an imperative. While on the surface it seems like there is less and less reason to have a public postal service, the postal workers' union saw an opportunity to expand and transform the post office. Especially in small and remote communities (of which there are many thousands in Canada) the post office remains an important community hub. The complex plan, called *Delivering Community Power*, involved the creation of a postal bank (as a public alternative to the private banks), making local post offices community technology hubs (including charging stations for public vehicles), and the source of a local innovation fund for the development of life-serving technologies. It opens with a direct challenge to the idea that postal work is obsolete:

> *Some consider the post office past its prime: the last decade has seen efforts to cut, devalue and undermine this quintessentially public service. These moves have been fiercely resisted by people across the country. What if our cherished national institution, with its vast physical infrastructure and millions of daily human interactions, could offer us something completely different? What if the post office could play a central role in building our next economy—an economy that is more stable, more equal, and less polluting?[16]*

Instead of saying: "yes, postal workers are anachronisms that should be replaced," postal workers thought creatively about the *opportunities* that technological change opened up.



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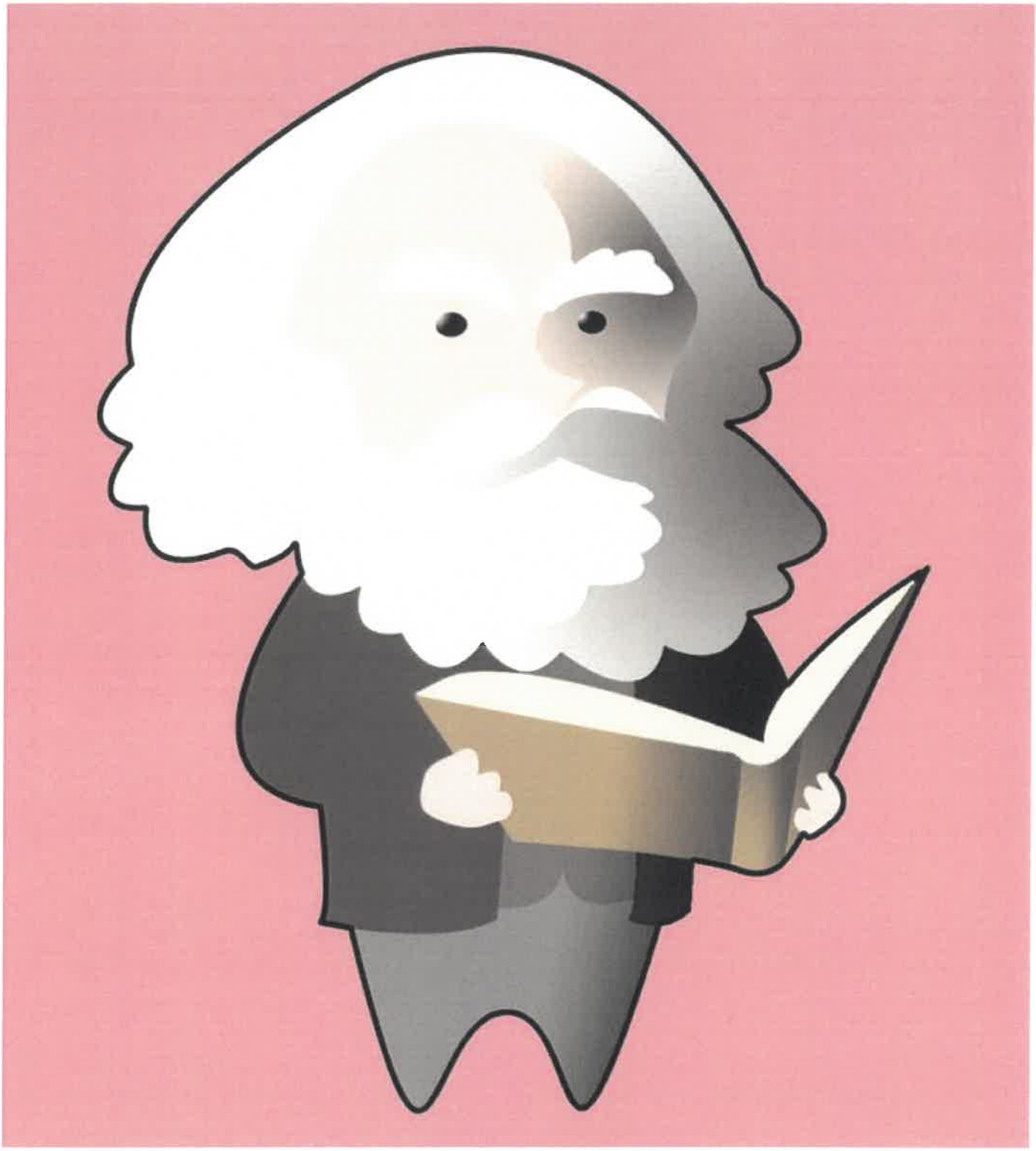
[Credit: BBC Radio 4.]

As it turned out, the union was unsuccessful in this round of bargaining in making their plan a reality. Nevertheless, like the UNIFOR example it is the underlying principles that will prove more important in the long term. In this case the underlying principles are two. First, that public institutions are an actually existing alternative to commodity markets as means of satisfying human needs. In fact, their principle of distribution is already socialist: from each according to her abilities to each according to his needs. If they fail to live up to this principle in practice, then the proper response is to work to build better public institutions, the battle for their legitimacy having already been won. More practically, vital, democratically managed, and adequately funded public institutions (schools and universities, libraries and cultural centres, sports facilities, hospitals and clinics, public health services, drug plans, pensions, etc.) are the necessary other side of GBI schemes. Without robust public services, as Clarke noted, GBI is reduced too easily another market mechanism ensuring the preservation, rather than the transformation, of capitalism.

The second principle that underlies the creative response of Canadian postal workers to technological change is the principle that technological change not only eliminates jobs, but it also creates new and different forms of work. As Ursula Huws points out, "human knowledge, ingenuity, and creativity are absolutely essential to invent and design new products and processes, communicate and provide content for a wide range of products, and services that keep the wheels of capitalism turning, and care for, educate, inform, distract, and entertain the entire population."[17] But inventing, creating, communicating, educating, informing, etc., are not *in themselves* practices whose sole value is to keep the wheels of capitalism turning. Rather, they are the practices through which meaningful lives are built. The struggle should be directed against their alienated form, because the ultimate justification for socialism is that it satisfies the fundamental conditions of positive human freedom. The living expression of positive human freedom is self-realization, and self-realization, the objectification of our ideas in material reality, must always involve de-alienated labour.

If we think through the implications of these three practical struggles together, from the standpoint of the principles that underlie them, the society their successful realization would result in would most definitely leave its citizens time for play and carnival, as Dyer-Witherford rightly demanded. But they would provide much more too: a democratic organization of life-valuable work in which people could feel the special joy that knowingly doing something that others need and value produces. Necessity and freedom are often treated as antitheses, but is there anything worse for a social being than feeling useless, feeling that we are *not* needed? To be needed is to be valued, and to be active in relation to that which makes you valuable, to consciously devote time and effort to making yourself real for others by meeting their needs, is an irreducible dimension of the positive freedom for which socialists have always fought.



(https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2017/01/alienmarx_jose-rodriguez.jpg)

[Credit: Jose Rodriguez.] **End**

notes:

[1] Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, in *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Collected Works, Volume 3*, New York: International Publishers, 1975, p. 274.

[2] Karl Marx, *Outline of a Critique of Political Economy* in, *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Collected Works Volume 28*, New York: International Publishers, 1986, p.250.

[3] See Martin Ford, *The Rise of the Robots*, New York: Basic Books, 2015.

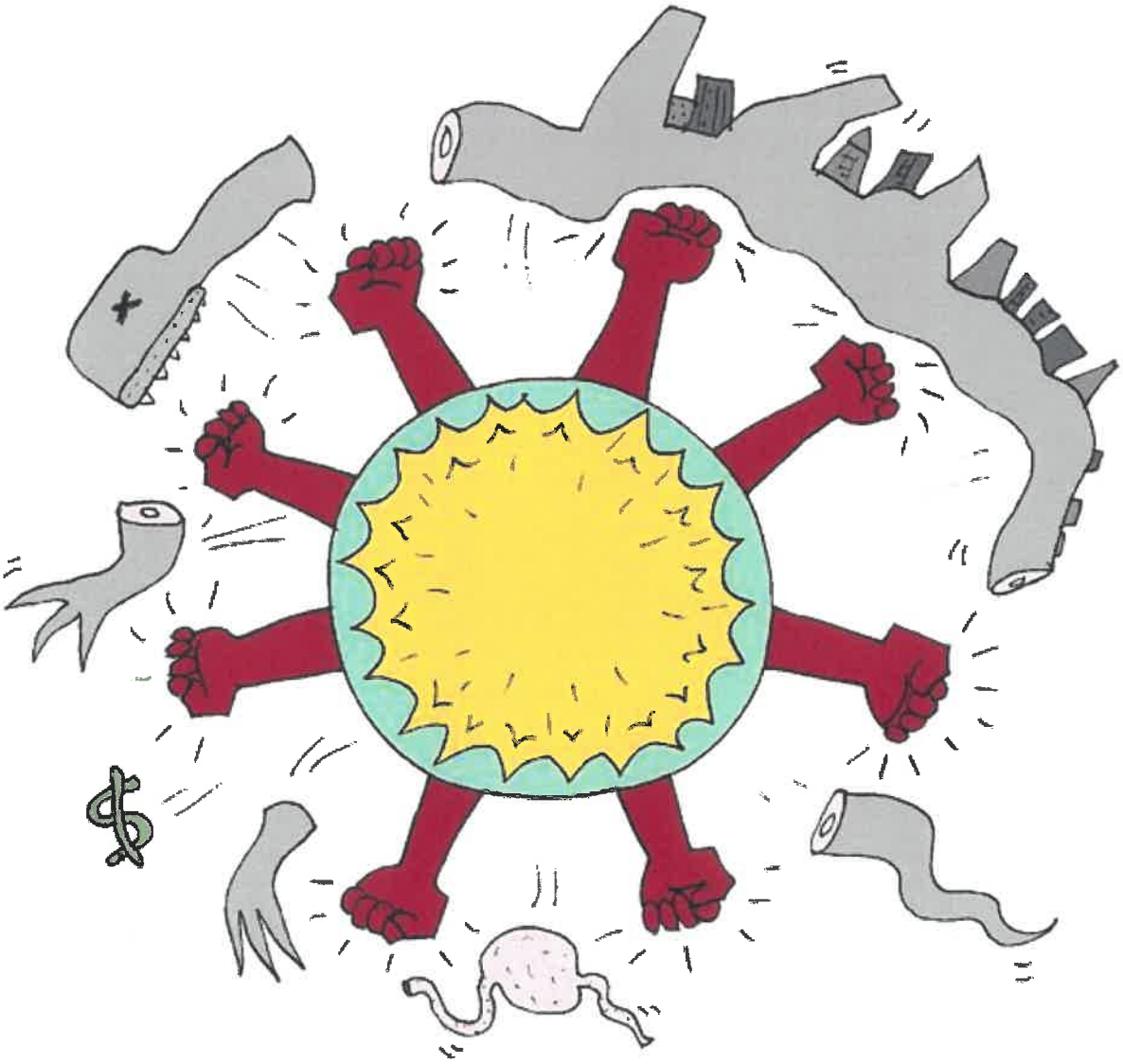
[4] Leon Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution and Results and Prospects*, New York: Pathfinder Press, 1969, pp. 239-243.

[5] Nick Dyer-Witherord, "A Reply to Michael Albert," *Utopian Pedagogy: Radical Experiments Against Neo-liberal Globalization*, Mark Cote, Richard J.F Gay, and Greig de Peuter, eds., Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007, p. 325.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 327.

[7] *Ibid.*, p.326.

[8] Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, 2015, *Inventing the Future*, London: Verso, 2015.



(https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2017/01/capattack11_stephanie-mcmillan.jpg)

[Credit: Stephanie McMillan.]

[9] Michael Albert,

"Reply to Nick Dyer-Witherford," *Utopian Pedagogy: Radical Experiments Against Neo-liberal Globalization*, p. 331.

[10] See Harry Braverman, *Labour and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998.

[11] John McMurtry, "Human Rights versus Corporate Rights: Life Value, the Civil Commons and Social Justice," *Studies in Social Justice*, Volume 5, Issue 1, 11-61, 2011, p. 25.

[12] As others have argued as well. In addition to Srnicek and Williams, see Judith Schorr, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure*, New York: Basic Books, 1992, Stanley Aronowitz and Jonathan Cutler, *Post-Work*, (New York: Routledge), 1998; and Peter A. Victor, *Managing Without Growth: Slower by Design, Not Disaster*, (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar), 2008.

[13] A recent study by the Canadian Imperial bank of Commerce has concluded that Canada is in the midst of a long term trend toward part time low paid work as an increasing percentage of available jobs. During the recession the share of part time work rose form 18 % to 20%, with no signs that it is returning to the lower figure. More alarmingly, perhaps, is the related finding that a full 61% of Canadian workers are earning below average wages. Benjamin Tal, "On the Quality of Employment in Canada," *In Focus*, November 28th, 2016. **https://economics.cibccm.com/economicsweb/cds?ID=1974&TYPE=EC_PDF (https://economics.cibccm.com/economicsweb/cds?ID=1974&TYPE=EC_PDF)** access ed, January 2nd 2017].

[14] John Clarke, "Basic Income: Progressive Dreams Meet Neoliberal Realities, *The Bullet*, No. 1350, January 2nd, 2017. **http://socialistproject.ca/bullet/1350.php (http://socialistproject.ca/bullet/1350.php)** accessed, January 2nd 2017.

[15] Bill Murnighan, "Unifor and Big Three Bargaining: A Response to Gindin's "Different Ways of Making History" *The Bullet, No. 1322*, October 31st, 2016. **http://socialistproject.ca/bullet/1322.php (http://socialistproject.ca/bullet/1322.php)** accessed, November 11th, 2016.

[16] Canadian Union of Postal Workers, *Delivering Community Power.* **http://www.deliveringcommunitypower.ca/ (http://www.deliveringcommunitypower.ca/)** accessed, November 11th, 2016.

[17] Ursula Huws, "What Will We Do: The Destruction of Occupational Identities in the "Knowledge-Based Economy" *Monthly Review*, Vo. 57, No. 8 (January 2006), **http://monthlyreview.org/2006/01/01/what-will-we-do-the-destruction-of-occupational-identities-in-the-knowledge-based-economy/ (http://monthlyreview.org/2006/01/01/what-will-we-do-the-destruction-of-occupational-identities-in-the-knowledge-based-economy/)** accessed, January 8th, 2017.

(https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2017/01/alienfreedom_drhurd.jpg)

[Credit: Dr Hurd.]

[*Thank you indeed Jeff for this contribution. Lead picture credit: soc331.*]

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