

Discussion on Anti-work

Crisis of capital or its success?

John Zerzan
Bob Brubaker
Tim Luke

“Anti-Work and the Struggle for Control” in this issue [FE #309, June 19, 1982] continues John Zerzan’s work demonstrating the massive erosion of traditional American values, in this case centering on popular allegiance to the work ethic. Below is a rebuttal from Tim Luke, which appeared in Telos magazine No. 50 (Box 3111, St. Louis MO 63130, \$5); this is followed by a reply from Zerzan and a comment by Bob Brubaker of the FE staff.

Anti-Work?

by Tim Luke

In “Anti-Work and the Struggle for Control,” John Zerzan argues that America’s over-exploited working classes once again are verging on total revolt. Although many points in his arguments are difficult to firmly pin down, Zerzan apparently holds that the recent increases in a whole range of work avoidance activities are the preliminary signs of a general crisis looming just over the horizon as the Reagan revolution slowly unfolds its program for the American economy. The broad-gauged systematic challenge of “work refusal,” in its many subtle forms across the spectrum from absenteeism to on-the-job drug abuse, now poses such a basic threat to corporate capital that big business and top management have retreated to the last bastions of co-determination, co-optation and, ultimately, corporativism in order to merely survive the coming crisis. Thus, Zerzan issues a warning to this resurgent proletarian force.

While these new industrial programs for “job enrichment” and “worker involvement” might be construed as some positive sign of capital’s final capitulation to labor in preparation for building an equal partnership in the corporative administration of the means of production, in fact these new psychosocial schemes merely are the latest subterfuge for elaborating scientific management and complete administrative control in the workplace.

Successes of Capitalist Integration

Yet, the growing trend toward work refusal by the working classes in the United States and other advanced capitalist countries cannot be reduced so simply into the latest phase of the classic struggle over control in the factories. Admittedly, the workers are in danger of losing more dignity and freedom on the job. Still, the “quality of work life” movement, and its guiding force of “Japanophilia,” has been inspired by more than the bourgeoisie’s eternal need to repress the proletariat. As Zerzan notes, these steadily increasing levels of absenteeism, alcohol abuse, disability scams, drug abuse, job-related accidents and worker sabotage do present a systemic threat to

management as it seeks to maintain a stable, trained and dedicated workforce in its offices and factories. The aversion to work, however, does not stem so much from the failures of capitalism and the discontent of the workers so much as it flows from the successes of capitalist integration and the privatistic withdrawal of the workers to take fullest advantage of their integration.

Nearly three generations ago, the more progressive fraction of top management made a series of basic marketing and administrative decisions about workers and consumers. More control, greater profit and more stable returns, it was decided, could accrue from deskilling the workers and technologically intensifying the material means of production instead of protecting proletarian skills and insulating the technical process of production from scientific advancements. Industrial tasks purposely were devalued and degraded to realize new economies of efficient scale. Rather than continuing their status as technical polymaths, the workers were reduced systematically to “trained gorillas,” as Gramsci maintained, whose time as semi-skilled machine tenders was rented out to big business.

At the same juncture, to partially compensate for these lost skills and the intrinsic satisfaction that derived from their exercise, another series of marketing decisions funneled a major part of this tremendously increased industrial capacity into the production and circulation of new consumer goods and services, or an unprecedented array of standardized things and experiences, that the worker as consumer might acquire with the fatter pay packet he earned from renting out his productive time and energy to the producers of things and the providers of experiences. As such a consumeristic rentier, the objective position of the proletarian within the means of production, shifted from the primacy of production to the primacy of consumption. Instead of being most productive through undaunting hard work on company time in the workplace, the technologically intensified means of production now basically transformed the worker as a productive force into the consumer as productive force, who becomes most productive through unending intense leisure on off-time in the living place. In many respects, the aversion to work and the trend toward “anti-work” represent the obverse of corporate capitalism’s real dynamic of inculcating a passion for play and a movement towards “pro-leisure.”

The systemic development of “anti-work” attitudes and activities, then, closely parallels the systematic emergence of “pro-leisure” values and practices throughout the economy, at least since the end of World War II, if not before. Corporate capital has invested leisure with immense importance in order to integrate the workers into the affluent society by training them to “work” hard “at play.” Private time, personal pursuits, leisure time are culturally redefined constantly as self-actualizing moments to be aggressively sought after and wantonly spent upon. The personal car, the private home, the individual electronics system, the single-family accessories of backyard fun are all “worked for” and “worked on” as new forms of play. Zerzan mistakes the latest outbreaks of anti-work activities as the rebellion of a militant and skilled working class chafing to expropriate the capitalists. In fact, since corporate capital has so comfortably transformed “play” into “work,” it now can seek final closure by artfully transfiguring even those final hours of work-time in the factory and office into activity forms that more closely resemble playtime and leisure. The new waves of industrial sociologists and managerial psychologists that are now pitching out plans for “job excitement,” “job enhancement,” and “job enrichment” see this underlying need to transform work into something more like play. Hence, the advent of exercise programs on company time, the elimination of routine tasks, the introduction of variety, diversity and mystery in job assignments, the formation of structured bull sessions and gossip circles to improve “productivity,” or the creation of innumerable new little submanagerial niches on the line or in the office so that everyone can pretend he is boss or play assistant vice-president.

The civic privatism that Zerzan now concludes will bring the system into its final crisis is instead the proper, correct form of psychosocial behavior required by advanced corporate capital to maintain its control over the worker, who now is only a producer as a consumer. The worker as producer can be replaced by a robotic-cybernetic servomechanism. Thus, only a consumer, who is properly socialized to spend his rentier income on the unending flow of technologically generated things and experiences, does the worker have a function and importance in corporate capital’s designs.

The larger culture of withdrawal, as Zerzan complains, is simply the social form of “pro-leisure” that remains once everyone has been mobilized by prime-time TV ads to rush out to the closest shopping mall to hunt for and gather the correct things that they can then fully experience and enjoy in the privacy of their homes, unbothered by political issues, union meetings, religious obligations, neighborhood community, family ties, or the hassles at work. Workers are absent from work to stay at home to play “Space Invaders” or are tardy because they have to

watch all of “Hour Magazine” to start the day, or are doped up on the job because working is not as much fun as lying around the pool at home, or are disabled on the job because they are daydreaming about cruising around on their dirt bikes—not because they are gathering their energies for the final confrontation with capital.

Indeed, as the pollsters and evening news broadcasters continually report, many if not most workers believe that the only way they will improve their lives is through the government granting fee license, tax breaks and new capital to the corporations that rent their time in factories and offices. Of course, the workers loathe their corporate tenants who rent their hours and the corporations themselves moan about the utility of the units they rent. Nonetheless, what might, at first glance, appear to be indicators of social unrest are in fact, solid signs of social integration and civic passivity. The next time that Zerzan climbs behind the wheel of social theory to take it on a spin through contemporary social trends, let us hope that he drives along looking through the windshield at events of the 1980s that are going on ahead of him, rather than staring into the rearview mirror of working class politics in the 1880’s.

Negativity & Reality

response to the foregoing by John Zerzan, author of “Anti-Work and the Struggle for Control.”

In Tim Luke’s effort to demonstrate his fealty to *Telos* editor Paul Piccone’s “artificial negativity” thesis (more on this below), he has produced really no reply at all to my essay.

Inexplicably, he uses almost a third of his response to point out two developments, which, if barely relevant, are completely and tediously well-known: namely, that a systematic de-skilling of work has been going on a long time (over twice as long as he seems to be aware of) and that the work ethic has been replaced by a culture of consumption (miraculously discovered by bourgeois sociologists about 30 years ago).

Having thus maligned our intelligence, he proceeds to raise questions about his own. He claims I see in work refusal a “working class chafing to expropriate the capitalists.” Of course, there is no proletarian self-consciousness of any kind hinted at in my article, which simply depicts the progressive evacuation of the work role and the counter-measures this is now engendering.

It gets worse as we arrive at the main point Luke makes. Here he reveals that whether workers continue to work is quite unimportant, so long as they uninterruptedly consume, which constitutes “the proper, correct form of psychosocial behavior required by advanced corporate capital to maintain its control over the worker.” If they don’t work, they can be replaced by robots; what matters is an absorption with spending.

Leaving aside such questions as who and at what cost will provide and refine the required raw materials, assemble, service the robots, etc., let us take a look at this insight which has it that work refusal is actually proof that the central activity, consuming, is dominating society so well.

Actually, this view is the quintessence of leftists’ unhappiness with an advancing depoliticalization (e.g. Luke’s denunciation of those who have no interest in his “political issues, union meetings, religious obligations...”). Leftists like him, grandly exhibiting that “will to a system” pointed out by Nietzsche, do not comprehend the movement which is eroding the dominant values of the capital relationship. Threatened by the real negative, in fact, they shrilly attack the general withdrawal from the system.

Christopher Lasch is another exemplar of this reaction, whose sour and conservative *Culture of Narcissism* equates, in Freud-marxian terms, “narcissism” with consumerism, with passivity. He does, however, sometimes unwittingly reveal something of what is going on with people today: “Outwardly bland, submissive and sociable, they seethe with an inner anger for which a dense, overpopulated, bureaucratic society can devise few legitimate outlets,” for example.

Even granting the irrelevance of the status of wage-labor, do we really witness such a pervasively efficient consumerism? In fact, the corrosion besetting the one is clearly also engaging the other, in such forms as the hugely mounting levels of arson, vandalism, and participation in looting situations, not to mention booming rates of shoplifting, employee theft, and tax avoidance. Violation of the commodity, as much as the refusal of the rules of wage-labor, is manifestly the trend.

Finally, I would add that Luke serves the concept of “artificial negativity” faithfully, but very uncritically. Piccone—albeit because of a withdrawal he devalues—sees the need of the system to provide opposition to itself in order that it may advance in a regulated, intelligent manner. This becomes a necessity in the absence of organized negativity from below. The blind spot here of course is that there does abundantly exist a negation, precisely in the form of a withdrawal from the reform of domination. So, it is true that the order may indeed be in need of artificial negativity and also the case that a seemingly unrecoverable negativity of no use-value to the wage-labor and commodity world is the predominant social fact.

Anti-Luke

response by Bob Brubaker, FE staff

Tim Luke tries very hard to sustain his pessimism in the face of massive evidence to the contrary, and considering the ability of words to obfuscate and distort reality, succeeds quite well. His response to Zerzan does not, however, tell us much about the questions raised by Zerzan’s article.

What it does tell us about is Luke’s misconceptions and prejudices, which are legion. Let’s begin with the most concrete of these, then proceed toward a consideration of his theoretical premises.

First, Luke imagines that Zerzan has reduced the work refusal syndrome to “the latest phase of the classic struggle over control in the factories.” How he comes up with this notion is anybody’s guess, since Zerzan never speaks of or alludes to current workplace struggles as directed toward classical labor goals. He refers only to the growing instances of work refusal, to the perceived threat to capitalist control and productivity posed by these acts, and to the beginnings of an organized response by capitalist management to the problem.

Second, Luke erringly focuses entirely on questions of integration and ideology, and this in a completely one-sided way. Presuming that workers are completely integrated into the system as consumers, he banishes as pseudo-problems any consideration of worker unrest. He thinks it crucial that workers hate work not out of loyalty to socialist ideals (or “the political issues, union meetings, religious obligations, neighborhood community, family ties, and hassles at work” that presumably occupy the labor militant’s time), but because work interferes with the pleasures of consumption. Never mind if management appears disturbed at the widespread unrest in its workplaces; the battle has already been won, the ideology of consumption has triumphed, and, in any case, at the wave of a magic wand workers can be replaced by “robotic, cybernetic servomechanisms,” which, as we all know, never take coffee breaks, go on strike, or talk back to their supervisors. Luke even imagines that management is flirting with workplace innovation because of its theoretical acuity, recognizing the desirability of effecting a “closure” of the system which, having transformed play into work, is now transforming work into something resembling play.

Such prosaic management concerns as productivity, regular attendance, company loyalty, work quality, etc. are missing in Luke’s account, despite Zerzan’s evidence indicating that precisely these concerns currently obsess corporate capital. Luke writes as if capitalist integration was an accomplished fact rather than a continuous battle, and as if that integration was unconnected to capital’s efforts to extort more productivity from and secure the loyalty of its subjects. Managerial complaints about labor costs and reliability must seem an annoying intrusion into Luke’s perfected capitalist universe, where the sun never sets on the smoothly functioning capitalist empire. This is not to deny the prescience of Luke’s descriptions, which loom as possibilities at the horizon of the system. However, these theoretical anticipations only obfuscate the crucial struggles of which work refusal is a part, and which could eventuate either in a complete collapse of capitalist legitimacy or in a perfected domination.

Third, Luke, not Zerzan, evinces a nostalgia for the working class politics of the nineteenth century. His extreme pessimism is fueled by a time-worn fidelity to the concept of proletarian revolution. While his revolutionary agent has long since expired, at least in the classical sense mourned by the left, Luke seems as if he just returned from the wake. Perhaps he was caught in a time warp, because he seems to think it’s the 1950s. In the heat of his conceptual rage, he sees only self-indulgent sows feeding at the trough of consumption. Thus does he miss the insight of the situationists that at the very center of this engorgement in commodities rests the bitter pill of nihilism, which having been swallowed by countless people has led them to search for a life really worth living. Absent from Luke’s

gloomy scenario are the student, youth and women's movements of the 1960s and '70s, except their most retrograde aspects, May '68 in France, and more recent acts of anti-capitalist rebellion by disaffected youth and others.

Finally, Luke's vaporous account is directly traceable to his theoretical position, a variant of Paul Piccone's theory of "artificial negativity," which holds that having suppressed the "organic negativity" of the old workers' movement, capital has been forced to construct an artificial negativity comprised of leftists and pseudo-radicals, who provide the requisite criticism needed to drive the system forward. A bloated modification of Marcuse's theory of "one-dimensionality," neatly tailored to the cynicism of the 1970s and 1980s, it tries to reduce every recent instance of rebellion to an absurd totalistic conceptual schema. Thus, Luke writes elsewhere, "The radical student movement was manufactured and manipulated in order to pressure the state out of a pointless, destructive war." Manipulated, it undoubtedly was. But manufactured? We apparently have here a kind of magical thinking in which the state assumes a god-like omniscience, undertaking the seemingly counterproductive task of engineering the political and cultural explosions of the 1960s (never mind the fact, embarrassing for Luke's thesis, that the 1960s youth phenomenon was world-wide) because it knew in advance that the result would be a sort of self-criticism posing no threat to the social order. But why should the state criticize itself in so circuitous and inefficient a manner? Or perhaps he means the opponents of the war themselves manufactured a movement which, initially autonomous and pregnant with radical potential, came to assume an essentially system-supporting role because it failed to overcome its initial limitations and separations and become a revolutionary movement. But this would be to describe the recuperation of acts and events, rather than their generation by a deterministic system, a completely different matter. Luke's formulation is, in fact, a logical and conceptual morass.

Like the black sheep who shows up at the family reunion to the discomfort of all, the discontinuity of rebellion plagues Luke's theoretical construct with embarrassing insistence. Unable to account for rebellion by the logic of his system model, he banishes it from the world or grossly distorts its features and meaning. At bottom, he simply cannot see or imagine revolt against modern conditions.

The real question raised by Zerzan's article concerns whether the negativity he describes will unfold into a total challenge to capital's rule, or remain at its present state of incoherence, which would signal probable defeat. Whatever the answer to that question, the importance of the work refusal phenomenon is unquestionable.

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