

# Work and the Dreamers Against It

The Surrealist movement's view on what came to be known as work in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

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a review of

*Surrealist Sabotage and the War on Work* by Abigail Susik. Manchester University Press, 2021

Surrealism emerged from the brutality of the trenches of the first world war that devastated Europe as an attempt to come to terms with the ruins and a rapidly changing world of new technologies and systems.

With World War I, a generation born near the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had reached adulthood. Increasing social and technological changes became more and more prominent and, by extension, both labor and culture became shaped by everything these constantly-updating machines demanded.

Abigail Susik's book *Surrealist Sabotage and the War on Work* examines the Surrealist movement and its view of what came to be known as work under these changed conditions. Marx and Engels contended that the proletariat was the product of bourgeois society as well as its negation. The Surrealist movement was also the product and negation of 20<sup>th</sup> Century bourgeois society—and, they understood how to effectively undermine it by tackling and struggling against its foundation: work.

That Abigail Susik is an assistant professor of art history at Willamette University will not surprise the reader. Extensive records are carefully examined, researched and analyzed on every page. Susik touches upon the motivations of the unconscious mind of the Surrealist movement itself, the very thing that the Surrealists were so keen on discovering and examining.

The release of Susik's book could not have come at a more fitting time, during the autumn of 2021, when major media outlets were reporting on the so-called Great Resignation along with the growth of innumerable online anti-work communities. The Surrealist movement came into being in 1918, not only during an increasing critique of work by European radicals mirroring the enormous spikes of interest in anti-work perspectives today, but during the global Spanish flu pandemic.

Every new change in a capitalist society not only affects labor, it is based on labor. Thus, any change or reform in capitalist society allowed by the capitalist class is merely a performance to increase its returns on its investments and decrease the hindrances to such returns. As the interests of the working class and the capitalist class are diametrically opposed, each change in the economic system will improve the condition of one at the expense of the other and one will respond to negate the improvement of the other.

It is fascinating to learn that Surrealism's emergence coincided with an increase in work discipline tactics in France that were imported from the Fordist Era in the U.S. which were met by subsequent resistance by workers. Capitalizing on this and influenced not only by Marx, but his son-in-law Paul Lafargue (author of *The Right to Be Lazy*), the Surrealists went beyond union strike actions and insisted on tactics that effectively undermined the process of work (a primary function in a world of "miserablism," as Andre Breton called it).

Workers at this time used numerous tactics to fight against work that varied in their intensity. "Subversion through compliance" involved following workplace rules to such a meticulous and calculated degree that it com-

promised productivity. Faking illness, showing up late, work stoppages and cheating the clock were common occurrences.

In their journal *La Révolution surréaliste*, the Surrealists called for mass suicide as a viable tactic to fight work! “Self-inflicted death became an absolutist substitution for the endless toil of the conscription of wage labor,” Susik tells us. An “all-too-earnest questionnaire” was included in one issue asking readers “about their opinion of suicide” as a means to combat capitalism, noting recent suicides in French newspapers

No means to destroy work were too extreme. The aggressive hostility to the world of work by Breton and his comrades never shied away from all applicable tactics to undermine it. The development of Surrealism in Europe coincided with the rebelliousness of the working class of the era, thus producing art and ideas in opposition to capitalism.

The Surrealists, not only being products of their time, were also products of their class. It seemed with all their disdain for work, their privileged positions in life allowed them to avoid doing a great deal of it. The first Surrealists in France, especially Breton and his wife Simone, were from fairly advantaged backgrounds. There was also an alliance with the Parti communiste français (PCF) that, however, did become uneasy. In their rejection of Stalinism and the mass production apparatus, the surrealists found the PCF to be completely antithetical to their calls for the destruction of work. The Surrealists’ anarchist perspectives, desire for sexual liberation and calls for the end of work were aggressively rejected by the Stalinists in both France and Russia. A permanent break between the surrealists and PCF thus resulted in the 1930s.

Further contradictions of the Surrealists are seen when noting their championing of women’s empowerment; in practice they overlooked their own male domination. Susik writes, “It is well known that Andre Breton and the Surrealists venerated working-class women who murdered people in positions of power.”

Such radical anti-capitalist feminism was not unusual for the Surrealists, but their practice of automatism (seeking images and words from the unconscious mind) was done exclusively by Surrealist women at the typewriter, transcribing like secretaries, the results of the men entering trances.

Here, Susik comes to a brilliant observation. Surrealism (and even psychoanalysis, a heavy influence on it) was a direct product of the growth of early 20<sup>th</sup> century office culture, with a gendered division of labor. Sexism and miserablism (and the reality of their inseparability) seemed to go unnoticed or at least unremarked by the men of the movement.

While Surrealism was a rebellion against the mass conformity that was coalescing into the rise of fascism in the 1930s, it greatly influenced a generation after it as well. The Chicago Surrealist Group in the 1960s, that also took inspiration from the Industrial Workers of the World, was founded by Franklin Rosemont, Penelope Rosemont, and others after a trip to Paris in 1965 where the Rosemonts met Breton and other Surrealists.

They published *The Rebel Worker* detailing wild adventures and hoping to find other writers and artists seeking to change the world. This led to lucid examinations of revolutionary theory with German-American Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse. Susik details the communication between the Rosemonts and Marcuse, and finally with Breton and friends toward the end of his life. They pondered how to create a Surrealist revolution and a world free from alienated labor and repression.

Over a hundred years since their start, both the Surrealists and the world they struggled against live on.

Michael Desnivic is an anarchist writer living in Saint Louis. He enjoys poetry, procrastination and assisting in any way he can to make the modern world of misery, conservatism, work, and hierarchy come to a dramatic conclusion.

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