

Alternatives to Lives of Misery

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a review of

Jobs, Jive, & Joy: An Argument for the Utopian Spirit by Bernard Marszalek (Ztangi Press and Charles H. Kerr, 2024)

“Certainly, contending with climate catastrophe and civilization collapse requires a cultural revolution to match the devastation before us.” —Bernard Marszalek

The environmental, health, social, economic and political stresses of the last few decades have spurred the formation of increasing numbers of mutual aid groups for sharing resources and solidarity. Especially since the emergence of the Covid pandemic, people are reflecting on how to move their lives beyond working in the current world’s humiliating, boring, and unhealthy jobs.

So, it is not surprising that more and more are turning for inspiration to the dreams of better, more socially fulfilling societies that have flourished during hard times over the centuries.

Bernard Marszalek, the author of *Jobs, Jive, & Joy*, has a long history of exploring and advocating for the utopian spirit in everyday life. As a participant in the grassroots anarchistic/anti-authoritarian global insurgency of the 1960s, he was one of the founders of Chicago’s Solidarity Bookshop in 1964. Together, he and his comrades enthusiastically read, shared and discussed publications and ideas of anarchists from many parts of the globe, as well as those of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the Surrealist movement.

As part of this exploration, Marszalek collaborated in reissuing an English edition of Paul Lafarge’s *The Right to be Lazy*, earlier published in English in 1907 by Charles Kerr and Co. Although he was Marx’s son-in-law and supporter during the debates of the First International, in this book Lafarge disagreed with Marx’s contention that work was a positive part of being non-alienated, of expressing one’s human essence. *The Right To Be Lazy* proudly ridicules the modern bourgeois work ethic.

Lafarge wrote: “A strange delusion possesses the working classes of the nations where capitalist civilization holds its sway. This delusion drags in its train the individual and social woes which for two centuries have tortured sad humanity. This delusion is the love of work, the furious passion for work, pushed even to the exhaustion of the vital force of the individual and his progeny.”

Marszalek has continued this exploration over the years. *Jobs, Jive, & Joy* is a richly detailed examination of some of the most significant utopian thought of the past three centuries. In the book, he highlights alternative perspectives that reject the work ethic and the commodification of human beings and other living creatures, as well as denying the inevitability of hierarchies and exploitation by elites.

He explores differences in paradigms which have helped create the cultural/political conditions generally prevailing in different societies. For example, time has been understood and measured differently in eras past and present. In pre-industrial societies, time was generally understood and measured in terms of the duration of tasks to be completed by individuals and/or groups. The skilled craftspeople and peasants of medieval Europe did not calculate the hours spent at tasks, but thought in terms of producing appropriate quality results.

Times of the year were not understood in terms of abstract units of time, but reckoned by seasons, the phases of the moon, and religious rituals, marked by bells, horns or loud singing.

In modern society, time is comprehended with reference to the amount of monetary exploitation of workers, and profits for the owners of industry. But it required several decades for workers to forget pre-industrial time and reluctantly internalize schedules of labor prescribed by the employers as justified and being a hard worker as morally admirable. This paradigm shift is what has enabled the development of the modern work ethic.

It has become clear that utopian perspectives are the only ones currently capable of comprehensively challenging the contradictions in industrial society between the necessity of work and desires for an enjoyable and fulfilling life.

Marszalek interweaves discussions of past utopian aspirations and projects with his own mixed work experiences, those of his mother and those of others. He points out that while no examples from the past or present can offer definitive solutions to current dead-ends, situations in which people have had control over their own activities are the most satisfying, and lead to the most creativity.

Delving into the heritage of several utopians, Marszalek encourages readers to think about what aspects may still be relevant today. These utopians asserted the strength of people's imagination and passionate creativity having an impact on daily life.

For example, Charles Fourier, writing before the major consolidations of industry and agriculture of the mid-19th century, understood that achieving authentic individual and social freedom would require abolishing economic slavery and the necessity for people to work in order to survive. Only then would they be enabled to contribute to the good of the community in the ways they were most capable of doing.

Fourier also recognized that people's experience and understanding of work is shaped by the social context. Useful drudgery can be fulfilling when those who do it are recognized and appreciated as contributors to the group, and the work is understood as the means to a pleasurable end. For him the relationships between freedom, work and pleasure needed to be recognized as a totality, firmly intertwined.

Marszalek's book also explores the ideas of William Morris, who emphasized the relationship between freedom and fulfilling work. In the second part of the 19th century, he witnessed and opposed the centralization and mechanization of industry and amenities in personal life as well as the growing degradation and pollution of the environment produced on a daily basis.

Morris considered capitalism and the profit motive as corrosive to both individual self-expression and cooperative bonds. He argued that a truly free society would have to be one based on everyone's enjoyment and creativity, focused on the respect for everyone's creativity, sharing of art and appreciation for the balance of nature.

By the end of the 19th century, some progressives were advocating state administered social welfare programs capable of providing basic life needs in return for accepting centralized efficient regimentation. One of these was Edward Bellamy, who wrote a very popular fantasy novel, *Looking Backward*, idealizing just such a society. Morris responded with direct critique and by writing a fantasy novel of his own, *News From Nowhere*.

Morris welcomed mechanization of tedious and tiring tasks, but he was appalled by the destructive nature of modern technology and the brutal hierarchical social organization of life it engendered. He refused to accept mechanical engineering as the ultimate human achievement for which autonomy should be surrendered.

Today, some of the worst aspect of modern authoritarianism are pushing the world toward disaster and we need to call forth the highest sentiments of solidarity and mutual aid to contend with them.

Marszalek examines several different proposed solutions to the current impasse, calls out the jive of some and is hopeful about others. On the whole the book does a valuable service by reminding us of the great variety of utopian alternative perspectives that reject authoritarian rule and capitalist social relations.

As Bernard Marszalek aptly asserts, "The impetus to overcome the misery of everyday life, so that daily expectations of delight can be experienced, is foundational for future transformational social activity."

Rui Preti is a long-time friend of the Fifth Estate and a great believer in the value of continuous questioning of cultural paradigms.



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