

Carl Davis

Stephen Beck; Susan Preciso

Work and the Human Condition

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Work ≠ Meaning

As humans we spend much of our adult lives working, both out of necessity and by choice. Work is necessary inasmuch as it provides us the resources to live fulfilling lives, but to a large extent work itself has become the central focus of our lives. We have defined success in life by material wealth, confounding a capacity for mass consumption with fulfillment. Work, then, is the means by which we acquire the resources to consume. Consumption is problematic as the model of success, because it is a constant process and thus to sustain it takes either a constant stream of resources, or an inexhaustible reserve of resources.

For most of us, maintaining the level of consumption to be “successful” requires that work be central to our lives. With work occupying so prominent a role in our lives, *who we are* as a person is largely eclipsed by *what we do* for work. Essentially, we become defined by our work, and to be defined by our work is to surrender much of our identity to those who define our work. As a result we lose the power to lead our lives in our own interests. In our pursuit of consumption we are consumed by our work.

It is illuminating to look at the role technology has played in creating this consumption-based model of life and work. There is a stark contrast between the conception that technology which increases productivity will allow people to work less and the reality that dramatic increases in productivity over time have not been accompanied

by corresponding reductions in workloads. Instead of working less, we are simply producing more. This increased production has to be sustained by increased consumption, so we consume more. To sustain our increased consumption, we need to work more and produce more.

For such a system to function, success *must* be defined by the accumulation of material wealth in order to drive the over-consumption necessary to meet the demands of increased production. The crisis of overproduction described by Marx is constantly looming, should consumption flag. So the ideal model of individual success is the capacity to engage in completely unfettered consumption. This escalating cycle of production and consumption is fruitless— we may live lives of relative material prosperity, but on the whole we are deeply dissatisfied and increasingly isolated from our communities.

The utility of such a seemingly decadent model of society is that it is effective in maintaining the political and social status quo by reducing the power of the public to engage in political action. Social and political theorist Hannah Arendt explains in The Human Condition:

The only indispensable material factor in the generation of power is the living together of people. Only where men live so close together that the potentialities of action are always present can power remain with them (201) ... However, the people who meet on the exchange market are primarily not persons but producers of products, and what they show there is never themselves ... but their products. The impulse that drives the fabricator to the public market place is the desire for products, not for people, and the power that holds this market together and in existence is not the

potentiality which springs up between people when they come together in action and speech, but a combined “power of exchange” (Adam Smith) which each of the participants acquired in isolation. It is this lack of relatedness to others and this primary concern with exchangeable commodities which Marx denounced as the dehumanization and self-alienation of commercial society ... Men show themselves only in the privacy of their families or the intimacy of their friends. (209-210)

Work today is the bane of the human condition. It consumes our lives, isolates us, and makes us impotent in the face of political injustice. This isn't to say that work is bad, or that there is no such thing as meaningful or fulfilling work, but rather that work which functions as both the means and the ends in a destructive cycle of mass consumption is neither meaningful nor fulfilling. To live a meaningful life, we must reject the model of success based on the constant cycle of work and consumption. Success should be defined by the things in life that give each of us a feeling of meaning. That may be family, service, athletic excellence, or any number of other things— But one thing it surely is not is consumption for consumption's sake.

Works Cited

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