WHAT DO YOU WANT?

Mareile Pfannebecker and J.A. Smith, *Work Want Work: Labour and Desire at the End of Capitalism,* London, Zed, 2020, 208pp; £14.99 paperback.

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I read *Work Want Work: Labour and Desire at the End of Capitalism* over a few days on lockdown at a time when work, or the lack of it, is on a lot of people's minds. It makes for a compelling read, both grounded in a breadth of theory – sociological, philosophical and psychoanalytic – and replete with examples from literature, art, film, popular culture and politics. The title alone offers plenty to consider, given now might be a particularly pertinent time to try to imagine the possibility of the end of capitalism. Astute analysis of a range of attempts to contend with 'the problem of work' sit comfortably alongside commentary on some of the stranger elements of late capitalism that serve to illustrate the tensions between what we want and what we actually get in the (dis)pleasures of 'bleeding vegan burgers', Googling your symptoms and trawling Tinder. As arguments develop, so too do considerations of the cultural politics of the moment. #Metoo, the UK's 'Prevent' strategy, TERFs (trans-exclusionary radical feminists), wokeness, and snowflakes all feature, though always with a critical edge putting them into context. Despite its range, the work never seeks to skirt the complexity of its subject matter and succeeds in questioning its own arguments. This is perhaps a consequence of having been co-authored and creates the impression, for me at least, that a concerted effort has been made to create space for the reader to develop their own responses and imagine what their own post-work desires might be.

Pfannebecker and Smith begin by setting out the view that a 'new *lifework* regime' has led to a scenario in which 'all you do is work, and everything you do can be put to work' (pix). The authors adopt the term *désoeuvrement* – 'literally 'unworking', but also 'inoperability', 'the absence of work', and 'the absence of *a* work'' in order to conceptualise *not-working* as 'something more than just a passive withdrawal of effort' (p1). *Not-working* might instead be thought of as having 'an active, positive, even material quality', though one 'increasingly under threat in the lifework regime' (p1). Now, the authors argue, 'we are living through a generalised diminishing of *désoeuvrement'* (p6), as it becomes increasingly difficult to make an 'imaginative leap to 'something that is not work'' (p5). As work has

crept into so many areas of life and so many areas of life have come to be conceptualised in terms of work, the loss of the permanent career, or what the authors call the 'tragedy of not being a baker' (drawing on Richard Sennett), has also come to dominate much discussion of employment. The authors are cautious not to implicitly romanticise older models, recognising the ways in which nostalgia for certain kinds of work has been a productive part of the politics of Brexit in Britain and MAGA in the USA. They avoid perpetuating the notion that being a university lecturer, for example, was nothing but brilliant before it came under the 'tyranny of extraneous bullshit' (p12) that arguably preoccupies so much time in so many professions now. Work has never been straightforward. The authors acknowledge this, describing precarity as 'a grim kind of stable norm in itself' (p17).

Under current conditions, the authors argue, when an increasing 'porousness between the lives of the unemployed and those in low-pay employment' is accompanied by 'new powers for the state to expel people from the economy and polity altogether' (pxi), there is a need for a 'totally new vocabulary for talking about employment and unemployment' (p50). Chapter two, 'Work Expulsions', features the analysis of Lucien Freud's painting 'The Benefits Supervisor Sleeping' (1995) as a springboard for thinking about differing perspectives on worklessness as unemployment and offers two new terms. The first, malemployment, denotes a break in any conventional binary opposition of employment/unemployment and emphasises the ways in which it has become 'hard to firmly tell the difference' (p64) between the two. Unemployment has come to resemble employment – it is a lot of work filling out endless forms, attending meetings, getting online and undertaking mandatory 'volunteering' or 'training' – and employment fails to seem all that different from unemployment when you might have work and be homeless, have work and be hungry, or have work and be just plain broke. The authors outline how this situation has come about through political decision making, in particular in Britain and the USA. The second term, disemployment, acknowledges the experiences of 'those who have been removed from unemployment figures, are not collecting benefits, but who have not reappeared within the job market; those in other words, who have simply been expelled or cancelled from the official economy as such' (p61). The terms seek to address, and perhaps to begin the process of redressing, 'the violence resulting from the redefinition of unemployment since the 1990s' (p70), in particular in Britain.

While disemployment and malemployment become the norm for many, 'quasi-adolescent self-commodification' comes to define the 'work-based subjectivity' (pxi) of others as capitalism 'produces subjects who relate to themselves as commodities, online and offline' (p75). In chapter three, the authors use the examples of the two highly mediatised deaths of Amy Winehouse (famous for her music) and Peaches Geldof (famous for being famous) to examine the notion of 'Young-Girlification'. The phrase comes from the French anarchist collective Tiqqun and acknowledges the ways in which the adaptable, self-improving 'Young-Girl', labouring primarily on herself, had become the ideal in consumer societies. This chapter's discussion of digital labour and the ways in which we are 'increasingly required to perform our desirability and the desirability of our lives as part of our work' (p137) coincided with my watching the BBC Three documentary *Nudes4Sale* (2020). The documentary follows women and teenage girls who utilise OnlyFans, the London based company premised on the idea that 'whether you're uploading, tutorials, tips, behind the scenes footage or just endless selfies, a lot of your followers would be willing to pay for them!'[1] UrbanDictionary perhaps offers a more pertinent definition of OnlyFans as 'a website where one can sell their nudes in an attempt to escape their retail job'.[2] Users post content to those who subscribe for a set fee every month, plus you can earn tips. OnlyFans seems to epitomise what Pfannebecker and Smith describe as 'the ways capitalism puts our time, our subjectivities, our experiences, and our desires to work in unprecedented ways only possible on the basis of globalised technologies' (p149). One of OnlyFans' most popular figures is Jem Wolfie, described by the platform as 'marketing gold' because 'her social media is about her' – she, like Peaches, achieved celebrity status 'just by being who she is'.[3] Pfannebecker and Smith point out that 'while the figure of the person 'famous for being famous' predates platform capitalism, the possibility of being so specifically on the basis of a constantly updated body of work charting one's daily life is clearly specific to it' (p97). You might wonder if platforms like OnlyFans, which complicate Pfannebecker and Smith's emphasis on 'forms of activity that accumulate wealth for capital without being recognised as labour' (p106-7) because users ask for money, really do chart one's daily life or something much more constructed – but then you would perhaps be surprised by how often the women in *Nudes4Sale* are asked for videos of everyday activities like urinating and defecating. Such

[1] 'How it works', *OnlyFans*, 2020, available at: https://onlyfans.com/how
[2] thanks.frank, 'OnlyFans', *UrbanDictionary*, 3 September 2019, available at: https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=OnlyFans
[3] 'Meet Jem Woolfie', *OnlyFans*, 4 September 2018, available at: https://blog.onlyfans.com/meet-jem-wolfie/

platforms only add to the urgency of Pfannebecker and Smith's question: 'How do we get out of wanting 'self-valorization', the work of the good girl of capitalism?' (p107).

In its discussions of platform capitalism and desire the final chapter, titled 'Three ways to want things after capitalism', offers the greatest insights. Here the authors draw on psychoanalytic thinking to illustrate that 'to design a system that automatically 'gives me what I want' shows a grave misunderstanding of what desire is' (p131). Sometimes what we want in the moment and what we want long term are in conflict, and the book's discussions of the importance of chance meetings, unexpected matches, serendipitous moments – all of those things unlikely to happen when an algorithm seems to be in charge – prove particularly rewarding. The tensions between what we *think* we want and what others *think we should* want are at the fore as the authors emphasise the often-moralising tendencies that surround so many visions of both work and post-work futures. The discussion centres first on Silicon Valley and the extraction of value from data then on cultural criticism that calls for us to 'repurpose our desire', exploring some of the challenges that typify attempts to get 'to the other side of capitalism' (p140). Pfannebecker and Smith make the vital point here that what many 'post-work visions' fail to acknowledge is 'that we cannot know what the other wants', and that 'a consensus on the basics of a life well spent, if there may be such a thing, is liable to change' (p28). How can we know now what we would want in the future? Why would the things we want now be the same things we would want then? Why should what we want coincide with what others want? Our desires aren't free from the structures of the world they exist in – desire has what Pfannebecker and Smith call a 'cultural-historical plasticity' (p121) – so if the world changes, so might the things we want.

The book concludes with an emphasis on approaching the future with 'experimentation and openness' (156). In keeping with the literary references throughout *Work Want Work* this is reminiscent of a comment from Ursula K. Le Guin, who argued it was important as a writer 'not to offer any specific hope of betterment' but rather to 'dislodge' hers and her readers' minds 'from the lazy, timorous habit of thinking that the way we live now is the only way people can live'.[4] Pfannebecker and Smith adhere to this in offering not a single vision of a post-work future, but an opportunity to think differently. Now, questions are being asked about whether the current pandemic might open up new

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[4] Ursula K. Le Guin, *The wave in the mind: talks and essays on the writer, the reader, and the imagination*, Boston Mass, Shambala, 2004, p.218.

possibilities in the aftermath of what no doubt will be, for many people, profound loss. Chris Ridell's cartoon in *The Guardian* titled 'Uncertain future' makes the point poignantly. It pictures two people staring into the clouds, one asking: 'When this is all over, what should change?', the other responding: 'Everything'.[5] As Pfannebecker and Smith emphasise, 'all the future is, until it happens, is present desire' (p147). *Work Want Work* is a valuable contribution to writing on late capitalism and post-work theory. Simultaneously, it offers an engaging prompt for doing the hard work of thinking about what it is we want.

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[5] Chris Riddell, 'Coronavirus: everything must change – cartoon', *The Guardian*, 28 March 2020, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/picture/2020/mar/28/coronavirus-everything-must-change-cartoon