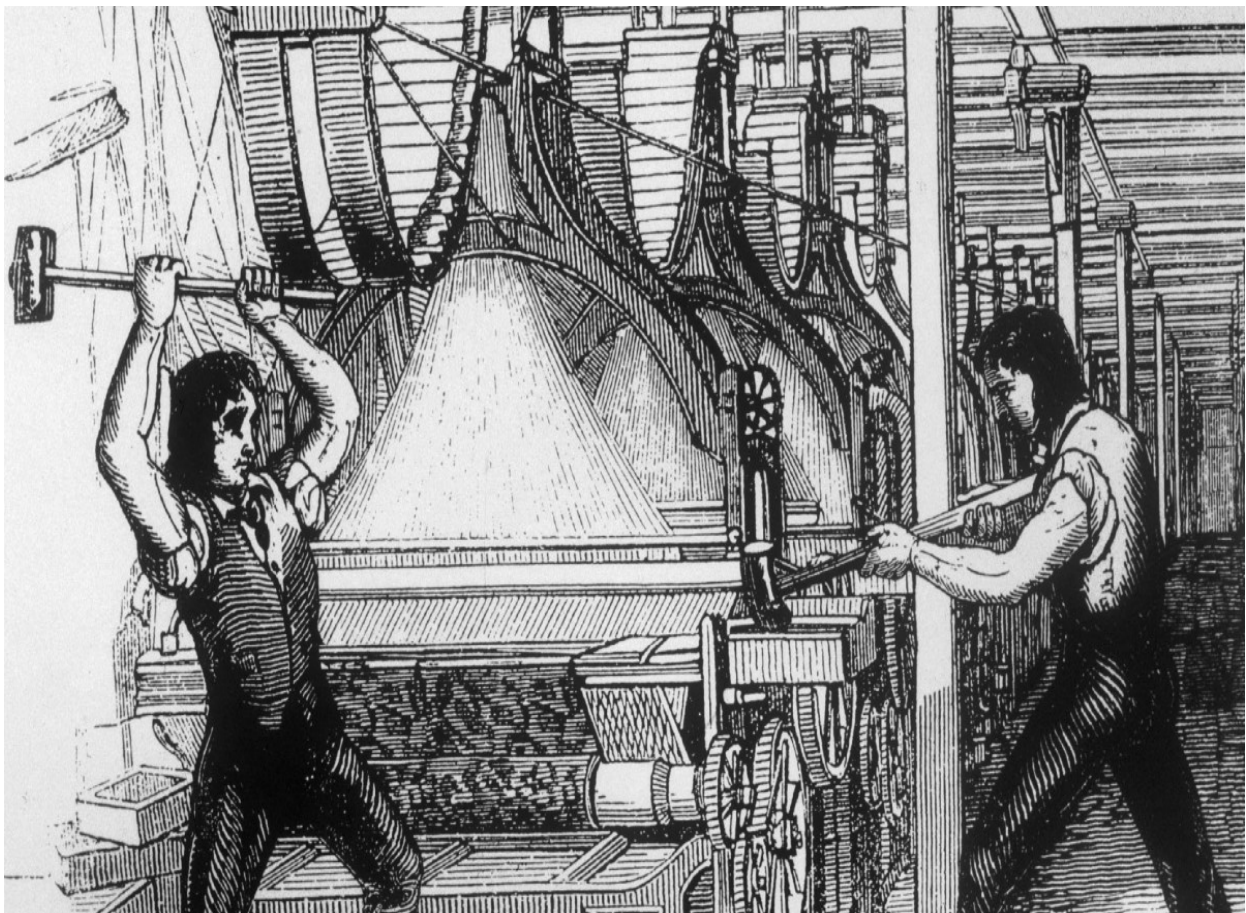


# THE IDEOLOGY OF WORK



By Jacques Ellul

Before any research or reflection on work in our society, it is necessary to be aware that everything in it is dominated by the ideology of work. In almost all traditional societies, work is not considered as a good or as the main activity. The eminent value of labor appears in the Western world in the seventeenth century, in England, Holland, and later in France, and develops in these three countries according to economic growth. How do you explain the mental and moral evolution that consists of going from work as an inevitable penalty, punishment or necessity, to work as value and good? It should be noted that this reinterpretation that ends in the ideology of work occurs in the encounter of four events that are going to modify Western society. First of all, the work becomes harder and harder, with industrial development, and seemingly more inhumane. Working conditions worsen considerably with the shift from handicrafts and even from manufacturing (which was already tough but not inhumane) to the factory. It produces a new, ruthless kind of work. And since, with the need for capital accumulation, wages are lower than the value produced, work becomes more absorbing: it involves the entire life of man. The worker is at the same time forced to make his wife and children work in order to survive. Work is, then, at the same time more inhumane than it was for the slaves and more totalitarian, leaving no room for any other activity in life, no play, no independence, no family life. It appears, in the eyes of the workers, as a kind of fatality, of destiny. It was then essential to compensate for such an inhuman situation with some type of ideology (which, on the other hand, appears in this case corresponding exactly to the perspective of Marx's ideology) that would make work a virtue, a good, an acquisition, a promotion or elevation. In the event that work was still interpreted as a curse, the situation would have been radically intolerable for the worker.

However, this diffusion of the «*Work-Good*» takes on great importance especially because the society of that time abandoned its traditional values, which forms the second factor. On the one hand, the ruling classes stop believing deeply in Christianity, and on the other, the workers, who are exiled peasants, find themselves lost in the city and no longer connected to their old beliefs, the scale of traditional values. This fact makes necessary the rapid creation of an ideology of substitution, a network of values to which to integrate. For the bourgeoisie, courage will be the foundation of their strength, of their elevation. Work (and secondarily Money). For the workers, we have just seen that it is necessary to provide them with an explanation of what exploitation is, or valorization, or the justification of their situation, and at the same time the supply of a scale of values capable of replacing the old one. Thus, the ideology of work is produced and grows in the void left by other beliefs and values.

But there is a third factor: it is admitted as a value, which has become the need for growth of the economic system, this is seen as essential. The economy takes its fundamental place in thought only in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Economic activity is a creator of (economic) value. It becomes the thinking of the elites, but not only of the bourgeoisie, but of the center of development, of all civilization. Since then, how not to attribute an essential place to it in moral life. However, the determining factor of this economic activity, the most beautiful of mankind, is work. Everything is based on hard work. Having not yet been clearly formulated in the 18th century, many already understood that work produced economic value. The passage from this value to the other (moral or spiritual) occurs quickly. It was imperative that this materially essential activity be equally morally and psychologically justified. Creator of economic value:

the same word is used to express that it is a creator of moral and social value.

A final factor assures this supremacy. The ideology of work appears when there is a greater and more decisive separation between those who command and those who obey within the same production process, between those who exploit and those who are exploited, corresponding to different radical categories of work. In the traditional system, we have the one that does not work and the one that works. There is a difference between the intellectual worker and the manual worker. But there is no radical opposition between the tasks of organization or even command and those of execution: the manual worker was left more initiative. In the eighteenth century, the one who organizes work and the one who exploits is also a worker (and no longer a non-worker, as the lord was) and they are all within the circuit of work, but with total opposition between the exploited performer and the exploiting leader. There are totally different categories of work in the economic domain. These are, I believe, the four factors that lead to the elaboration (spontaneous, not Machiavellian) of the ideology of work, which plays the role of all ideologies: on the one hand, to disguise the real situation by transferring it to an ideal field, attracting all the attention towards the ideal, the ennobled, the virtuous and the honored one, on the other hand, to justify this very situation by staining it with the colors of good and meaning. This ideology of work has penetrated everywhere, and still dominates our minds to a great extent.

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What, then, are the main components of this ideology? First is the central idea, which becomes evidence: that man is made for the job. There is no other possibility to live. Life cannot be filled except by work. I remember a tombstone whose only inscription,

under the name of the deceased, was "the work was his life." There was nothing more to say about a man's entire life. And at the same time, in the first half of the 19th century, the idea appeared that man differed from animals, he really became man, because from his origins he had worked. The work had made the man. The distance between the primate and the human was established by work. And, significantly, while in the 18th century prehistoric man was generally called "homo sapiens", at the beginning of the 19th century the one who will prevail will be the "homo faber": the man who makes or manufactures work tools ( I know that of course that was related to actual discoveries of prehistoric tools, but that shift in emphasis is illuminating.) As in the origins of man is work, it is this the only one that can give meaning to life. This does not make sense in itself: man brings it to him, through his works and the realization of his person in work, which in itself does not need to be justified, legitimized: work has its meaning in itself, it carries its reward, at the same time for the moral satisfaction of the "duty accomplished", and for the material benefits that each person derives from their work. He carries his own reward, and also a complementary reward (money, reputation, justification). *Labor improbus omnia vincit* . [1] This currency becomes the most important of the nineteenth century. Because work is the father of all virtues, just as idleness is the mother of all vices. The texts of Voltaire, one of the creators of the ideology of work, are, indeed, enlightening on the subject: "Work removes three great evils from us: boredom, vice and necessity", or also: "Force men to work and transform them into honest people. And it is not surprising that it is precisely Voltaire who puts the value of work in the first order, since this becomes a justifying value. You can commit many faults of all kinds, but if you are a hard worker you are forgiven. One more step and we come to the unmodern statement that "Work is

freedom." This formula is reflected today by a tragic tone, because it reminds us of the formula at the entrance to the Nazi concentration camps: "Arbeit macht frei." [2] But in the 19th century it was solemnly explained that, indeed, only the worker is free, as opposed to the nomad who depends on circumstances, and the beggar who depends on the good will of others. The worker, he, everyone knows it, does not depend on anyone. Just from his job! In this way, the slavery of work is transformed into a guarantee of Freedom.

And of this moral we find two more modern applications: the Western one saw in its capacity to work justification and, at the same time, the explanation of its superiority with respect to all the peoples of the world. Africans were lazy. It was a moral duty to teach them to work, and it was a legitimation of the conquest. You couldn't accept the prospect that they would stop working when they had enough to eat for two or three days. The conflicts between Western bosses and Arab and African workers between 1900 and 1940 were innumerable for this reason. But, extraordinarily, this valorization of man by work was adopted by feminist movements. The man kept the woman in inferiority, because only he carried out the socially recognized work. Women are only recognized today if they work: taking into account that maintaining the home and raising children is not work, since it is not productive work and does not bring money. For example G. Halimi says that "The great injustice is that women have been excluded from professional life by men." It is this exclusion that prevents women from accessing full humanity. This means that it is also considered the last colonized town. In other words, work, in industrial society, is the source of value, which becomes the origin of all reality, it is transformed, thanks to ideology, into a super-reality, inverted in an ultimate sense starting from the which all life takes its meaning. In this way work

is identified with all morality and takes the place of all other values. Work is the carrier of the future. Whether it is an individual or a collective future, it is based on the effectiveness, the generality of the work. And at school the child is taught, first and foremost, the sacred value of work. It is the base (with the homeland) of primary education from 1860 to 1940, approximately. This ideology will completely penetrate generations.

This leads to two very obvious consequences, among others. First we are a society that has progressively put everyone to work. The rentier, like before the nobleman or the monk, both idle, become ignoble characters at the end of the 19th century. Only the worker is worthy of the man's name. And at school children are put to work as they had never worked in any other civilization (I am not talking about the atrocious industrial or mining work of the children of the 19th century, which was fortuitous and linked not to the value of work but to the capitalist system) . And the other currently significant consequence: we are not able to see what the life of a man who did not work would be like. The unemployed person, even if he receives sufficient compensation, remains unbalanced and disgraced by the absence of paid social activity. Too long time off is disturbing, accompanied by a bad conscience. And you still have to think about the many "retirement dramas." The retiree is fundamentally frustrated. He is no longer productive, his life lacks legitimacy: it is useless. It is a widespread feeling that comes solely from the fact that ideology convinced man that the only normal use of life was work.

This ideology of work is of particular interest insofar as it is a perfect example of the idea (which should not be generalized) that the dominant ideology is the ideology of the ruling class. Or that it imposes its own ideology on the dominated class. And it is, in

effect, the ideology of work together with the expansion of industry, an integral creation of the bourgeoisie. It replaces all morality with the morality of work. But this is not to deceive the workers, nor to make them work more. Because the bourgeoisie also believes in it. It is she who, by herself, puts work above all else. The first bourgeois generations (the captains of industry, for example) are made up of men obsessed with work, they worked more than everyone else. Such morality is not developed to contradict others, but as a justification for what one did. The bourgeoisie did not believe more in religious values than it believed in traditional morals: it replaces the whole with the ideology that legitimizes at the same time what it does, its lifestyle, as well as the system itself that, it , the bourgeoisie, organize and install. But of course, we have already said that like all ideology, it also serves to disguise, hide the condition of the proletariat (if it works, it is not by obligation or subjugation, but by virtue!). However, it is captivating to see that this ideology produced by the bourgeoisie becomes the deeply rooted and essential ideology of the working class and its thinkers. Like most socialists, Marx falls into the trap of this ideology. That one so lucid towards the criticism of bourgeois thought, enters fully into the ideology of work. The texts abound: «*History is nothing more than the creation of man by human labor. Work has created man himself*' Engels).

And here we have beautiful texts from Marx himself:

In your use of my product, I will directly enjoy the awareness of having satisfied a human need and objectifying the essence of man, of having been for you the medium term between you and the human race, of being therefore known and felt by you as a complement of your own being and a necessary part of yourself. To know that I am confirmed both in your thought and in your love, of having created, in the individual manifestation of my



life, the manifestation of your life, of having thus directly confirmed and realized in my work ... the human essence, my social essence . [3]

It is precisely in the elaboration of the world of objects through his work that man really asserts himself as a generic being. This production is your active life. Through it, nature appears as his work and his reality. That is why the object of work is the objectification of the generic life of man, since he unfolds not only intellectually, as ideally in consciousness, but actively and really, and contemplates himself in a world created by him by middle of your job. [4]

And one of Marx's ruthless attacks on capitalism deals precisely with this point: " *capitalism has degraded human labor, makes it a debasement, an alienation* ." Work in that world is no longer work. (But he forgot that it was precisely this world that had made the noble image of work!). " *Capitalism must be condemned, among other things, so that work can find its nobility and value* ." On the other hand, Marx simultaneously attacked the anarchists on this point, the only ones to doubt the ideology of work. In short: «*In essence, work is the manifestation of man's personality. The produced object expresses the individuality of man, his objective and tangible extension. It is the direct means of subsistence, and the confirmation of their individual existence.* In this way Marx interprets everything thanks to work, and his famous demonstration that only work is a creator of value is based on this bourgeois ideology (in fact, it was bourgeois economists who, before Marx, had made work the origin of value). But it will not be only the socialist thinkers who will enter this perspective, but the workers themselves, and the unions as well. Throughout the end of the 19th century, there is a progression of the word "Workers". Only the workers are justified

and have the right to be exalted, in opposition to the idlers and the rentiers who are vile by nature. And yet, by worker is understood only the manual worker. Around 1900, fierce debates will take place in the unions as to whether civil servants, intellectuals and employees can be given the noble title of worker. Likewise in the unions, between 1880-1914, it is repeated without end that work ennobles man, that a good unionist must be a better worker than the others; the ideal of a job well done is propagated etc ... And, finally, still in the unions, justice is demanded, before anything else, in the distribution of the products of work, or the attribution of power to the workers. Thus, we can say, in a very general way, that the trade unions and socialists contributed to the diffusion and strengthening of this ideology of work, which, by the way, is perfectly understandable!

[1] Exhausting work overcomes everything (Virgilio, *Georgicas* ).

[2] Labor frees (inscription on the gates of the Auschwitz, Sachsenhausen, Dachau and Theresienstadt camps).

[3] Karl Marx, *Manuscripts of 1844* .

[4] *Ibid* .

## Further Reading:

Prison Break by Flower Bomb

Illegalism: Why Pay for a Revolution on an Installment Plan...  
When You Can Steal One? By Paul Z. Simons

The Abolition of Work by Bob Black

Smokestack Lightning by Bob Black

Against His-story, Against Leviathan! by Fredy Perlman

The Unique and its Property by Max Stirner

How The Stirner Eats Gods by Alejandro de Acosta

Mutual Utilization by Massimo Passamani

An Invitation to Desertion by Bellamy Fitzpatrick

All of the further reading can be read for free at  
[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)

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