

Work or Activity: From the Classical "Curse of Work" to the Willed Activity of Modern Production Communes

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I. *The Concept of Work, Classical and Etymological*

Plato in his social Utopia *The Republic* says: "Nature produces neither shoemakers nor blacksmiths; such occupations degrade the men who pursue them—miserable mercenaries, unspeakably base, who because of their condition are excluded from political rights."

The Romans called work "*sordidae artes*," the filthy arts, which according to law belonged to the domain of slaves—one could be tried and punished for putting free citizens to work. Cicero says: "Everyone who sells his effort and skills should therefore be regarded as mean and despicable: for any who gives his work for money sells himself and thereby lowers himself to the level of slaves."

The Church taught that work is God's punishment for the Fall of Man. "Man is born to work and suffer, just as the bird is born to fly," says the Book of Job, 5:7, bitterly.¹

The Scandinavian word "*arbejde*" (work) comes from the Low German "*arbeit*." Historically speaking, the word *arbejde* came to the Scandinavian countries at the end of the Middle Ages, brought here by the Hanseatic German merchants.

The Low German *arbeit*, meant trouble, need, pain, anxiety, distress, drudgery, illness, poverty, renunciation, hunger, thirst, senile decrepitude, birth pangs, exertion and futility. All these were brought

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1. This section is drawn to a great extent from K. Tuft, "Arbejde og utugt" ("Work and Immorality"), Dissertation, Institute of Psychology, University of Copenhagen, in stencil, 1972.

about by human labor. No wonder work was considered as the curse of Heaven. No wonder too that the Papacy, the tithes of which were provided by the labor of the common man, had to threaten with the flames of Hell if an unfortunate wanted to escape the misery of work by taking his own life—a mortal sin according to the Catholic faith.

From the point of view of the Papacy only the rulers are called by God, for only they are made free of the world and can unceasingly dedicate themselves to the love of God and heavenly matters. *Vita contemplative!* is the highest goal of life, in contrast to the base and despised *vita activa*. In Scandinavia, on the other hand, we speak of "a (plain and merry) active life on Earth," whereas a contemplative life on Earth sounds faintly ridiculous.

Before we in the Nordic lands met the Hanseatic concept of work, the characteristic Old Norse expression was "*virke, arke*," meaning use (as in farming and forestry), grow, raise, make. These do not express any sort of valuation of labor but are rather a statement of what work actually is: a fundamental condition of life, something which is done. *Virke*, activity, possesses the same value as actuality, reality: it is.

I have attempted with these examples to illustrate my assertion that the original Nordic idea of *virke*, work, as a fundamental condition of existence and therefore a value-neutral concept, has been pushed aside by an intruding conception from more southerly lands, of work as drudgery and the special lot of the poor.

2. *The Necessary Work Discipline*

This conflict between two essentially different concepts of work has followed us to the present day. And just as we have two historically rooted concepts, we have the two opposite poles of work itself: *wage labor* and *free activity*, independent of fast wages.

Wage labor is characterized by, among other things: (1) separation of need and effort (since wage labor is organized with fixed working hours, without regard to even the most well-founded desires for flexibility, for example, in the case of sickness in one's family, or because one has earned enough by Thursday to cover the week's expenses); (2) separation of need and product (self-sufficiency is replaced first by payment in commodities, later by the money economy); (3) exploitation of surplus labor.

Wage labor—just as other forms of work—is inherently and universally meaningful as a means of providing a living. Nevertheless, the ruling order in society clearly needs an early training and disciplining in the spirit of labor so that the young are "vaccinated" and immune to its negative traits.

In a recent examination of this process of "disciplining," or training in work discipline, the following four types of ideologies of work are drawn up—ideologies here meaning "more or less distorted conceptions of reality":

- 1) work as a deed for God,
- 2) work as a moral duty,
- 3) work motivated by one's own needs, rewarded by wages,
- 4) work as self-realization/meaningful in content.²

Since religion does not play a major role in the lives of most Scandinavians today, the first ideology of work hardly exists any longer, except perhaps in the form in which it is converted—so to speak—to a secular moral duty.

The postwar boom was the signal for a moral reevaluation of wage labor. Almost everyone who could run, walk or even crawl was in demand on the labor market—if not as is, then as supported by rehabilitation or other social service measures offered by the health and welfare departments of the growing welfare state. Generally speaking, everyone could attain a reasonable material standard of living—even the tiny minority of the more or less work-shy who ignored the siren tones of employers. Without the former basis of material necessity the concept of a moral duty to work quickly lost force, since it no longer was a useful justification for the individual's striving for a place in the sun. Of the above ideologies of work, therefore, there remain only work as motivated by one's own needs and interests/wages, and work for its meaningful content/value as self-realization.

Labor motivated by one's own needs and interests has most recently again begun to take on the meaning it had before the heyday of the welfare state (1965-1980). The welfare state at its peak partially removed the connection between work and prosperity; the minority which could adapt itself to a new identity without paid employment was secured a decent material basis for its new way of life. *Technically* speaking, this is a material reduction in the ranks of the employed. (I am referring here to a number of comprehensive future studies— at least those dealing with the development of microprocessors. Some are mentioned briefly in A. Gorz, 1981. For Danish studies see, for example, several of the accounts prepared in connection with the national plan 1983-2000, Planning Administration, 1982.) *Politically*, however, there is no sign of a willingness to make use of these developments toward a reevaluation of work, in the form of either a shorter

2. H. Knudsen, "Discipliniering til kmarbejde" ("Disciplining for Wage Labor"), Aalborg University Centre, 1981.

working day for all or a permanent release of those unemployed who might wish it from the responsibility of staying available in the labor market. The transitory period of something resembling a guaranteed income or "social wages," giving basic material security³ in practice, whether one did or did not want to work (as long as one said one did), is therefore at an end—at a time when technological progress actually could make it possible both to secure material advancement and officially to end the demeaning ritual kowtowing to the virtue of wage labor.

The fourth and last ideology of work was motivation by self-realization and rewards intrinsic to the content of the work performed. The point of departure for this ideology was a growing indifference or devil-may-care attitude on the part of workers in the postwar economic boom, expressed as rising absenteeism, carelessness on the job, and resulting problems of quality. Added to these problems were a swelling wave of strikes—including wildcat strikes—and the younger generation's more active resistance to being pushed around. This was the background for McGregor's theory (1960) of the traditionally motivated X individual, contrasted with the Y individual motivated by the opportunity for self-actualization. Here we can also find the source of Herzberg's works⁴ on job enrichment, job enlargement, and autonomous work groups. The somewhat parenthetical aspect of these new creations in social theory lies in the fact that they were introduced in the midst of an explosive process of automation in practically all branches of industry—a process which recently has been accelerated even further by the development of industrial robots, all-electronic office systems, and so on. The "rationalizing away" of labor has a double aim—both economy of operation and an often overlooked control function. Machines do what they are programmed to do.

People who want to work but who are implacably opposed to working under any master have for centuries been able to try going it alone and fulfilling a dream of starting a business of their own. After a while, if luck was with them, they could hire and direct others. In the last ten to fifteen years we have seen the birth of an alternative—giving a chance not only to be one's own master, but also to avoid taking command of others, and instead becoming part of a co-operative community of labor, where all are equal. We shall now consider this alternative.

3. With apologies to the "revolt from the middle-of-the-roads": N. Meyer, K. H. Petersen, V. Sorensen, "Opror fra midten" ("Revolt from the Middle of the Road"; Copenhagen, 1978).

4. F. Herzberg, *Work and the Nature of Man* (London, 1968).

3. Danish "Working and Living Communities"

In Denmark we have a growing number of intentional communities which emphasize fellowship, living and working together. These include both social experiments with therapeutic and reeducational goals, and a number of production-oriented communes and cooperative enterprises. Both types seek to reestablish shared activity, *virke*, as the center of existence. At Aalborg University Centre, in a "research group on working and living communities," we have been able to follow the development of both types.

First we will consider working and living communities with social-educational aims. This alternative area of social experiments in work with young people in trouble is suggested in Table i. In addition to these there are a number of educational projects—especially continuation schools for young people, but also folk high schools, extended-day schools, and residential work training centers—which emphasize a closely knit fellowship built up around educational ideals of learning or resocialization through shared experience and work, and deal with a group of young people who have quite serious social problems. Especially with projects in group 1, but also with some groups 2 and 3a, we find communities with a radical and deliberate blurring of the distinction between worker and client, or between "old" and "young," "grown-ups" and "youngsters" as they often prefer to call themselves. Altogether, over one thousand are members of such communities.

TABLE I Communal Projects by Type and Number⁵

Type	Number
1. Communal projects based on foster/residential care	
a. "therapeutic communes" combined with work opportunities	25
b. "therapeutic communes" without work offer	25
c. religious communities	10
d. extended family care, with or without work or educational opportunities	100
2. Residential institutions with emphasis on living and working together	10
3. Ship projects	
a. emphasis on social benefits	15
b. working ships (with both clients and regular crew)	15

5. According to the preliminary registration of T. J. Hegland, et al., "Systematisk oversigt over arbejdsog levemiljøer med social-pedagogisk siget" ("Systematic Survey of Living and Working Communities with Social and Educational Goals"), 3rd ed., Aalborg University Centre, 1983.

The economic basis of these projects is foster care payments, agreed upon and measured out for each client according to a bewildering series of possibilities provided under the Social Security Law of 1976.⁶ Roughly speaking, we can say that such experiments have fashioned a niche in society, in which they produce—for a competitive price—certain social services: socialization and training for work, of a quality seldom achieved by the traditional treatment institutions (residential and treatment homes for children, correctional and psychiatric institutions, and so on), or with groups of young clients often labeled as "unplaceable," meaning that they create frightful upsets no matter where they are sent.

Such a niche is part of the scrap-bin system which is part and parcel of wage-labor society and its not always fully successful attempts at inculcating work discipline. Members of these communities experience a close-knit daily fellowship, at times further strengthened by a partially or completely communal economy among "grown-ups" and "youngsters" (who may in fact be grown-up). Foster care payments are generally sufficient—with a bit of pinching and scraping—to maintain a reasonable standard of living, so that no one in the commune needs to take paid work outside. The physical minimum is guaranteed, in other words, while at the same time there is plenty of motivation toward the many-sided activity within the communities, which may for example take the form of:

restoration, rebuilding, and improvement of houses, farm buildings, or ships,
self-sufficient vegetable gardens, often combined with farm animals,
collecting of and heating with firewood,
sewing, weaving, and knitting of one's own clothing,
daily housekeeping and child care,
making of household items, furniture,
repairing cars, etc.,
small-scale production from workshop or farm (sold locally, to other groups or on the market),
helping out in other communities.

Using the above activities as examples we can pinpoint a number of quite central differences between ordinary wage labor and the nature of work in these living and working fellowships:

- 1) the motivation for work is primary and direct since most of the labor involved goes directly to meet the group's own basic needs;

6. In decreasing order of importance: Sees. 65-65 (foster care placements), Sec. 42 (rehabilitation), Sees. 33.1.1 and 46.2 (voluntary and involuntary placement of minors outside the home)—all more thoroughly reviewed in I. Tiativ/Handbog for initiativtagere" ("Handbook for Innovators"), Aalborg University Centre, 1982.

- 2) alienation is thereby at a minimum;
- 3) The great degree of self-sufficiency and autonomy give both "old" and especially "young" a self-confidence and ego-strength which many have had painfully little sense of earlier—especially those with massive institutional "careers" behind them.

A "sphere of autonomy," as Gorz uses the concept, grows up.⁷ But in fact there are a number of inequalities between so-called grown-ups and youngsters—due partly to the tremendous differences in background and therefore in the maturity which is necessary in order to take a responsible role in the community, but also because of the formal boundary between the grown-ups who own or rent the physical setting, and the youngsters who are placed there by society. And finally, because of the difference in time perspectives; grown-ups can stay as long as they feel like it; youngsters normally have a time-limited stay.

Such differences are evened out in daily life where all share and share alike. Members of the commune live and work together, and cannot flee from interpersonal problems at four o'clock when ordinary wage-earners can escape to their private lives. For better or for worse, socially and practically, commune members have to get along together. A ruined dinner, messy room, broken-down automobile, and so on are hard and fast symbols of the basic rule of life in alternative communities: if we do not do it ourselves, no one will. There is rarely money left over for paid help or artisans—not to mention the fact that it is an article of faith never to resort to such help except in emergencies. To put it briefly: in these communes there is no longer a rationale for dividing existence into working life and private life (or however many lives we are used to leading). There is but *one* life, here and now, balanced between necessity and potential, and this life consists of steady activity toward goals set mainly by the group itself.

The above description may give the impression of small island communities or enclaves which have escaped from the ordinary conditions and problems of life in a capitalist society. This, of course, is only true to a limited extent. In the first place, the niche which makes alternative social treatment possible has itself appeared as part of the natural course of such societies: social problems are created and must therefore somehow be solved. In the second place, such fellowships depend on a contract with the rest of society, in this case the social-welfare sector, which has certain assigned "treatment" goals—however vague. And third, all such projects are subject to the usual market

7. A. Gorz, "Farvel til proletariatet" ("Goodbye to the Proletariat") in *Politisk revy* (Political Review), 1981.

and legislative ground rules of society in their dealings with it. Even so, the communities enjoy a relative autonomy which is unknown in the related social experiments we now shall consider.

4. *Production Communes and Collective Enterprises*

From the latter part of the 1960's, parallel with the appearance of residential communes, there grew up a number of alternative projects which not only were a reaction to the isolation of the nuclear family but which also were a practical yet Utopian attack on the wage labor system.

This is true of the whole spectrum of alternative production—the production-oriented communes, whose members both live *and* work together, and collective enterprises, where only work is shared. Such experiments have no "umbilical cord" to the social welfare system or other public source of support,⁸ apart from the general provisions for support of business undertakings—where they compete as equals with traditional enterprises.

We find collective production initiatives in all the major sectors of the economy. In the sphere of *primary production* there is at least one fishing commune and a number of farms and market gardens, so many that a part of the "Movement," by going back to these ancient forms of work, certainly is expressing a clear break with city life. In *manufacturing* especially there are many artisans and craft operations (usually in construction). Such diverse areas as clothing, footwear, electronics, machine industry, printing, and publishing are all represented. In *trade* and *transport* there are countless shops, small businesses and hauling contractors. In the *service* sector we find restaurants and hotels, automobile repair shops, laundries, and the like. The *professions* are represented by at least one legal firm and a medical center. *Artistic* activity includes a number of theatre and musical groups.

It is extremely difficult to estimate the number of production communes in Denmark. An address list from an annual listing of such communes in 1982, together with my own desultory cataloguing, gives about 120 addresses. There may well be two to five times as many. If we set the average number of adult members at eight,⁹ there

8. There are however a number of mixed types in the form of production projects as a half-way step for the "graduates" of treatment communes. Members live for a time on a combination of social security benefits and income from production, and are thereafter able to earn their own living.

9. Corresponding to the number found in a minor survey in this area; see A. Hjalager, "Alternativ regional udvikling" ("Alternative Regional Development"), Department of Town Planning, The Aarhus School of Architecture, 1981.

may be between two thousand and five thousand engaged in these communes—by the roughest of estimates.

In their relation to work the production communes carry on the Nordic tradition by seeking a meaningful life and direct satisfaction in their manifold activities. However, work motivation is hardly so simple as an exclusive devotion to hard physical labor and a demanding life. In fact a majority of these communes keep to a low or middle level of technology; the extreme example would be farming communes which prefer horses to machinery. But in most cases it is the commune's economy which limits the acquisition of high-technology machinery, though few would wish to be in the forefront of technological advance. Such would also be absurd since the whole point is to experience and cultivate the work fellowship rather than to do away with it. And in some branches of production, especially the traditional crafts, there is no question since the work processes involved have not yet lent themselves to mechanization or automation.

Production-oriented communes, according to the debates which are carried on at their annual meetings and elsewhere, have three main problems:

- 1) difficulty in recruiting new members,
- 2) low level of craftsmanship among members, both old and new,
- 3) chronic financial problems in many communes.

Since these problems are closely connected I will consider them together.

It may seem paradoxical that with 300,000 out of work, the communes should lack manpower for replacement and growth. The explanation must lie in the fact that with mass unemployment anyone will think twice before giving up either a job or guaranteed unemployment benefits to go it alone with a communal project. If one's expectations of economic survival capacity and social togetherness are disappointed, the avenues of retreat are few indeed. In Sweden, France, and Spain, among others, special legislation guarantees continued wage-earner and insured status to those who engage in cooperative enterprise. Similar legislation in Denmark would remove one of the greatest hindrances to collective initiative. Such support could just as well, as far as I am concerned, be extended to all founders of enterprises during the starting-up period. There is also an unfilled need for help from consultants with a feel for the special nature of communal enterprise.

Generally speaking, interest in the communal way of life—in which the residential communes dominate by at least twenty-five to one—is apparently as great as ever. In Denmark the daily newspaper

Information is the most important forum for public contact in this area; here one has been able to find between fifty and 125 advertisements year round for a number of years. But especially during an economic recession it is something of a leap from residential to production commune.

Residential communes now, as earlier, are primarily sought by students and recent graduates in the fields of health, education, the humanities, and social service. This mixture of professions is hardly of much use to communes dependent on the sale of home-made goods and services. The relatively few skilled workers and others with experience in a productive capacity must, therefore, feel rather lonely in their attempts to get a productive enterprise under way, and they may lose their courage when faced with a production team consisting of a couple of trained workers and six to seven apprentices.

No similar collective movement has arisen among workers and others engaged in practical fields. The closest we come would be the cooperative ventures started in the garage by a couple of work-mates, which—if the going is good—later emerge as small partnerships or corporations or the like and expand to include regular employees. The fact that so few with Trade Union Congress affiliation dare take the leap into the ranks of the self-employed, collectively or otherwise, is due (apart from the effects of the current recession) to the uncompromising animosity of the trade unions to members who take part in starting a business—be it incorporated, cooperative or whatever. Any such members are excluded on the grounds of suspicion—perhaps well-founded—of an ambivalent attitude to the basic values of the labor movement, even though the social security system accepts membership in an unemployment insurance association provided one's share in an enterprise is sufficiently limited. Briefly put, the trade-union movement is hardly a forum for the formation of groups out to organize their own enterprises. This also accounts for the difficulty such groups have of recruiting members with a reasonable level of skill and training.

The modest means of such communes are only partly a result of any lack of skilled and trained workers (including those skilled in administration and sales). It is partly a question of a deliberate choice of certain ways of organizing work and varying production, which such communities regard as absolute principles even though they may result in a lower standard of living: nonspecialization, rotation of tasks, a high degree of self-sufficiency, attempts to combine being together with the children and time spent on production, all of which cut across narrow considerations of effectiveness and profitability. Some of the lost ground is regained after traditional establishments'

closing hours. Work goes on early and late, weekdays and weekends, without much distinction, so that work dominates the existence of participants—much as we see on family small-holding farms.

At some point the realization of ideals for the structure and content of work can thus become too difficult and drain off all available energy. Better-functioning projects—both economically and technically—have reserves to cover this situation, but the dilemma is real.

5. *An Attempt to Look at the Future*

The deepening recession is gradually undermining the individual Dane's confidence that the welfare state can be counted on to provide when, sooner or later, one becomes unable, temporarily or permanently, to shift for oneself. This has led to countermeasures on the part of individuals:

by insuring oneself (not only all wage-earners, but also most self-employed, will soon be members of unemployment insurance associations);

by being cautious, not taking changes;

by working harder and, if possible, laying something aside.

In short, one must be clever and know how best to exploit the system.

A tried and true means of defending oneself against a threat is to join with others. It was not the single soldier of fortune but whole wagon trains who moved westward in pioneer days in North America. And in Denmark, mutual helpfulness never flourished more than under German occupation.

If we turn to the "working and living communities," their membership is bound to increase as the economic crisis bites deeper. Unfortunately, most of this growth will be made up of resource-poor individuals, with fragile social networks and a threatened existence. These may be single parents, whose standard of living is getting worse and worse, long-term unemployed with no other prospects than poor relief, and so on.

Not all will be taken in, but some will, and the experimental communities themselves will be marked by attempts to cover all bets and spread any risks:

There will be an *intermixture of types*. A tendency toward a mixed-bag type of commune will continue. The ideal types, the pure resocialization-treatment milieu and the pure production commune will tend to be thinned out. Both the social sector and the free market are too uncertain to be relied upon one hundred percent as sources of income. The community of the future will combine foster care, production, a high degree of self-sufficiency and probably also a sprinkling of wage-

earners, who in addition to their wages can contribute a vital lifeline to the surrounding society.

There will also be a *greater age range*. The growing group of people with ten years or so of collective experience are getting a bit long in the tooth and intend to open up the communes to several generations—not only new young blood, but also recruitment of "grandparents," members of their own parents' generation. A natural extension of the communes' approach to child welfare is the establishment of caring for the elderly. For many years to come, however, the group will be able to draw on older members' experience and work potential, before they begin to need intensive personal care. With the current "age ghetto" aspect of the communities removed, these social experiments will deserve the title of parallel societies.

One thing will not change: the fundamental work ideology. Even with a growing number of wage-earners, outside employment will clearly still be a supplement to the real thing: shared and varied activity, *virke*—on one's own terms and in an intimate and manageable unit.¹⁰

10. For further reference, see: G. Adler-Karlsson, *Nej til fuld beskæftigelse, ja til materiel grundtryghed* (No to Full Employment, Yes to Basic Material Security) (Copenhagen, 1977); *Dansk etymologisk ordbog* (Danish Etymological Dictionary); A. Gorz, *Guder og helte i Norden* (Gods and Heroes in Scandinavia) (Copenhagen, 1972); and D. M. McGregor, *The Human Side of Enterprise* (New York, 1960).