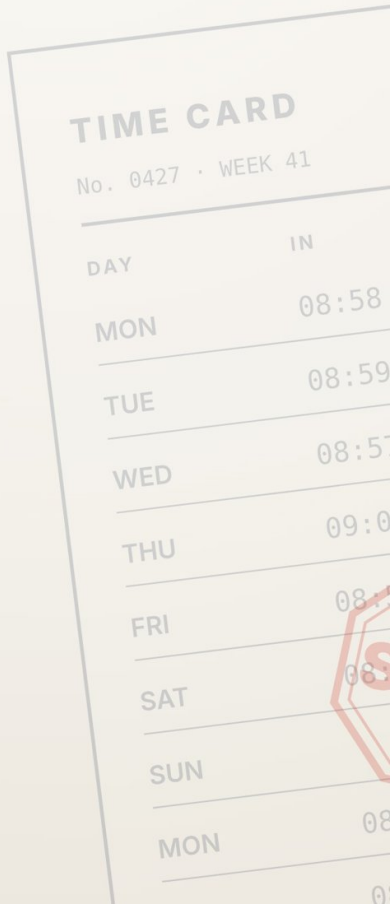
REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION

BOB BLACK

The ABOLITION *of* WORK

and other essays on wage slavery

WITH TEXTS BY JULIAN DELPHIKI



"No one should ever work."

Thinking School

The Abolition of Work

BOB BLACK
and Julian Delphiki

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and other essays on wage slavery



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The Abolition of Work and Other Essays on Wage Slavery

Bob Black · Julian Delphiki

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No one should ever work.

— Bob Black

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Introduction

THE ARRIVAL OF artificial intelligence marks a milestone in human history comparable to the Industrial Revolution and the dawn of the internet. Since it appeared, a torrent of debates, news stories and studies has been unleashed about its impact on work. Yet instead of fearing its influence or trying to resist its advance, I propose a radically different perspective: to embrace this technology as an opportunity to reach a goal that modern society has postponed for far too long, the abolition of work.

The idea of abolishing work may at first seem shocking, even utopian, but Bob Black examines its foundations with great care. Work, as we know it today, has become inseparable from the ideas of subsistence and personal fulfilment.

In an age of automation and artificial intelligence, however, we can glimpse a future in which many tasks are taken over by machines and algorithms, freeing humanity from the burden of monotonous, repetitive labour.

That liberation would bring tangible benefits, such as less work-related stress and more free time for personal exploration and leisure. It would also open new possibilities for rethinking the very structure of our society.

Abolishing work does not mean inactivity or a lack of purpose. Rather, it challenges us to reconsider what it really means to contribute to the common good, and how we might organise our lives around fulfilment and human flourishing instead of mere survival.

Arguing for the abolition of work does not mean ignoring its complexities. It would require a deep rethinking of our social, economic and cultural institutions, and policies that guarantee a fair distribution of wealth and universal access to resources. But in the face of relentless technological change, perpetuating a system built on wage labour is

becoming ever harder to sustain, and ultimately incompatible with a truly emancipatory vision of humanity.

Behind all these changes we must not forget the system that feeds them. "Are we having fun yet?" ought to be a question we ask ourselves far more often, as a society that, despite all its technological progress, keeps working longer hours under ever greater emotional strain.

Universal Basic Income (UBI) emerges as a tangible and promising step on the road towards the abolition of work. Once dismissed as utopian, it has gained traction as contemporary societies face the challenges of automation and increasingly precarious employment.

At its core, UBI seeks to guarantee a basic level of income for everyone, regardless of their employment or financial situation. It addresses the growing gap between those with access to well-paid jobs and those pushed to the margins of the labour market, and it offers a safety net to people whose jobs are at risk of being automated away.

> Key concept
> **Universal basic income**
>
> A regular payment made to every individual, unconditionally, with no work requirement and no means test. It should not be confused with means-tested benefits such as Spain's Ingreso Mínimo Vital, which are paid only to those without sufficient resources.

What makes UBI especially relevant to the abolition of work is its capacity to free people from the imperative of seeking employment simply to survive. With a basic income guaranteed, individuals can make better-informed choices about how to spend their time and energy, whether that means study, community life, creative passions or ventures of their own.

UBI can also cushion the economic and social shocks of the transition to a post-work society. As automation transforms the nature of work and reshapes traditional employment, a basic income provides a floor of stability and dignity for those whose lives are affected.

Radical as it may sound, a gradual and carefully designed basic income looks increasingly feasible. Numerous studies and pilot

programmes have reported encouraging results in reducing poverty, improving health and well-being, and encouraging civic participation.

The pandemic offered, without meaning to, a test on a vast scale. Gary Stevenson—a former Citi trader and today one of the most outspoken commentators on inequality—recalls that after the 2008 crash millions of people lost their jobs, whereas in 2020 many governments chose to prop up workers' incomes (Britain through its furlough scheme, Spain through a similar job-retention scheme) and, once the worst had passed, the jobs were still there. The lesson is simple: if the state so wishes, a crisis need not throw millions of people out of work. It was not a basic income, since it was tied to employment, and Stevenson warns of its other side: those who kept high salaries saved, while the self-employed and the low-paid used up what little they had, so that, in his view, inequality accelerated. But it showed that guaranteeing incomes is possible.

Stevenson also proposes using basic income as a yardstick. Faced with any economic measure, you need only ask: is this better than sharing the same money out equally among everyone? His example is a general cut in energy prices. A 10% cut saves £100 for a household that spends £1,000 a year on energy, and £10,000 for someone who spends £100,000 on huge climate-controlled houses, several cars and private flights. The more you consume, the more you receive. Taxing consumption and handing the proceeds back in equal shares would do the opposite. The example simplifies—some modest households in badly insulated homes spend a great deal—but the test does not require you to support basic income: it simply forces you to see who each policy really benefits.

On the other hand, whether through hyper-capitalism, the *gig economy*, growing job insecurity, a false "American dream" and the even falser idea that "you are responsible for everything that happens to you", there is a growing tendency for workers to be exploited… by themselves.

Self-exploitation has become a remarkably efficient form of exploitation, eclipsing traditional forms of domination. Unlike exploitation by others, in which external forces impose control and coercion, self-exploitation means that individuals take part willingly in

their own exploitation, often under the illusion of freedom and autonomy. The line between perpetrator and victim, master and slave, is blurred.

> **Key concept**
> **Self-exploitation**
> Exploitation that people inflict on themselves while believing they act freely. The oppressor and the oppressed are the same person. The idea has been popularised by the philosopher Byung-Chul Han.

The sense of freedom in self-exploitation can be deceptive. People believe they are acting of their own will, yet they are often driven by social pressure, manipulation or the lure of perceived rewards. Internalised exploitation not only perpetuates systemic inequality; it also feeds a culture of self-sacrifice and self-submission.

The culture of endless effort takes this logic to its extreme. In one of his videos, Stevenson discussed a post from an Instagram account that, to spur people on to work harder, reasoned that slaves worked every waking hour and that, if they could do it, so could he. It would be hard to find a more exact illustration of what Aldous Huxley wrote in his 1946 foreword to *Brave New World*: the truly efficient totalitarian state would be one whose slaves do not have to be coerced, "because they love their servitude". Margaret Thatcher had put it from the other side in 1981: "Economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul". Stevenson's reading is economic before it is moral: if everyone competes to be the most self-sacrificing and worst-paid worker, the only result is to drive down everyone's wages. Half a century ago, he argues, people understood that the best protection against the powerful was to stand together; today they are taught to compete with their equals. Stevenson does not argue for the abolition of work but for decent jobs and a fairer economy, yet his diagnosis of self-exploitation matches this book's.

The shift towards self-exploitation accelerates the logic of capitalism, since individuals become both the agents and the objects of exploitation, unwittingly fuelling a cycle of self-exploitation in pursuit of supposed freedom. This paradox of freedom and violence lies at the

heart of modern capitalism, where the illusion of choice conceals the mechanisms beneath.

Recognising these dynamics is essential if we are to challenge the inequalities that self-exploitation perpetuates and reclaim genuine autonomy from coercive structures.

All too often this leads to self-aggression. As people navigate the pressures of modern life, many turn hostility inward. Social norms and expectations are internalised as feelings of inadequacy, insecurity and worthlessness, which can show up in self-destructive behaviour such as substance abuse, self-harm or eating disorders.

The constant pursuit of success and validation in a hyper-competitive society only sharpens these tendencies, pushing people to extremes to cope with inner distress. Self-destruction is the breaking point where outside pressure and inner anguish collide.

Understanding the roots of self-aggression is essential to addressing the mental-health challenges of our time. That means promoting healthier ways of coping and effective systems of support.

Contemporary society, obsessed with achievement, drives people to chase success and productivity relentlessly until they inevitably burn out. Worth and identity become tied to excelling in every area, academic, professional and personal. As a result, people internalise the pressure to constantly outdo themselves, sacrificing their well-being in pursuit of external validation and success.

This culture of boundless ambition and self-sacrifice creates a cycle of self-exploitation, in which people willingly submit to endless hours, high stress and neglect of their physical and mental health for the sake of achievement. Sooner or later such a life takes its toll: physical and emotional exhaustion, disillusionment and collapse.

People internalise the pressure to constantly outdo themselves, sacrificing their well-being in pursuit of external validation and success.

The achievement society perpetuates a damaging cycle in which people sacrifice their own well-being to social expectations, only to face, in the end, the consequences of their relentless pursuit of success. Recognising the harm this culture does is crucial to a healthier and more sustainable approach to individual and social well-being.

A new dynamic has emerged in work and daily life, in which technology dictates an accelerated pace. Technological progress has transformed the way we work and communicate, but it has also introduced new pressures. The relentless speed and efficiency of the microchip have cultivated a culture of productivity that demands constant output and permanent connection. People are expected to keep up with technology's pace, often sacrificing their free time and well-being in the name of efficiency and progress. The result can be exhaustion, stress and a sense of losing control over one's time and priorities.

The ubiquity of technology and the expectation of instant gratification have also eroded the boundary between work and private life, raising the pressure to perform at all times. So while computers, AI and robotics have expanded our capabilities, they have also imposed new constraints on our lives and challenged our very idea of freedom.

Advances in artificial intelligence and robotics are transforming the world of work at its foundations. Humans now compete directly with computers, algorithms and robots that never tire, never have a bad day and can run around the clock without rest. The pressure on individuals to keep pace with automation grows accordingly.

This challenges traditional ideas of work and employment. In an ever more complex and competitive labour market, skills and qualities that once set humans apart are rapidly being supplemented, or even replaced, by technology.

Adapting to this new reality requires a profound rethinking of how we work and how we educate. We need to explore ways of combining human strengths with the unique capabilities of machines, a symbiotic relationship that could open new forms of collaboration in work and beyond.

Or we could simply abolish work.

Bob Black, with his anarchist leanings, turns out, counter-intuitively, to be the most radical anarchist of all and at the same time the most approachable: an anarchism of everyday life, quite different from that of better-known authors such as Noam Chomsky.

Less *mainstream* than his contemporaries, Black is in some ways more influential, and reading him is an intellectual pleasure.

KEY IDEAS

- Artificial intelligence can be an opportunity to free up human time, not just a threat to jobs.
- A universal basic income is presented as the practical bridge to a post-work society.
- Self-exploitation (pushing ourselves past our limits while believing we are free) is the most effective form of domination of our time.

Part One

Against Work

I

The Abolition of Work

Bob Black, The Abolition of Work. *The essay began as a speech in 1980 and was first published as a pamphlet in 1985; this is the author's revised text of 1991 (Inspiracy Press edition).*

NO ONE SHOULD ever work.

Work is the source of nearly all the misery in the world. Almost any evil you'd care to name comes from working or from living in a world designed for work. In order to stop suffering, we have to stop working.

That doesn't mean we have to stop doing things. It does mean creating a new way of life based on play; in other words, a *ludic* revolution. By "play" I mean also festivity, creativity, conviviality, commensality, and maybe even art. There is more to play than child's play, as worthy as that is. I call for a collective adventure in generalized joy and freely interdependent exuberance. Play isn't passive. Doubtless we all need a lot more time for sheer sloth and slack than we ever enjoy now, regardless of income or occupation, but once recovered from employment-induced exhaustion nearly all of us want to act.

The ludic life is totally incompatible with existing reality. So much the worse for "reality," the gravity hole that sucks the vitality from the little in life that still distinguishes it from mere survival. Curiously—or maybe not—all the old ideologies are conservative because they believe in work. Some of them, like Marxism and most brands of anarchism, believe in work all the more fiercely because they believe in so little else.

Liberals say we should end employment discrimination. I say we should end employment. Conservatives support right-to-work laws. Following Karl Marx's wayward son-in-law Paul Lafargue I support the right to be lazy. Leftists favor full employment. Like the surrealists —except that I'm not kidding—I favor full unemployment. Trotskyists agitate for permanent revolution. I agitate for permanent revelry. But if

all the ideologues (as they do) advocate work—and not only because they plan to make other people do theirs—they are strangely reluctant to say so. They will carry on endlessly about wages, hours, working conditions, exploitation, productivity, profitability. They'll gladly talk about anything but work itself. These experts who offer to do our thinking for us rarely share their conclusions about work, for all its saliency in the lives of all of us. Among themselves they quibble over the details. Unions and management agree that we ought to sell the time of our lives in exchange for survival, although they haggle over the price. Marxists think we should be bossed by bureaucrats. Libertarians think we should be bossed by businessmen. Feminists don't care which form bossing takes so long as the bosses are women. Clearly these ideology-mongers have serious differences over how to divvy up the spoils of power. Just as clearly, none of them have any objection to power as such and all of them want to keep us working.

You may be wondering if I'm joking or serious. I'm joking *and* serious. To be ludic is not to be ludicrous. Play doesn't have to be frivolous, although frivolity isn't triviality; very often we ought to take frivolity seriously. I'd like life to be a game—but a game with high stakes. I want to play *for keeps*.

The alternative to work isn't just idleness. To be ludic is not to be quaaludic. As much as I treasure the pleasure of torpor, it's never more rewarding than when it punctuates other pleasures and pastimes. Nor am I promoting the managed time-disciplined safety-valve called "leisure;" far from it. Leisure is nonwork for the sake of work. Leisure is time spent recovering from work and in the frenzied but hopeless attempt to forget about work. Many people return from vacations so beat that they look forward to returning to work so they can rest up. The main difference between work and leisure is that at work at least you get paid for your alienation and enervation.

I am not playing definitional games with anybody. When I say I want to abolish work, I mean just what I say, but I want to say what I mean by defining my terms in non-idiosyncratic ways. My minimum definition of work is forced labor, that is, compulsory production. Both elements are essential. Work is production enforced by economic or political means, by the carrot or the stick. (The carrot is just the stick by

other means.) But not all creation is work. Work is never done for its own sake, it's done on account of some product or output that the worker (or, more often, somebody else) gets out of it. This is what work necessarily is. To define it is to despise it. But work is usually even worse than its definition decrees. The dynamic of domination intrinsic to work tends over time toward elaboration. In advanced work-riddled societies, including all industrial societies whether capitalist or "communist," work invariably acquires other attributes which accentuate its obnoxiousness.

Usually—and this is even more true in "communist" than capitalist countries, where the state is almost the only employer and everyone is an employee—work is employment, i.e., wage-labor, which means selling yourself on the installment plan. Thus 95% of Americans who work, work for somebody (or some*thing*) else. In Cuba or China or any other alternative model which might be adduced, the corresponding figure approaches 100%. Only the embattled Third World peasant bastions—Mexico, India, Brazil, Turkey—temporarily shelter significant concentrations of agriculturists who perpetuate the traditional arrangement of most laborers in the last several millennia, the payment of taxes (= ransom) to the state or rent to parasitic landlords in return for being otherwise left alone. Even this raw deal is beginning to look good. *All* industrial (and office) workers are employees and under the sort of surveillance which ensures servility.

But modern work has worse implications. People don't just work, they have "jobs." One person does one productive task all the time on an or-else basis. Even if the task has a quantum of intrinsic interest (as increasingly many jobs don't) the monotony of its obligatory exclusivity drains its ludic potential. A "job" that might engage the energies of some people, for a reasonably limited time, for the fun of it, is just a burden on those who have to do it for forty hours a week with no say in how it should be done, for the profit of owners who contribute nothing to the project, and with no opportunity for sharing tasks or spreading the work among those who actually have to do it. This is the real world of work: a world of bureaucratic blundering, of sexual harassment and discrimination, of bonehead bosses exploiting and scapegoating their subordinates who—by any rational-technical

criteria—should be calling the shots. But capitalism in the real world subordinates the rational maximization of productivity and profit to the exigencies of organizational control.

The degradation which most workers experience on the job is the sum of assorted indignities which can be denominated as "discipline." Foucault has complexified this phenomenon but it is simple enough. Discipline consists of the totality of totalitarian controls at the workplace—surveillance, rotework, imposed work tempos, production quotas, punching-in and out, etc. Discipline is what the factory and the office and the store share with the prison and the school and the mental hospital. It is something historically original and horrible. It was beyond the capacities of such demonic dictators of yore as Nero and Genghis Khan and Ivan the Terrible. For all their bad intentions they just didn't have the machinery to control their subjects as thoroughly as modern despots do. Discipline is the distinctively diabolical modern mode of control, it is an innovative intrusion which must be interdicted at the earliest opportunity.

Such is "work." Play is just the opposite. Play is always voluntary. What might otherwise be play is work if it's forced. This is axiomatic. Bernie de Koven has defined play as the "suspension of consequences." This is unacceptable if it implies that play is inconsequential. The point is not that play is without consequences. This is to demean play. The point is that the consequences, if any, are gratuitous. Playing and giving are closely related, they are the behavioral and transactional facets of the same impulse, the play-instinct. They share an aristocratic disdain for results. The player gets something out of playing; that's why he plays. But the core reward is the experience of the activity itself (whatever it is). Some otherwise attentive students of play, like Johan Huizinga (*Homo Ludens*), *define* it as gameplaying or following rules. I respect Huizinga's erudition but emphatically reject his constraints. There are many good games (chess, baseball, Monopoly, bridge) which are rule-governed but there is much more to play than game-playing. Conversation, sex, dancing, travel—these practices aren't rule-governed but they are surely play if anything is. And rules can be *played with* at least as readily as anything else.

Work makes a mockery of freedom. The official line is that we all have rights and live in a democracy. Other unfortunates who aren't free like we are have to live in police states. These victims obey orders or-else, no matter how arbitrary. The authorities keep them under regular surveillance. State bureaucrats control even the smaller details of everyday life. The officials who push them around are answerable only to higher-ups, public or private. Either way, dissent and disobedience are punished. Informers report regularly to the authorities. All this is supposed to be a very bad thing.

And so it is, although it is nothing but a description of the modern workplace. The liberals and conservatives and libertarians who lament totalitarianism are phonies and hypocrites. There is more freedom in any moderately de-Stalinized dictatorship than there is in the ordinary American workplace. You find the same sort of hierarchy and discipline in an office or factory as you do in a prison or a monastery. In fact, as Foucault and others have shown, prisons and factories came in at about the same time, and their operators consciously borrowed from each other's control techniques. A worker is a part-time slave. The boss says when to show up, when to leave, and what to do in the meantime. He tells you how much work to do and how fast. He is free to carry his control to humiliating extremes, regulating, if he feels like it, the clothes you wear or how often you go to the bathroom. With a few exceptions he can fire you for any reason, or no reason. He has you spied on by snitches and supervisors, he amasses a dossier on every employee. Talking back is called "insubordination," just as if a worker is a naughty child, and it not only gets you fired, it disqualifies you for unemployment compensation. Without necessarily endorsing it for them either, it is noteworthy that children at home and in school receive much the same treatment, justified in their case by their supposed immaturity. What does this say about their parents and teachers who work?

The demeaning system of domination I've described rules over half the waking hours of a majority of women and the vast majority of men for decades, for most of their lifespans. For certain purposes it's not too misleading to call our system democracy or capitalism or—better still—industrialism, but its real names are factory fascism and office

oligarchy. Anybody who says these people are "free" is lying or stupid. You are what you do. If you do boring, stupid, monotonous work, chances are you'll end up boring, stupid, and monotonous. Work is a much better explanation for the creeping cretinization all around us than even such significant moronizing mechanisms as television and education. People who are regimented all their lives, handed to work from school and bracketed by the family in the beginning and the nursing home in the end, are habituated to hierarchy and psychologically enslaved. Their aptitude for autonomy is so atrophied that their fear of freedom is among their few rationally grounded phobias. Their obedience training at work carries over into the families they start, thus reproducing the system in more ways than one, and into politics, culture and everything else. Once you drain the vitality from people at work, they'll likely submit to hierarchy and expertise in everything. They're used to it.

We are so close to the world of work that we can't see what it does to us. We have to rely on outside observers from other times or other cultures to appreciate the extremity and the pathology of our present position. There was a time in our own past when the "work ethic" would have been incomprehensible, and perhaps Weber was on to something when he tied its appearance to a religion, Calvinism, which if it emerged today instead of four centuries ago would immediately and appropriately be labeled a cult. Be that as it may, we have only to draw upon the wisdom of antiquity to put work in perspective. The ancients saw work for what it is, and their view prevailed, the Calvinist cranks notwithstanding, until overthrown by industrialism—but not before receiving the endorsement of its prophets.

Let's pretend for a moment that work doesn't turn people into stultified submissives. Let's pretend, in defiance of any plausible psychology and the ideology of its boosters, that it has no effect on the formation of character. And let's pretend that work isn't as boring and tiring and humiliating as we all know it really is. Even then, work would still make a mockery of all humanistic and democratic aspirations, just because it usurps so much of our time. Socrates said that manual laborers make bad friends and bad citizens because they have no time to fulfill the responsibilities of friendship and citizenship.

He was right. Because of work, no matter what we do, we keep looking at our watches. The only thing "free" about so-called free time is that it doesn't cost the boss anything. Free time is mostly devoted to getting ready for work, going to work, returning from work, and recovering from work. Free time is a euphemism for the peculiar way labor, as a factor of production, not only transports itself at its own expense to and from the workplace, but assumes primary responsibility for its own maintenance and repair. Coal and steel don't do that. Lathes and typewriters don't do that. No wonder Edward G. Robinson in one of his gangster movies exclaimed, "Work is for saps!"

Both Plato and Xenophon attribute to Socrates and obviously share with him an awareness of the destructive effects of work on the worker as a citizen and as a human being. Herodotus identified contempt for work as an attribute of the classical Greeks at the zenith of their culture. To take only one Roman example, Cicero said that "whoever gives his labor for money sells himself and puts himself in the rank of slaves." His candor is now rare, but contemporary primitive societies which we are wont to look down upon have provided spokesmen who have enlightened Western anthropologists. The Kapauku of West Irian, according to Posposil, have a conception of balance in life and accordingly work only every other day, the day of rest designed "to regain the lost power and health." Our ancestors, even as late as the eighteenth century when they were far along the path to our present predicament, at least were aware of what we have forgotten, the underside of industrialization. Their religious devotion to "St. Monday"—thus establishing a *de facto* five-day week 150-200 years before its legal consecration—was the despair of the earliest factory owners. They took a long time in submitting to the tyranny of the bell, predecessor of the time clock. In fact it was necessary for a generation or two to replace adult males with women accustomed to obedience and children who could be molded to fit industrial needs. Even the exploited peasants of the *ancien régime* wrested substantial time back from their landlords' work. According to Lafargue, a fourth of the French peasants' calendar was devoted to Sundays and holidays, and Chayanov's figures from villages in Czarist Russia—hardly a progressive society—likewise show a fourth or fifth of peasants' days