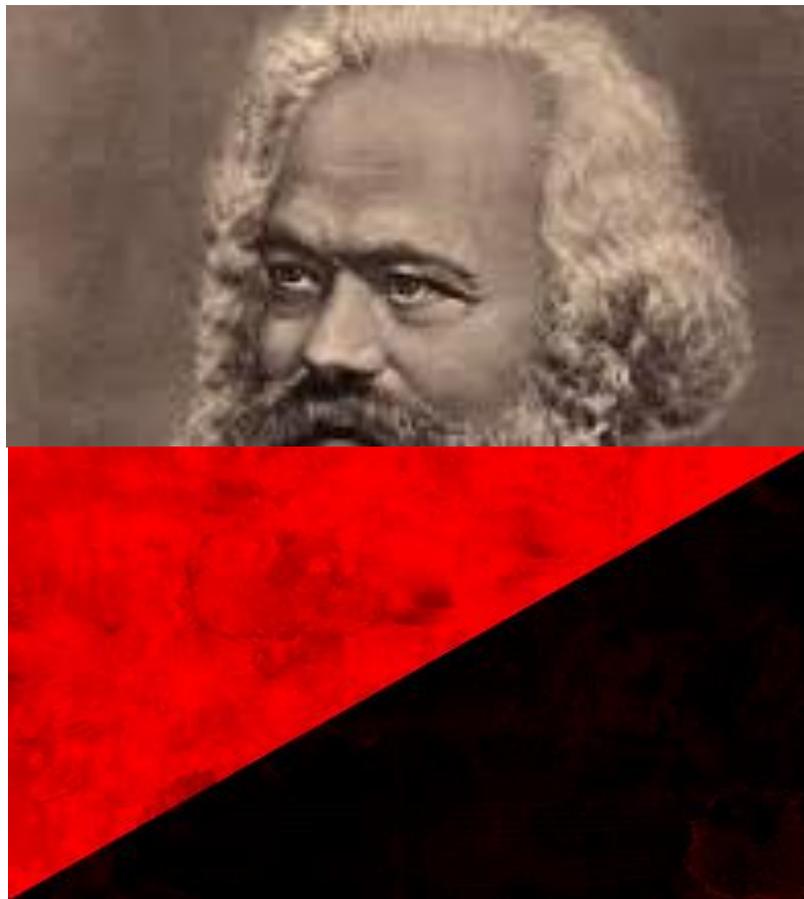


Casual Labour, Agency Work & Unemployment



By 'Malatesta'

Casual Labour, Agency Work & Unemployment

‘Work, work, proletarians, to increase social wealth and your individual poverty; work, work, in order that becoming poorer, you may have more reason to work and become miserable. Such is the inexorable law of capitalist production.’ Paul Lafargue, *The Right To Be Lazy* (written in prison, 1883).



Introduction

In December, 2013, after a period of unemployment I got a temporary Christmas job at a parcel depot. To make things more manageable I began to research all the different ways that the casual worker is alienated and how time and value is experienced. For this study Marx's early work on alienated labour (1844), the Grundrisse, his later Value, Price & Profit (1865) and, of course, Capital (1867), proved strikingly relevant and this essay draws extensively, though not exclusively, on his work.

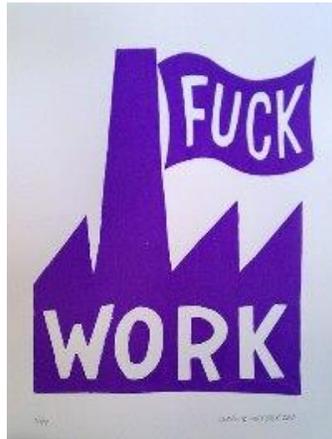
But why would an anarchist draw on the work of Marx? Because traditionally anarchists have focussed on doing rather than telling others how it should be done and their amount of theoretical work is slight compared to Marx and his acolytes who have refined his work over the last 150 years, particularly his work pre-1848 Communist Manifesto period. We have had to separate the theoretical work from the particular social revolution Marx agitated for, and which we feel is now unlikely to materialise however much we may hope, in order to focus on casual labour, agency work and unemployment.

The reduction of people down to abstracted labour units, how much we can exchange our time, our skills and experience for wages, and the inevitability of having to trade labour power in order to survive is something that dominates our social, sexual and political lives and encroaches on what we can salvage of our leisure time. 'Free time' as we shall see, is far from free.

This essay traces a trajectory from casual labour via agency work and back to unemployment. In the first section we look at the nature of work and for this we draw extensively on Marx, particularly in identifying how labour relations have remained the same despite radical technological innovations and cosmetic appearances. We then go on to discuss alienation in relation to casual workers, time, social and labour relations, the role of agency and agencies, wages, value and, inevitably, unemployment.

'Malatesta,' 2014.

‘Work: What Is It Good For?’



The company ‘cannot always predict the exact staffing levels it will require on a day-to-day basis.’

‘This is not an employment contract and does not confer any employment rights on you... [and] makes no promise or guarantee of a minimum level of work.’

It ‘shall not confer any legal rights on and, in particular, should not be regarded as establishing an entitlement to regular work.’ (From the Christmas Casual Contract)

In December, 2013, the Cosmodemonic Parcel Company depot were taking on casual workers and it would have been a dry and Lenten Christmas all round if gainful employ, albeit temporary, had not been secured

At the training session in the ‘reception suite’ a list of casual workers’ names was read out and, unsurprisingly, about 1/3rd had failed to show

The depot processes packages and there are 4 types: A, B, C and D all of which are fairly interchangeable and no one seemed to be able to differentiate between them

The 30 seconds training session explained that ‘the A’s go into the A dumpster, B’s into this one etc’ although the noise from the shopfloor was so intense no one was actually sure

We were put on to a conveyor belt to process them but after 15 minutes they’d had to stop it 3 times through our ineptitude and so we were put elsewhere to fuck that up as well

All the different sections at the depot seemed connected like a giant mechanical octopus - if the octopus had absolutely no sense of co-ordination whatsoever

The only thing worse than the existence of work is that we have to do it

It is hard to do and hard not to do

It is true that we can enjoy our work but this is determined by what the work actually is (does it use our skills and experience satisfactorily?), why we are doing it (can’t get anything else) and what the money is like (never enough)

This is a question of agency: the more choice we have in doing something, the more likely it is that we can enjoy it

Agency, using free will as far as realistically possible, determines our response to any situation: if it is a case of either take this meaningless job or absolute penury then this is less an exercise in free will and more a justified cause for bitterness and resentment

We feel like we should have the right to choose what kind of work we do but often face a limited variety of jobs

A choice involves a quantitative and qualitative difference between possibilities, i.e., deciding to either go swimming, stay in bed or pursuing some other interest; variety is either this can of beans or the other one

Most of us simply do not have the choice over what job we take on and there are geographical reasons, skill sets, experience, age and gender issues involved

Full time, part time, permanent, agency and casual workers, underemployment, short term and zero hour contracts, the rise in internships, DWP and ATOS forcing people to take any job at the risk of poverty, outdated skills and irrelevant experience, useless courses, retraining with no job at the end of it, inevitable spells of unemployment, involuntary or otherwise, 'gardening leave,' breaks between contracts, lay offs and permanent closures It is fairly obvious that the conditions of work in the UK, and by extension the EU, has changed drastically

Employment contracts favour the employer rather than the employee

It is also obvious that more and more work involves the mediation of commodities rather than their actual production.

New types of jobs have appeared as others have vanished

Work has become more depersonalised with call centres, teleworking and the internet removing us physically from the people we are dealing with

In supermarkets there is rarely any social relationship between the person shopping and the person stacking shelves or sitting at the till

A large percentage of workers do not make anything: whether M&S, BHS or NHS we either mediate that made by others or help reproduce the labour force via a public sector that attempts to maintain the health, education and general welfare of the population

We work for people we do not know, with people we may not like, doing tasks that do not interest us

Work thus becomes an exercise in alienation

Alienation & Casual Work ¹



‘The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, takes on its own existence, but that it exists outside of him, independently, and alien to him.’ Karl Marx, The Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844.

The job is straight manual labour and the problem is that you can’t fake it
When working in an office in London I spent hours wandering round with an empty file looking concerned in order to avoid working
That was when I wasn’t reading on the toilet or taking a cigarette break even though I’d quit (I had to keep saying, ‘I’ve just put 1 out, I’ll have another in a minute’)

Whatever the job, alienation is a concern

Firstly, the worker is alienated from what he produces

In ‘Alienated Labour’ Marx describes the process thus:

The product is external to the worker and he neither owns it nor owns the tools he has made it with ²

The value of the product is extracted physically as labour from the worker and the workers’ actual value decreases with every product he produces; that is, the product devalues the producer physically over time or as the beard says:

‘The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and size. The worker becomes an even cheaper commodity the more commodities he makes.’ Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts.

The more products he makes the less valuable they become as a commodity’s price is based on its relative scarcity

The worker exchanges his labour power for wages and so his time becomes a commodity that he can sell but never buy back: his time becomes something external to him, taken away

He makes the product to satisfy the needs of others but not himself; he sells his time to satisfy needs external to the work place, to live

It is only outside of work, Marx wrote, that the worker feels himself:

‘Life begins for him where this activity ceases, at table, in the tavern, in bed. The twelve hours labour on the other hand has no meaning ... [except] as earnings, which bring him to the table, the tavern, into bed.’ Marx, Wage Labour & Capital.

Which is debatable

¹ Most of this text was written whilst working the afternoon shift which was unskilled, repetitious work. Obviously not all casual work is like this.

² Throughout this text I will be using ‘he’ rather than ‘she’ or ‘s/he’ or permutations thereof.

So how does alienation affect the casual worker?

The casual worker is not only alienated from the product and the tools that produce it but also from the company because of his short term transient relationship

He has no long term interest in his co-workers, the product or the company
He is alienated from the owner because of his lowly status; the management because of his subservient relationship; and the full time workers because of his casual status

There are several further ways in which the casual worker is alienated apart from the product and the company: he is alienated from the usual benefits granted long term workers; from any political struggle in the workplace; and frequently from other casual workers when factory conditions and social parameters mean that communication is minimal or restricted

Casual workers are alienated from any product that they may help reproduce or mediate: production or mediation may require few skills and none of the special skills the worker may have; the work does not engage them in any meaningful way; and if they are on a production line or part of a processing plant they only know 1 part of the process (division of labour) so have little relation to the finished commodity and, ultimately, the consumer of their labour

The casual worker is replaceable and requires or gets little training: they merely need to turn up

In Capital, Marx wrote 'that factory work exhausts the nervous system to the utmost, it does away with the many sided play of muscles and confiscates every atom of freedom, both in bodily and in intellectual activity'

But what would he know? That old hippy didn't do a stroke in his life

150 years later little has changed: the repetitious undemanding nature of unskilled casual work means that people get tired or bored quickly and leave, preferring to take their chances with the bureaucracy of the DWP or the hope of another job rather than the tedium of this workplace

The casual worker is alienated from the workplace because their stay may only be brief so they have no stake in the job and by extension the success of a company which is unlikely to take them on full time

If the worker is subcontracted by an agency and has been there a while this still doesn't give much security and therefore little incentive to work hard either

The lack of certainty with a company that hardly knows they exist puts the casual worker in a fragile position

The short-term nature of much casual employment means being alienated from the benefits that come with full time work: an inability to make long term financial plans, few means to secure a pension or start a family, get a mortgage or even organise a holiday without pay

Such are the rewards for the casual worker

The casual worker is alienated from any struggle between the union of the regular workers and the employer as they 'belong' to neither

If the casual worker is a member of another union they may find themselves in a situation where they either have to cross a picket line, which is a further alienation from both ones ideals and other unionised workers, or lose a day's pay they can ill afford, neither of which are remotely desirable

Alienated relationship amongst the workforce are further extended between casual labour and full time or long term part time workers: the latter feel they have a stake in the company, could have been gradually promoted over time or see it as a convenient job they like near home whilst the casual worker has no chance of promotion, often has to travel further to get there, is paid less and so feels they have little in common with the permanent workforce

Full time and long term part-time workers can be identified physically: they may have uniforms but their confidence, body language, multiple friendships and knowledge and experience of the workplace sets them apart visibly from the short term casual workers

Work methods may also differ: casual workers are told they are working too slowly, too quickly or too shabbily and are often initially unaware of protocol on the shop floor

Conversations between casual workers at the depot have been either bewildering ones about what we are supposed to be doing or include the question 'what do you usually do?'

The 'real job' uses the workers skills and experience, they have a personal impact on the work and it may be something they have invested time and energy significantly and satisfactorily into

What we want to do, what we are good at, or what we usually do, may not be so easily accessible on the contemporary job market, hence casual work

Casual work can be interesting because of the variety of people and their stories but there are two noticeable factors that tend to inhibit socialisation Firstly, people have a tendency to stick with their peers or other members of their community: there are obvious social and cultural explanations for this separation but there are only short breaks and limited opportunity for casual workers to meet after work to relax or mingle with co-workers, either casual or permanent - and after-work pub socialising is always dependent on what shift you are on

Age, psychological and physical difficulties act as a further separation and it becomes obvious quite quickly which workers have difficulty socialising in general

Secondly, there can be environmental difficulties in communicating: the noise of machinery is so constant that it is hard to follow what anyone else is saying, especially if they have a strong accent

The noise of the machinery and the pace of work makes it difficult to talk and as most casual workers are done in a couple of weeks or you never know if they're going to turn up tomorrow, at times it's hardly worth the bother

It is difficult to form friendships based on anything beyond the job although we should not forget that for some people work is their only chance to socialise especially if they have family responsibilities or face religious strictures

Casuals speak with co-workers and pass the time because, although they are alienated in any number of ways, they still operate in the same place and have spatial relationships with the depot and other workers

With casual work temporary alliances can be formed based on mutual disinterest or feelings of resentment (and the one thing that unites all workers is moaning about the job)

When the job is over, many casual workers find they lose contact with each other quickly and what may have been an interesting friendship is dissolved This is not to say that friends cannot be made at work: of course they can but there is a difference between the type of friend made at work because of the job, that folk are there on sufferance and share a mutual antipathy, and friends that are made despite the job that continue outside work

The only reason most people work is to make money and as with any other situation where people are there for a single purpose - jail, armed forces, hospital - these alliances, however temporary help pass time as painlessly as possible

‘Through alienated labour, therefore, man not only produces his relation to the object, and to the process of production, as alien and hostile men; he also produces the relation of other men to his production and his product, and the relation between himself and other men.’ Marx, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844.

For the casual worker, the alienated relationships to the product, the company and the permanent workforce affects their relationships with other casual workers

People are seen as full-time workers, part-time workers, agency workers and casuals

The full and part-time workers have no relationship with casual labour and they have different skill sets, better wages and are permanent employees

What is the relationship between the casual worker and the line-managers and those above? As far as the latter is concerned, absolutely none

With the line managers it can be slightly better: the line manager’s job is to get casual workers to turn up then get the job done as quickly as possible

Casual workers are aware of their lowly status and gauge it in relation to other casual workers and so a further alienation grows between them: young and the old; the men and the women; the less able and the agile; the slackers and the over-zealous

Although each task is part of a process, each task becomes a separated activity, devoid of any relationship with the task before or after and devoid of any collective relationship between the workforce

The casual worker reproduces a set of simple actions that are one part of a longer process and these tasks are an alienation from the overall process, the product and the consumer

The alienated relationship that the production line casual worker has with the product is reproduced and carries over into their relationships with each other. At times, if the work is extremely busy, people have a very clear idea of what to do and how long it will take to do it but these periods are unpredictable and a certain amount of time is spent standing around.

Underemployment becomes a problem: the over-eager encroach on the work of others and leave fellow casual workers with little to do, which is demarcation. Casual workers begin to see these scraps of jobs as 'theirs' and others who are there to help them become a burdensome benefit.

We cling to these repetitious tasks as it gives us purpose but also end up competing with, and further alienating ourselves from, each other.

It is one thing to be estranged from full-time workers but quite another for a casual worker to be estranged from someone in exactly the same position.

There can be further hostility generated by differing approaches to work: some casual workers are intent on being seen 'doing a good job' whilst others are less motivated and are there through lack of alternatives.

If there is any chance of them becoming full-time employees then casual workers become alienated from each other as they are now in direct competition.

The other folk on the shopfloor may look more comfortable and productive than casual workers but they have their own worries that casual workers are not privy to.

Has alienation at work changed since Marx and Engels were writing?

Briefly, IT has drastically changed some working practices but this is far from a totality: we may be teleworking through Skype, conference calls or internet discussion forums, de-physicalised abstracted voices on mobiles, emails and text messages yet alienated relationships can be reproduced in a new context (i.e., in technological environments) whilst remain essentially the same.

In call centres, the worker is alienated from the customer even through the relative intimacy of the telephone: the caller/worker is at best an irritant, at worst verbally abused; the person being called is merely another number charged with the small possibility of a sale and maybe a bonus and so the teleworker is as alienated as the most menial casual worker.

Of course, there are still manual workers on building sites, driving trains, health care workers and council workers but Marxists think that these workers are equally alienated and are there to reproduce the conditions for labour power to be maintained.

The alienation between unskilled workers and that which they produce, the consumer, other workers and management has not changed much either: the relationship between factory owner, management and workers remain the same and we still sell our labour power and take orders from management in exchange for rarely adequate wages.

For casual workers, there is only our shared adversity and low pay, united if only through our collective alienations.

Agency

Agency is the freedom to operate according to one's own judgement

We like to think we are free agents at ease to make our own decisions

The amount of agency we can exercise is determined by circumstance and what is possible within it

Repercussions on our lifestyles and those of others limit what we can actually do

There is another form of agency that is antithetical to the idea of free will: when working for an employment agency, the workers' agency is seriously compromised

An agency worker explained that he never knew for sure if he was going to work each day because the agency usually called him an hour before the shift started

As he lives locally this was not too difficult commuting wise but it meant that organising a social life became untenable

This job supplemented his other one as a fork lift driver which was another agency job and he had to keep both going just to cover his mortgage

The work for both was never certain so a lot of stress was involved

What are the ways in which the agency worker is not a free agent? When the agency worker is looking for work:

He will usually take whatever he can get

He has a limited range of jobs if the agency only deals with certain types of work (catering, admin, cleaning)

He cannot be choosy about time or shift

He has to be available any time

He cannot choose where and when the agency sends him to work and he often has to commute more thus losing leisure time and money

He cannot decide how long the work will last (unless he quits prematurely which is going to jeopardise his future relations with the agency)

Different shifts affect what we do before and after work: we can hardly go drinking at lunchtime then go on the afternoon shift and after the shift the pubs are closing - if there are any pubs near the workplace and it is not in a 'retail park'

All shift work bring its own idiosyncrasies

If the agency worker is spending long hours working, commuting and recuperating then there is little energy left to spend on applications for a better job

The fragile situation denies him the chance to make plans for the day or over the next week and even less so for the long term as financial security cannot be guaranteed

Because the work is uncertain this costs agency workers in other ways:

A weekly ticket is a significant saving on a tiny budget but the agency worker has to gamble whether it is worth buying one as he may not get to use it every day.

If he doesn't, he has to buy daily ones, but if he ends up working every day then this affects his weekly budget
This may seem trivial but if you are working two jobs and are still struggling to get through the week then it becomes a big deal and a further cause of stress

The company pays the agency X

The agency pays the worker X - 20%

The agency worker is relieved to get another day's work

The agency is happy because it takes a slice for doing very little (like a pimp)

The company is happy: there are no extra costs like sick pay, holiday pay or pensions; and they can sack the worker without any reason or confrontation:

they merely have to ring the agency saying the worker will not be required

They also know there will be many other agency workers only too eager to take his place

At the Cosmodemonic Parcel Company the agency workers get over £12 per hour whilst the casual worker gets half of this (and often more work as he does not know the dodges)

The casual worker is separated from the agency worker because he is getting paid twice as much for doing the same amount of work

This lack of equity is a further alienation between workers

The full time workers are aware that the agency worker who is being paid less than them could eventually replace them

Between the casual worker, agency worker and the full time worker there is a significant economic divide

The one small compensation for the casual worker is that, although the job may be tedious, at least it is only for a short amount of time and the next job may either be better or the one we actually want

The agency worker may be kept on but they never know for how long or when they will finally be out of there; there is little chance of them being taken on full time (too expensive); and many don't have any union representation so are in a vulnerable situation politically and financially

Although casual workers are at the bottom end of the company payroll, agency workers are hardly in an enviable position.

Wages

'Capital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.' Marx, Capital.

The worker sells his labour power as a commodity

The company buys his labour for a wage

The wage is needed for necessities - rent, food, bills, clothes - but it is rarely enough to meet the most basic of wants, let alone pleasures

A wage is worked out according to how simple a given task is and how much experience, knowledge and skill it requires

The simpler the job, the more people can do it so the lower the wages

The more specialised knowledge is involved, the higher the wage (and during a recession when specialised jobs go, the specialised worker can always apply down for jobs whilst those at the bottom of the labour pile cannot apply up)

The wages are advertised at the hourly rate: the employer has worked out what this will be in relation to other poorly paid jobs

As casual workers our unskilled labour is employed for minimum wage: the only requirement is a working knowledge of scissors

As our contracts are all zero-hour contracts, nothing is promised definitely, there are no incremental increases, promotions or bonuses, so the only thing anyone can hope for is a bit of overtime to supplement the poor wages

The lack of skill required plus the small amount paid at the end of the week confirms to the worker how replaceable he is: the company does not value him as an individual and the only thing he cares about the company is that it keeps paying him

NON PRODUCT

What is produced at the depot? Nothing

Our labour and activity is reproduced but for the benefit of someone else

We process commodities that are made elsewhere, that are sold by a vendor via the internet and we have no idea what they are or who they are for

We are hands through which things pass in some anonymous deal

So rather than producing any specific thing our labour time is spent shifting unknown stuff - like the truck drivers who pick up the parcels and drop them at the depot and the sorters who point the parcels in the general direction of the delivery guys who take them to your door

This is division of labour: workers become one part of a larger, more complex process that they need not understand in order to complete their tasks, whether drivers, sorters, tippers, age clerks or shirking casuals

Amazon is the main supplier that keeps the Cosmodemonic Parcel Company alive, along with a few other catalogue companies

Obviously, folk shop more and more online for their stuff, which is bad for shop workers, but it still needs to be sorted and delivered which is all done manually

The growth in online selling, parcel handling and delivery has seen a concomitant diminishing of store front shops
Trolleys full of stuff in stiff cardboard packages arrive at the depot jammed into mail sacks that generate a small Chernobyl of static
The sacks are supposed to weigh 11kg but this is often not the case so we are shifting more than we are paid for

At the end of the afternoon shift the casual worker is either told to come in tomorrow or they have to ask - which means they will call if we are needed
The worker is put into an immediate state of agitation as it is hard to predict whether they will get any work and they need the money
This puts pressure on the worker, his partner or family who need the money to live on; hours can be spent in a futile 'will they/won't they' internal dialogue; and the following day is spent waiting for the call to materialise
Or not

The casual worker waits and wonders if they are not being called because their work is sloppy

He can wonder if other casual workers are being called whilst he is being shunned

Waiting makes distraction difficult: it is hard to focus on much else when awaiting the outcome of an important decision

He cannot do much with the day in case too much energy is expended before going to work

Whilst waiting for the phone call, plans for the day or evening cannot be made, there are certain pleasures that cannot be engaged in (and we work so we can earn ourselves at least a little pleasure)

If you miss the call you can't 1471 it as the extension isn't recognised and you can lose a day, if not more

So you wait for the phone to ring

There is a psychological block: the idea of starting to do something involving and pleasurable (baking, bathing, cycling ...) before the shift starts only to have to snap it off half way through and go to work seems somehow pointless

This is another way in which work encroaches on everyday life and the work day seems to expand further into our time

Waiting reduces agency: we are subject to the will of others

Another frustrating aspect of waiting occurs at work

The daily workload is divided between so many workers who should take a certain amount of time to complete it but if the workers finish the work early and there is nothing else to do, they still have to wait until signing out time before they can go

Whether the company has simply miscalculated and cannot supply enough work or the workforce is too efficient and gets the job done, is of no consequence: the workers are reminded that although they may work hard, they are still employees

We stand in tired, bored bunches, waiting to go whilst the company gains absolutely nothing: they are producing nothing as there is nothing to produce So, in material terms, it makes no difference whether they are there or not except that the company - which made the decision abstractly and long ago - does not want them to leave early
So we wait

Time

‘Time is the room of human development. A man who has no free time to dispose of, whose whole lifetime, apart from the mere physical interruptions by sleep, meals and so forth, is absorbed by his labour for the capitalist, is less than beast of burden.’ Marx from Wages, Price & Profit.

In the same way that alienation affects the casual worker in multiple ways, so too does time

Time is a commodity: we exchange our labour at an hourly rate

The eventual timespan to be spent at the job can be either unclear or limited

The tasks we have to perform are often time-controlled

If we need time off, we lose money

We sign in and sign out at strictly defined times

If we are late, we lose money

We spend time commuting to and from the job

We often work overtime to compensate for inadequate wages.

When working, we look forward to time off

And after work our leisure time is compromised by tiredness

We exchange our time with the employer for wages and our time is a commodity that increases and decreases in price depending on the job For Marx ‘the commodity that I have sold you differs from the crowd of other commodities, in that it creates value, and a value greater than its own.’ (Marx in Capital)

When casual workers are contracted to the job they are told that they will be working for a certain rate but the time may not be definite

The tasks which many casual workers carry out are time controlled and they are expected to fulfil their quota, if not improve on it, within a certain number of minutes

The tasks are tedious and the wages low which hardly ‘incentivises’ the worker Because the casual worker is only working on one part of the entire process the system in which they are working is mystified

The casual worker faces stringent work practices that have been long established

The casual workers queue to sign in and sign out, write their names and time of arrival whilst supervised by the line managers

If the casual worker is more than a few minutes late their wages will be reduced accordingly, no matter how legitimate the reason and they are not allowed to make up time later

This is doubly infuriating if the casual worker has to rely on public transport which can be frequently late - and we cannot calculate how much time is spent stressed by this

Commuting is neither time spent profitably at work nor at leisure but takes up considerable hours of the day as well as using a percentage of our wages

The time spent commuting is neutral time; we cannot realise it as leisure time and we are not paid for the journey or subsidised for tickets

Casual workers often have to travel further to the job than full time and part time workers

The job consumes more and more of the casual workers' time

The casual worker is offered overtime the attraction of which is compensation for inadequate wages with a temporarily increased rate of pay

However tempting the offer may appear to be, we may not be physically able to last that long; there may be no public transport to get us back home after; and we may simply be reluctant to spend any more time at the job than is necessary as we are already there for long periods and the work consumes enough time through commuting and recuperation

When working, we look forward to time off, and the idea of losing more of that precious time, even if it is feasible, is hardly attractive

After work our leisure time is compromised by exhaustion and quotidian hassle and necessity.

What is left over after that is 'our time'

We need to work in order for 'our time' to be realised in as full a manner as possible

The more we work, the more tired we get, and even though we may be richer in financial terms, we are poorer in terms of that time being realised in a satisfactory way, i.e., too tired to enjoy our time away from work

Of course, not all pleasurable pastimes cost money: walking, time with our lovers or conversation with friends are beyond pricing - although considerably enhanced by food, drink or comfortable surroundings, all of which cost money.

'A man who has no free time to dispose of, whose whole lifetime, apart from the mere physical interruptions by sleep, meals and so forth, is absorbed by his labour for the capitalist, is less than beast of burden.' Marx from Wages, Price & Profit.

Bergson wrote about the experience of time and referred to the idea of duration

He was interested in how time is experienced rather than how it was measured on a clock Most of us realise that the more we are enjoying ourselves, the quicker time goes by, but when bored, time goes by much slower

Consider the experience of time during sex compared to the same amount of time spent waiting at the bus stop (or indeed having sex at the bus stop)

Time is experienced more slowly when there is nothing to distract us: we have to pay attention in case the bus goes by, or we may be cold and agitated by the lateness of the bus; and there is nothing to do but stand there

This lack of events or distraction makes the wait at the bus stop seem long as we are constantly aware of time passing slowly (and are aware that the bus should be running on time but isn't)

The same amount of minutes can be endured differently and pleasurably because of the events that occur within it

We can say then that the duration of any given time period is relative to the complexity of activities carried out during it.

Casual workers perform simple, repetitious tasks and begin to operate automatically, without thinking

Because there is no need of protracted concentration we grow distracted and begin to dwell on how unstimulating the job is and how slowly time appears to be passing (made worse by clock watching)

So, the casual worker's awareness of how boring the job is intensifies the negative experience of the job and makes it even more boring

Not only are we bored, we are aware of how bored we are and how time is passing slowly

There is a myth that 'time is money' but time is not money, time is time and money is money: you can always earn more, borrow more, steal more, unlike time

'We know that the value of each commodity is determined by the quantity of labour expended upon and materialised in it, by the working-time necessary, under given social conditions, for its production.' Marx, Capital .

As a casual worker the only thing required is our labour power - any particular skills and experience will not be drawn on - and it is the only thing of value we can exchange with the employer

Marx broke value down into several different categories

Labour power is a commodity; the job requires nothing but muscle; anyone can do it; the value of labour power is minimum wage

Value is added through relative scarcity and unskilled labour is not in short supply which is why it is cheap

The employer buys our labour power off us and therefore owns it

Our labour power may have multiple possibilities but for the casual labourer it is used only in one way by the employer

'Money implies the separation between the value of things and their substance.' Marx, Grundrisse.

Labour produces commodities by making them, digging them up, offering a service etc.

Commodities exist in a complex value system

Any commodity has a use value, how useful it is, so it would seem that a spade has more use value than a spoon

A spade is very useful in landscape gardening but less so in the coffee shop

So context determines the relative value of something as well - like a bottle of water in a desert compared to a bottle of water in the supermarket

The value of the spoon may be much more than the spade if it is made of solid silver and even more so if it is 250 years old and once belonged to Samuel Johnson

This valuation is not of the thing but what the thing represents - rarity, expense, culture, status, surplus cash etc

This is commodity fetishism: the imposition of an abstract value onto a real object that supersedes its use or exchange value

On the shopfloor, the labour power (time & effort) it takes to produce something influences its exchange value: 1 spoon should take 10 minutes to produce

Marx called this concrete labour

The scarcity, or availability, of the raw materials also influences its value: steel or silver spoons are priced differently

The worker is reasonably expected to produce 6 spoons per hour but if he makes 10 the excess is what Marx called surplus value

Whether he makes 6 or 10, the worker is paid the same

He is also paid the same if the company sells the spoons for an increased price

It is in the companies interest to demand that workers produce 10 spoons in the time allotted for 6 and to encourage quicker production which increases the profit for the owner

The point is not to make the labour more conducive to the worker but to make the worker more profitable to the capitalist

The relative complexity and skill required to produce a commodity also influences exchange value: a machine made shirt is cheaper to produce than a bespoke one

Clothing is also valued by its style, brand and exclusivity.

The social value of clothing is enforced by advertising and perpetuated unwittingly by consumers but clothes are only fashionable for so long and then they end up in TK Maxx

So, the value of a commodity is comprised of:

Use value (how useful is it?)

The time and skill it takes to make it (concrete value)

The relative scarcity of its raw materials (Silver? Paper?)

The context in which it exists (desert or supermarket)

What it represents (cultural value)

The status it confers (wealth, fashion)

The worker's 'use value' is his labour power

His exchange value is how much he can earn by turning his labour into wages

For this wage he is reasonably expected to produce X amount per hour

This is necessary labour, how much time is spent completing the task

His 'surplus value' is that which he produces over and above the X per hour, which he is compelled to do by the company, i.e., X + 20%

The profit (20%) or surplus value is created from the surplus labour that is squeezed from the worker or, as the beard wrote:

‘Over and above the six hours required to replace his wages, or the value of his labouring power, he will, therefore, have to work six other hours, which I shall call hours of surplus labour, which surplus labour will realise itself in surplus value and a surplus produce.’ Marx, Wages, Price & Profit

There is also an abstract value that he puts on his own work: does he enjoy it? It is possible; does he value the friendship of his co-workers? perhaps; does the job give him status amongst his peers?; does he like the challenges the work presents?

The problem is not that work is unendurable but that it is what we have to do, to do what we want

‘The value of labour-power is determined by the value of the necessaries of life habitually required by the average labourer.’ Marx, Capital.

The company calculates that it can handle so many parcels and will need so many workers to handle them

As with unemployment there are seasonal increases of parcels (Christmas) so to handle the increase in parcels the company needs to increase the amount of labour, hence casual workers

The majority of the wages earned are needed to maintain the worker

The worker reproduces his labour power at home every day, eating, sleeping, recuperating and with some leisure

His wages, then, enable him to reproduce himself in order to reproduce the profit of the company (and, in the longer term, reproduce the workforce through children - something which probably won't work as a chat up line - ‘would you care to aid international capital by reproducing the future workforce?’ ‘No’)

If the company's profits increase, his wages stay the same

If he produce surplus value, his wages stay the same

If he produce the minimum amount necessary, his wages stay the same

If he fails to produce the amount necessary, his stay may be a short one

The goal of the company is not just to move parcels but to move as many as possible and make more money

The time study of each individual task is not to make the job easier on the worker, but to make more money

Despite company songs, softball games, weekend outings or fake social events, it is only in the interest of the company to maximise their profit...

... After a brief enforced hiatus due to industrial injury (bad hand) and an extended break over Christmas, Mahmoud at the Cosmodemonic Parcel Company texted at 2.58pm saying ‘Can you come in at 5.15 pls?’

Nothing like the personal touch; nothing like a bit of notice

As usual, when we got there, no-one told us what the hours were, how long this would go on for or what the terms would be

Out of the 50 booked for the pre-Christmas induction session, 15 didn't show and others lasted a week or so before drifting off or found something more interesting

There are three guys and 2 lasses left and we feel like we've won a competition we hadn't entered.

The company now only lets all the casual workers know on a day to day basis whether they will be required for a day's work or not

There is no thinking required, just attend when your told: if you turn down a days work, you get bumped down the list

The casual contract is a zero-hours contract but if you stick it for 3 months, the hourly rate goes up

Some chance

The work is physically invigorating, if dull at times, but the hours are now shorter: 5pm-10pm which is more manageable tedium wise than 3.15 to 10.15 (with the last 15 minutes time and a half)

At least there is energy left to read and write until the wee hours of the morning

Today, at 5pm, thinking that the afternoon shift would have got in touch by now, dinner was half way prepared and tentative plans had been made when at 17.20 the text arrives '18.15 pls'

This gave 45 minutes to change, make inadequate sandwiches, cycle to the station, buy a ticket, catch the train and then cycle the 14 minutes to the depot (in the rain) when in fact 1 hour and 15 minutes is required: 15 minutes that will be docked from pay

The reason why they can do this is because of 'the list' and our awareness that there is a very real risk of being bumped down if you ask for more notice, miss the call, or turn up late

Later ...

The short term contract proved to be very short indeed and has turned into an absolutely zero-hours contract

Each day of the first week was spent waiting by the phone between 3 and 5 but there hasn't been a call for several days

Back at the DWP, for once, they sorted the claim out surprisingly quickly

So, it's back to being unemployed

Again

Although we can polish our CVs, prepare for interviews or read futile books like 'Dressing To Get The Job You Don't Want' being unemployed still involves essentials like caring for children, parsimonious food shopping or dealing with banks and landlords

Outside of work we often rely on bought things to occupy us and work to earn the money to pay for them, but when that source of income dries up, what then?

We become time rich and cash poor because we cannot realise that time in a meaningful way
It is difficult to fill time productively or meaningfully on a very limited budget

‘The generosity (or lack thereof) of unemployment insurance benefits will affect how diligent workers are in looking for jobs.’ T Taylor, *The Instant Economist*.

The frequent stigmatisation of unemployed workers - which includes those involuntarily made redundant, those ageing or with outmoded skills, the disabled, the downsized and victims of bankrupt businesses - is played out in the media which portrays them as scroungers and puts the blame on the unemployed worker because the job market has failed *them*

The attacks on the unemployed, chorused by wilful misrepresentation and tabloidal ‘shock-horrors’ about people living in subsidised mansions, is a disgrace

At the time of writing (February, 2014) there are over 2.5 million unemployed and the percentage that fits this ideologically driven stereotyped is relatively small

The ease with which the unemployed are stigmatised and blamed for ‘exploiting benefits’ is caused by the ignorance of the ruling classes about the very real situation, principally outside the south east of England, that people actually live in

As a political body the unemployed have no representation or voice in mainstream discourse (unlike ‘hard-working families’) and are an easy target for the kind of slating which often precedes further attacks on benefits

Governments cut benefits in the hope of pushing people into work but what about people who live in areas where there are no jobs or what few jobs hardly cover the cost of living and are highly contested?

This is a geographical concern and is hardly new:

‘It was already clear that unemployment was concentrated on a relatively small part of the workforce, so the rise in unemployment in the 1980s caused its duration to rise and regional concentration to increase.’ (Booth.

Attacks are also made by governments on benefits in a bid to cut public spending (no housing benefit for under-25s, ATOS forcing the genuinely disabled into inappropriate work, others being forced into jobs that are clearly unsuitable) but they rarely explain that the real reason why people are surviving on benefits is because of an inherent fault in the economic plan that they subscribe to

Economists see the unemployed as a variable number and expect a small percentage to always be out of work

Even right wing economists have to recognise the inevitability of unemployment:

‘everyone agrees [unemployment] must be one of the most important issues in any discussion of capitalism... I do not think that unemployment is among those evils which, like poverty, capitalist evolution could ever eliminate from itself.’ (Schumpeter, 60)

The British economist Keynes and his successors thought that in times of industrial slump, when unemployment rises, the government should take up the

slack until the market recovers but if the government are intent on cutting public spending then this is unlikely to happen

It is in the interest of the government and a well established practice to 'adjust' unemployment figures

'British unemployment statistics were compiled, but they were overtaken by political interference as the Conservative government of the 1980s, in a period when unemployment was rising rapidly, made a series of substantial revisions to definitions, almost all of which had the effects of lowering the rate of recorded unemployment.' (Booth).

Full Employment?

'The reserve of unemployable industrial labour... is always present. It forms a necessary prerequisite of the sudden expansion of production in times of boom, and is another specific condition of capitalist accumulation.' Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation Of Capital*.

Full employment is rarely possible so there will always be a surplus of labour power

Full employment sounds attractive as governments want to maximise labour and production to maintain a steady economy so job creation is a major concern for them

'Food producing nations were also customers for Britain's exports, and falling prices for their own main exports meant that it left them less able to buy manufactures from the UK.' (Booth, 46).

Parts of the UK economy is dependant on exporting goods and are susceptible to any fall in demand, and this dependency on outside demand affects unemployment

Better quality rival products, cheaper alternatives or technological obsolescence mean that the vagaries of markets far away determine whether the worker keeps his job or becomes a 'scrounger'

Local unemployment therefore has a global component

The Unemployed

Only benefit claimants are counted despite the fact that a percentage of unemployed workers do not claim for what they are entitled to (and others exist via illicit incomes) so the singular term 'unemployed' requires a fairly complex explanation

The unemployed are defined by the OECD as those with no job and actively seeking one, and those who are available to work

Unemployment is broken down into several different categories

The unemployed does not include those at college, the disabled and their carers

Frictional Unemployment includes those between jobs or on short term contracts

Voluntary Unemployment is when people choose not to work

Seasonal Unemployment means yearly fluctuations in numbers due to the nature of the work: seasonal figures show that in summer there are more agricultural and tourism jobs

The more sinister term 'Natural Unemployment' refers to the way unemployment figures fluctuate within the economy 'naturally' Structural Unemployment is when workers' skills become outdated, they become too old for retraining, traditional local industry disappears or technology replaces people

There are the unemployed in workless regional dead-zones like parts of the North East, Merseyside or Scotland, that have never recovered from job cuts in local industry as there has been little to replace them, hence 50 year old engineers stacking supermarket shelves (if they can get the job in the first place as age has major drawbacks in a competitive job market)

Governments have failed to acknowledge that they perpetuate a boom and bust economy where increased unemployment is inevitable as we have seen in the 1970s, the 1980s, the 1990s, the mid 2000s and now in 2014 with the 2.5 million out of work

All these eras are as debilitating as they are repetitive: 'The slump of the early 1990s was almost as steep as that of 1980-82.' (Booth, 131)

What also remains unacknowledged is the need to train people to deal with these inevitable downturns and consequent periods of unemployment that occurs so regularly and inevitably in these economic cycles

'With a high replacement rate (i.e. the ratio of income when unemployed to post-tax-and-transfer-income in work) the low paid may be little worse off (and in the short term perhaps better off) out of work ... an unemployed person had little financial incentive to seek work.' (Barr).

Of course at one end there are people who choose to be unemployed or can cope with reduced incomes and ultra-frugal lifestyles whilst keeping one step ahead of the DWP, and at the other there are those for whom work makes no financial sense as any wage on offer is too inadequate to equal that covered by benefits (which is also impacted by the problem of unaffordable childcare)

A single working class parent with two kids is going to find difficulty in getting a job that covers rent, food, bills and child care during holidays or shift patterns so it is in their interests to claim benefits

It is not their fault that wages do not cover the cost of living: most workers would rather have an adequate and reliable income

Once again, the failings of the economy are blamed upon those who are alienated from it the most

'The average probability of being unemployed is well known - it is simply the aggregate unemployment rate. There is also considerable knowledge of the possibility of unemployment for subgroups of the labour force.' (Barr).

What are the options to cope with being unemployed?

Few

Different age groups face different uncertainties and difficulties

In Japan, the young *hikikomori* chose total withdrawal as a coping strategy

The reduction of life to a small room, laptop and junk food can hardly be a psychological or physically healthy option

This is a middle class youth phenomenon available only for those whose parents can subsidise them to a certain extent, like internships, unpaid work or 'experience' to try and find a way in to full time paid work

A scheme is proposed where firms are subsidised for taking on young workers: they work for 6 months but when the time is up they usually find themselves unemployed again

Elsewhere, others grudgingly take whatever work is available - for money, not for any innate belief that 'all work is useful' - and this funds other more interesting activities external to the job and is reminiscent of the slacker phenomenon in the 1990s

In the UK there are the glibly titled 'NEETS' - Not in Education, Employment or Training - that range across the social spectrum

Young people under 25 are 3 times as likely to be unemployed as older folk (and in certain areas, more so) and benefits are becoming harder to claim

Youth unemployment is 20% in the UK: many become trapped because they are unable to gain the vital experience which would move their early careers on, and the longer they are out of work, the less likely they are to get it

They need a job to get experience but need experience to get a job

If there is no work in the area and they cannot afford to move to where there may be jobs and they do not have the experience even if they moved there, what then?

Young people end up on benefits for which they are then castigated, marginalised and stigmatised

Social factors such as attitudes to further education and family expectations about careers affect progress

Crime, drugs, desperation, depression and benefit dependency increase drastically

Once again, geography is a significant factor

Unemployment is exacerbated by an uneven distribution of available work and workers to do it: that is, there is plenty of work in the South East but trying to relocate from Scotland to find a cheap place to live near the job in London is extremely difficult

Unemployment & The Economy

Unemployment has an adverse effect on the economy: the more jobs, the more money in circulation so the more people buy; the more people buy, the more things are produced or imported and distributed and so more jobs are created; the less jobs, the less money, the less demand and production falls, jobs go so even less money in circulation ...

At the start of 2000, the job market was strong then after the 2007-09 recession, jobs disappeared, less money was circulating, the service industry shrank and the economy contracted

Unemployment is cyclical, is determined by and follows the cycle of industrial wealth

In this boom and bust cycle, unemployment is not an unfortunate side effect of an otherwise solid economy but an inevitable part of an economy that puts

short term private profits before long term investment and social welfare and where public sector jobs are lost and the private sector fails to replace them
The government blames unemployed workers for their predicament rather than blaming a private sector that is unable to provide work whilst the public sector is being deliberately under funded

A strong economy requires maximum employment, stable prices (i.e., no inflation of prices which make wages worth less) and growth in industry but unemployment, price increases, low wages and shrinking industry mean inflation, stagnation and recession
Inflation is when prices go up more than wages - and prices always go up, never down - which leads to a decline in purchasing power
This is caused by companies increasing prices for commodities whilst wages remain the same
Strong economies need a wealth of capital, human labour, natural resources as well as technology and the knowledge to utilise it
Investing in the workforce, training and new technology increases productivity

So, if full employment is not achievable and unemployment inevitable, why are the unemployed chastised, vilified and Kyle-ified?

Why are the unemployed blamed for the faults of a system that marginalises them through continuous boom and bust cycles, the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, 2007, 2014?

Why are the unemployed seen as a 'problem' rather than a continuum within a faulty economic model that focusses on short term profits rather than long term growth?

Why is there absolutely no acknowledgment of the inevitable periods of unemployment in education and methods of dealing with enforced idleness, poverty and despair?

The unemployed are always with us.

'Malatesta'

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