

Let's Escape Capitalism Together

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“This book, being about work, is, by its very nature, about violence” (p. 31), says Amelia Horgan, a PhD student at the University of Essex, quoting Studs Terkel. In her book *Lost in Work: Escaping Capitalism*, Horgan reveals the violence and illusions underpinning work under capitalism, offering a portrait of it in three

parts. The first part is dedicated to defining what work truly is, its origins, and the myths surrounding it; the second examines the problems this work creates on an individual and social level; finally, the third explores possible strategies to counter the capitalist work system, with references to the past and visions for the future.

The first three chapters of *Lost in Work* provide an analysis that explores the evolution, myths, illusions, and historical realities of work under capitalism. Horgan dismantles the idealized vision of modern work, presenting it not as a site of continuous progress and creativity, but as a stagnant system built on inequalities and inherently violent. Among the various examples that expose this idealization are the garment manufacturing, the Promethean mythology surrounding Silicon Valley, the ideology of the *gamification of work*, the exploitation of Temps and unpaid domestic labour, and the obsession with feedback and customer satisfaction at all costs.

Horgan demonstrates how the capitalist model not only generates inequalities but actively relies on them to function. In line with the philosopher Byung-Chul Han, the implicit violence of the system becomes increasingly subtle: the worker, rather than simply being exploited, is convinced they are free to choose, turning their subordination into an apparently voluntary act. Capitalist work, therefore, is a historical process disguised as freedom, fun, and

teamwork; but in reality, it is precarious, individualized, emotionally taxing, and based on violence and low wages.

The next three chapters examine the consequences of this system both at the individual and collective levels. For the former, Horgan analyses the lack of control workers have over their own work and the excessive control exerted over them (often by algorithms), as well as the stigmatization of unemployment, the plight of poor workers, and the pressure to find identity and social recognition through one's work role. On a collective level, the analysis extends to the systemic inequalities between rich and poor, immigrants and non-immigrants, men and women, and the mechanisms that conceal these power relations. For example, the violence and real effort required to create each product are often hidden, preventing us from fully understanding the production process and denying us the ability to repair goods, which in turn strengthens consumers' dependence on producers and distances us from the workers involved. In this context, Horgan highlights how even the

so-called family atmosphere imposed in the workplace may be merely a façade, behind which hierarchical and potentially toxic dynamics lie. The “company family” turns out to be a “dysfunctional family” (p. 103) because it does not sacrifice for its members.

In this analysis, two points stand out as particularly noteworthy. The first, in the collective dimension, is Horgan’s reference not only to our human society, but also to the entire biosphere, underscoring the ecological footprint of the capitalist production model. The second is the effect of work on non-working lives, as the siege of work does not stop at the workday: it extends to leisure time, study, and self-improvement. Horgan examines phenomena such as the university, increasingly focused on vocational training rather than critical thinking, and leisure time, which has been reduced to consumption time or time to be monetized through the “social industries” (p. 90), the real definition of social networks. In these circumstances, Horgan suggests, burnout, like late-19th-century neurasthenia, becomes a noble disorder: one is in burnout

because one embodies the paradigm of the Great Worker.

On the opposite side of the Great Worker, the stories and legends of the Great Slacker open the third part, which focuses on resistance strategies. While individual solutions, such as the famous literary cases of *Bartleby* and *My Years of Rest and Relaxation* or real-life stories like that of El Functionario Fantasma Joaquin Garcia and Henry David Thoreau in *Walden*, offer examples of a thick, subtle meshwork of resistances, Horgan argues that these individual strategies are merely temporary palliatives. Rather than representing resistance to work, they embody resistance at work: these acts take time away from the system without altering it, leaving collective exploitation untouched and sometimes even relying on it.

True resistance, Horgan asserts, requires collective, long-term solutions. In this regard, she devotes significant space to the history of trade unions, starting with Flora Tristan and moving through to the stagnation and defence of the present day. On the contrary, examples like the Paris Commune and the “Lucas Plan,” which

sought to convert a military industry to civilian purposes, show the true essence of resistance: being a propulsive force to “transform the world” (p. 143), embodying a vision of systemic change.

Horgan identifies two strictly entangled key areas for intervention. The first is realisms, both capitalist and family realism, which normalize the capitalist system and patriarchy as natural and unchangeable, cementing the idea of the nuclear family and atomizing society. This vision limits the possibility of building shared and collectively managed spaces and symbols, while breaking community bonds. The second concerns domestic and care work, often underpaid and irregular sectors where physical labour is combined with emotional intensity and proximity. Horgan highlights a profound contradiction of capitalist mythology here: “When labour is made available cheaply because of the stickiness of low pay for women and the exploitation of migrant workers, there is a disincentive for the development of technological innovation” (p. 158). This paradox hinders progress (capitalism’s

own fetish), especially in care and cleaning sectors. This system reproduces and feeds off a global chain of exploitation, exemplified by Hochschild’s paradigm: “the eldest daughter of a poor family takes care of her siblings while the mother works as a nanny for the children of a migrant nanny who, in turn, cares for the child of a family in a rich country” (p. 156).

In *Lost in Work*, Horgan presents a critical view of labour under capitalism, highlighting how it is deliberately designed to escape workers’ control, while fuelling and perpetuating inequalities. Settling for small improvements and minimal, fragmented concessions, is not enough: what is needed is a coherent, expansive vision that goes beyond isolated demands. Although she does not want to argue for a particular prescription, she invites readers to explore “new possible directions, evaluating them critically [and] experimenting with them” (pg. 164). We must denaturalize not only labour itself but also the capitalist system and even the concept of the nuclear, male-breadwinner family,

starting with the recognition that these structures are neither immutable nor inevitable.

Central to her argument is the collective control over our own time – a time that must not be reduced to mere “free consumer time” (p. 65), but should truly be free. Only then can we create the space to reflect, criticize collectively, and develop shared alternatives capable of breaking the cycle of exploitation, individualization, and alienation that imprisons us. Only then can we begin to envision, as Horgan puts it, “a future without the indignities, petty cruelties, exploitation and misery of capitalist work is possible, and it is one worth fighting for” (p. 166).