

How could we be free if we're getting a wage?

A brief introduction to the history of the wage, resistance to it and some starting points for its destruction.

MESSINGAROUND
The Occupied Fall of 2011

A LITTLE HISTORY

Hundreds of years ago, you lived on land that you knew how to take care of, and it provided for your friends and family. Now and then a knight or a king would come by and steal food and other things from you (feudalism). The set-up was horrible and fundamentally exploitative, but the relationship – between those who made everything and the parasitic, powerful-few who lived off everyone else – was clear. And there wasn't a whole lot you could do about it other than accept it or engage in large-scale, open revolt.

Eventually the powerful few (knights and kings who were starting to call themselves by different names) became sick of the rebellions – that and they were on the verge of totally losing. So they decided on a new method for stealing the hard work of others. They made laws (official and unofficial), which they enforced violently. Perhaps it's helpful to think of such laws in terms of ingredients necessary for making the current mess of world we live in. Let's consider a few of them.

For starters they kicked everyone off the land that had been held in common (privatization) and used to sustain whole communities for time *in memoriam*. Through the privatization of the commons, thousands of people were made homeless and forced to seek refuge and work in the cities, which up until now weren't very big. Whole communities and kinships were destroyed in the process.

Getting money for your time blurs the blatant theft of your work that was so clearly defined during feudalism.

But something was very different about the kind of work there was to be found. Instead of having access to the tools needed to work, making practical things and then being forced to give a percentage of them to some king, you now were expected to make impractical things that couldn't sustain you or any community: three times as many clothes as people to wear them, sewing needles by the thousand or mining coal you weren't able to heat your own home with. You also had to use the resources and equipment of the powerful-few. They didn't give you food or any of the things you spent all day making. You instead traded your time and labor for money, which you then had to humiliatingly use to buy back the very things you and your friends had made throughout the day. And as many earlier wage earners quickly pointed out - you can't eat money.

Since people no longer had access to the resources or equipment needed to survive (no land, no kinship, no tools) they were forced to accept the wage relationship. The message was clear: the powerful-few's way or starvation - there has never really been much of a choice in the matter.

Though this may have started in a few european towns, everywhere this violent logic has spread its carried its deadly, destructive, exploitative traits with it.

“REAL WORK” AND ALL THE OTHER BULLSHIT

During this time, the powerful-few began to divide activities up into what would be considered paid and unpaid work. If you made pants all day long in a factory you would be paid based on your time there or maybe on the number of pants you produced. The time it took to get to and from work each day would also be paid for since you had to do it in order to get to work to make pants. (Called a *viaticum* this has since become unpaid work, *what a bummer!*) The time you spent getting up in the morning or going to bed at night earlier or later than you normally would; making and eating meals; fixing, making or buying new work clothes; going out with friends to maintain your sanity; etc - all things needed to get you to work that you

Not only is a wage a way to steal from people, it's a way to control them as well.

wouldn't normally do – became unpaid work. ¹

The little bit that the powerful-few did consider paid work didn't come from the kindness of their hearts – workers fought tooth and nail to get the little bit that they could. Hundreds of thousands lost their wager of a better world, having to pay up with their freedom and lives.

At this time women were largely excluded from being allowed to do activities deemed “paid” work² - making women have to depend on men for economic survival. This brought the already degraded status of women to a whole new horrific level, and forced many of them to begin considering their own homes places of confinement. Millions of women who refused further subjugation were tortured and burned at the stake as witches.

Speaking of unpaid work, (chattel) slavery is the fourth ingredient, and the genocide of african and indigenous peoples is the fifth. ³

The powerful-few had recently arrived in what to them was a new world – full of people to steal from. Along with their repulsive idea of how to treat one another and the weaponry to enforce it, they brought something else they didn't even know they had. Germs⁴ became responsible for killing millions of people in the americas. Far from being an atrocity, the powerful-few considered the accidental genocide a blessing, perfectly complementing the one they were intentionally committing with guns, swords, whips and chains.

At first the powerful-few were pleased with how much easier they could steal from the survivors, but then they realized they'd killed most of their work force. And they weren't about to do their fair share of the work!

They would now have to go to yet another continent to kill and enslave millions of more people⁵ – from new-borns to the elderly, no one was left out. In chattel slavery the “agreement” is you do whatever work the powerful few who own you want you to do, and in exchange they provide you with food, clothing, a house, etc. This differs from waged work in that in waged work, the burden of feeding, clothing, housing yourself is put on you, even though all those things end up benefiting whoever you work for.

The horrific treatment that chattel-slaves received perhaps points to the powerful-few's desire to have us all in chains, being shuffled about at their will (even if it means killing us in the process) as nothing more than objects to be bought and sold. An object whose main point in existing is to work for them and spend the rest of our time recovering so we can keep on working.

Similar to the women and early wage-slaves (not mutually exclusive categories) who fought against the new laws of capitalism, inhabitants of the Americas and Africa fought bitterly against enslavement and genocide. From individual acts of resistance to large scale revolts, we, the children of capitalism's first exploited, have a proud tradition of resistance to draw upon, perhaps best exemplified in early Maroon communities (to be discussed more in the Refusal section.)

After hundreds of years of slavery and wage-work, certain people who can look at massacres and slavery and see only numbers (called economists) began comparing the two - similar to what we've done above. And for the most part they concluded it was actually cheaper to have a wage-worker who you barely paid than it was to outright own a person (who you don't pay money but you have to provide for materially for their survival.) This comparison is mentioned not to downplay the horrors of slavery, but to point out the disturbing severity of wage-labor. It also shows that the transition from an economy based on both chattel-slavery and wage-slavery to one almost entirely based on the wage was not a gesture of the powerful-few's goodwill, but a matter of how best to control and exploit the rest of us.

And so eventually a great war was fought. We're taught it happened in order that freedom and dignity might reign over the horrors of chattel slavery, but that simply isn't the case. Some of the powerful-few wanted to steal from people through chattel-slavery, others wanted to do it through wage-work - and neither would tolerate the

If the Confederate States of America had won the Civil War, would they now point to the misery and inhumanity of the factory and the waged worker as an evil they had overcome with the triumph of slavery?

other. This war (like every war waged by the powerful-few) saw mostly wage-workers and chattel-slaves killing one another -

the majority of the powerful-few's losses can only be expressed in terms of money and property.

With Feudalism and chattel slavery pushed out of sight, it would appear that we're doomed to spend our lives between the wage-work we do for a boss and unpaid labor we do on our "personal" time with consumerism thrown in to keep us working. The fact that they are some of the defining characteristics of how most of us spend our time could point to such a conclusion. We like to offer one more – refusal.

REFUSAL

The period of time we've been discussing is known in official academic circles as the transition from Feudalism to (Mercantilism to) Capitalism. It happened between the 1300-1800s. It's often talked about as natural or inevitable, but nothing could be farther from the truth.

For every step that the powerful-few have taken to further subjugate and control us, there has been resistance. Obviously, none of these have been totally successful, but we can see the wounds they've left on Capitalism.⁶ These scars, however, are often explained as humanitarian re-workings of capitalism by the powerful-few, and it depicts the powerful-few as our benevolent parents, not our parasitic masters.

During this 500 year period, when the powerful-few were trying to violently create a submissive, dependable work force, the ideas of gender and race were totally redefined. From the burning of women who refused to obey laws that made them prisoners in their own homes and bodies, to the once free tribesmen who refused to have a chain or whip placed upon them, there was resistance to the new standards. Even more dangerous to the powerful-few's new vision, were friendships, romances and alliances that crossed the gendered, racial and nationalist lines they were violently imposing.

These friendships can perhaps be best exemplified in certain pirate ships and maroon communities created during the "transition". In both cases we can see individuals who had suffered the worst capitalism can offer us, who refused to be

victims anymore and who banded together to collectively refuse the roles they'd been forced into.

Pirate ships came from privateer and merchant ships. Some historians have said the amount of work, the little compensation and the amount of physical punishment endured by sailors was worse than plantation slaves. Pirate ships were created when sailors plotted together, killed or kicked out the captain and officers, and ran the ships where everyone had equal say. They targeted merchant ships and divided the cargo amongst themselves equally. At a time when the powerful-few were saying there wasn't enough to go around, such huge hauls of shared booty said otherwise.

On occasions when the cargo was human beings, they were freed, offered life on the pirate ship or transportation to what was hopefully a safe port. Some of these floating republics were so successful, they had to have locations on dry-land to house all their members and loot. These bases often served as further space to experiment in anarchy. The hide-away of Libertatia was such an attempted town.

If the powerful-few were telling sailors to judge one another based on skin color, sex and where someone was born, pirates told the rest of the world that that was non-sense. Their flag was black - they were the anti-nation, and they were dedicated to judging people based on *who* they were not *what* they were.

This example may seem silly to readers who are used to such a different, Hollywood depiction of pirates, but regardless of whether or not this story is entirely true, one thing is: pirates stopped the expansion of chattel-slavery for over a hundred years. The constant attacking of slave ships and the freeing of their live cargo made the powerful-few lose money, made them hesitate to invest more, and made it so they couldn't create the infrastructure necessary for expansion - more ports, ships and crews. Pirate ships not only found collective ways to counter capitalism, but for a while they successfully sabotaged its attempts to become stronger. Maroon communities had similar origins and effects.

Maroon communities sprung up as a result of run-away slaves, the survivors of destroyed amerindian tribes, indentured

servants and wage-workers banding together. They lived in the wilderness outside of early European settlements. Some of the more successful or well-documented maroon communities include the Seminole Indian tribe, the inhabitants of Dismal Swamp, and the Ishmaelites. Decisions were often made as a group, and people refused to judge one another based on Capitalism's standards of race, sex, level of productivity, etc. Instead they saw in each other one's ability to strive as an individual but also as a collective whole. Women and people of color (not considered human beings by Capitalism's standards) were often unofficial leaders of maroon communities. Similar to pirates, wars were fought against the maroons in order to destroy a way of life so contrary and at odds with Capitalism. The maroons of the Seminole Indians were so strong they won two wars against the United States and lost a third after over 140 years of existence.

Sure there are examples of pirates who didn't free fellow slaves, but sold them like other goods, or maroon communities that mimic some of the very relationships they'd run away from, but these examples are generally the exception, not the rule. What it means to share in work, in responsibility and the joyous feast we create when allowed to enjoy the fruits of our labor has been beaten out of us. When we try to find ourselves it doesn't always go well, but the potential that it might is encouraging.

Everywhere Capitalism expanded similar laws, violence and resistance occurred. Now Capitalism is a system that governs almost every part of the world. Where do we go from here?

REFUSAL IN THE HERE AND NOW

What are our modern day pirate ships? Where are our modern day maroons? How do we take back power for ourselves and share it equally? How do we not simply create the same mess with a new name, a new vocabulary?

Two hundred years ago people were told this is the work you'll do, this is the role you'll play, this is the way you'll be treated, *and they refused to accept it*. Without disregarding why and how we've been divided along the lines of gender, race,

productivity, etc and the results of that, let's refuse the roles that create such divides to begin with.

If we, the globally exploited, have created all the property, all the wealth, all the nice things of the modern world, then we're entitled them - all of them. Right now a small minority of the global and local population control almost everything - we need to take it back.

Form subversive friendships with co-workers, neighbors and schoolmates that fly in the face of the roles we're expected to fulfill. If the bosses and politicians are always stealing from you, take as much as you can from them - the whole damn building or town if possible! If your voice is always silenced because you fit the description of those who will be listened to less: scream, demand your ideas and plans be heard. And if you're heard all the time, try listening. Neither slave nor master, right?

What starts off small as a ring of class-conscious thieves or a group that practices the equality it preaches can eventually turn into so much more.

Find ways to support yourself, friends and strangers that frees you from the constant burden of wage work. Share with each other what you have or what you've stolen. Band together to meet each other's needs and desires instead of looking to Capitalism to solve our problems.

Now that Capitalism is a global system with little or no "outside" to retreat to, we can only look to the pockets Capitalism has neglected or places we can carve out ourselves.

Is your town littered with abandoned schools and houses? Take them over for subversive purposes: perhaps a place to hold open conversations about how to get to a world without masters or exploitation, a place to launch attacks against the powerful-few that don't want that to happen or maybe just a warehouse for storing and sharing all the stuff we've stolen from the powerful-few.

Tired of work or school? Take over the buildings with your friends and schoolmates - use them for anything you want - other than work or school!⁷

Most of all let's keep it fun. One of the biggest myths of all is that life is nothing more than hardwork. Scarity is artificially

created by the powerful-few. There's more than enough to go around when we share it. Less serf, more surf!

Is this too vague or anti-climatic? Please, choose your own adventure, create your own ending. This is only intended as a beginning, or maybe another verse in the already long struggle.

NOTES

1. Always try to keep in mind that if you were actually paid for all the time you spent doing things for work, your boss couldn't afford to pay you. The only incentive the boss has to being a boss is she's allowed to not pay you for all the work you do, thus creating a profit. The only way capitalism can function and is profitable is that all work is intrinsically underpaid. There is literally no way the bosses could ever pay us adequately without ceasing to exist.
2. Prostitution was one of the only paid jobs women were legally able to have, which at the time helped establish the inconceivably disgusting standard that the body (in this instance the female body) is an object to be bought and sold. For the "consumer" of it to do whatever they may like with it, and then discard it. This isn't intended as a statement against sex work - prostitution is a legitimate form of wage-work.
Though women may now have been invited to have their time exploited like the rest of the male workers, they still on-whole get paid less and are often expected to preform more of the unpaid duties needed to sustain a household of both female and male workers.
3. Both the enslavement and genocide against the inhabitants of the americas and africa functioned to help set-up the degraded (and horribly fucked-up) second-rate status that most people of color currently hold.
4. Many of the original inhabitants of the americas who weren't killed by germs died resisting the colonizers or by the thousands in the spanish slave system known as *encomienda*.

5. The transportation of people from africa to enslavement in the americas, known as the “triangle trade” killed approximately 9 million people. It perhaps points to the danger of thinking of anyone or any free, living thing as a commodity - an object that can be shuffled about, bought and sold.
6. In Labor circles the weekend would be such a reminder of our collective strength, though it has slowly been eroded and isn't an option for most service industry employees.
7. This isn't against sharing knowledge or creativity. It's entirely about those things, which is why we should keep school and work the hell away from it!

FURTHER READING

Caliban and the Witch: Women, The Body and Primitive Accumulation
The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic
The Slave Ship: A Human History
Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers
Against-His-Story, Against Leviathan
The True History of the Pyrate Captain Misson, His Crew & Their Colony of Libertatia
The Real Resistance to Slavery in North America
A Little Matter of Genocide
Subversion of Politics
Work
Work, Community, Politics, War
Abolish Restaurants
The Ben Ishmael Tribe: A Fugitive “Nation” of the Old Northwest

[Not an extensive list!]