



What work has made us become

Nathan Gerard

review of

Carl Cederström and Peter Fleming (2012) *Dead man working*. Zero Books: Hampshire. (PB, pp. 76, £9.99, ISBN 9781780991566)

Last summer, *The New York Times* ran a front-page story on the latest craze in corporate team building: juice cleansing. 'It was a week when we were slammed, and we just needed to pull together as a community', explains an employee who recently embarked on the three-day-long, liquid-only diet. The cleanse, which entails replacing your typical three meals a day with vital 'living food' juices, promises the salutary effects of prolonged energy, heightened alertness, and increased productivity. 'We all worked through lunch every day' says another toxin purger, 'I got tons of cleansing done'. Particularly notable was the name of the cleanse most popular among the 'all or nothing', 'type-A men': the Excavation (Rubin, 2012).

On the very same day, CNBC posted a story on its website covering the latest technique for gaining a boost in the cutthroat environment of investment banking: testosterone injections. 'Doctor, I'm tired. I'm run down...I feel my creativity slipping. I don't wake up with morning erections', complains a banker allegedly showing signs of what has been branded as 'Low T'. The injections, which are administered a couple of times a week, claim in a similar fashion to counteract sluggishness, heighten alertness, and increase productivity, all while delivering the added bonus of an enhanced sex drive. 'Traders on Wall Street are

always looking to get an edge and pull ahead', writes the article's author, 'especially in this catch-a-falling-knife market' (Perman, 2012).

What to make of these workplace trends? Putting aside the evident risks of malnutrition and shrunk testicles, what is it about contemporary work that compels us to rid the body of toxins and then turn around and resuscitate it with strong doses of hormones? The binge-and-purge manner of these practices, centered around that most taken-for-granted, most ordinary aspect of ourselves – our capacity to feel – suggests today's work has numbed us to the point of seeking extreme assurances of our existence. As office automatons, we float about in search of reminders of a life so alien to us that we're willing to settle for anything – a smartly packaged beverage or a shot in the arm – so long as it promises the Excavation.

Of course, the obvious worry with these fashionable office stimulants is that they won't deliver on their stated promise, or will do so in unwelcome ways. In attempting to 'catch-a-falling-knife', all we may be left with – after significant investments of time and money – is a pair of bloody hands and a painfully unrelenting erection; reminders, no doubt, of our capacity to feel, but hardly worth paying for. A deeper concern is that their social and political significance will go unnoticed, especially by scholars of organization who display a tendency to preoccupy themselves with 'high' theory while the real world of work passes them by.

Thankfully, Carl Cederström and Peter Fleming have been alert enough – and, we hope, without the aid of liquid diets or hormone injections – to register the significance of these and other equally alarming workplace trends, from dressing up like infants and being spanked to standing in a circle and singing Muppets songs. Their new book, *Dead Man Working* is, in essence, a traumatizing journey into the bowels of the working world. Along the way, we are guided through a slue of rotting office landscapes and introduced to a handful of gnarly characters, ultimately to force us – against our will – to take a hard look at what work has made us become. Through lucid prose and a writing style akin more to journalism than the academy, the authors reveal a horrifically close-up (and hence faithful) image of our working selves. The effect on the reader is a prolonged act of mourning. Nervous laughter soon gives way to anger, followed by periods of bargaining and depression, before eventually arriving at acceptance: Hell is not the fictitious home of Luther far below the earth's surface; it's the office in which we spend the bulk of our lives.

Putting ourselves to work

The book begins by painting a disturbing picture of how work has literally consumed us, and not just our dignity or our increasingly lifeless bodies, but the complex web of social relations once thought to exist outside of work. Here the authors follow a train of thought originating with Marx and expanded upon by scholars associated with the Autonomist Marxist movement: namely, that capitalism requires for its continued existence an underbelly of communism. The ‘common’, as it is so called, is increasingly enlisted by the corporation to sustain the capitalist accumulation process. As a result, and as the lifeblood of the common, we are increasingly ‘put to work’ – our bodies, minds, and souls – to provide this sustenance of living labor. We now unwittingly train ourselves, manage ourselves, and ultimately exploit ourselves as the hosts of a dwindling humanity extracted as (bio)fuel for what the authors refer to as ‘moribund-style capitalism’.

Using this frame as their guide, the authors capture how fads like juice cleanses and testosterone injections, in addition to jolting what little life is left in us, also function to sustain this moribund-style capitalism by creating the fantasy of exit from work. ‘Ironically’, according to the authors, ‘imagining ourselves elsewhere only binds us tighter to that which we seek to escape’ (11). Dressing up like infants or singing Muppets songs, for example, represent humorous and playful asides that serve to conjure the allusion of escape through ‘non-work’ (see Fleming, 2009). As we take comfort in thinking of the office as an outlet for fun, the corporation receives the spark of life it craves. A similar, yet more refined (and less humiliating) allusion to escape can be found among the hallowed halls of Google and Facebook, where beanbags, scooters, and fire poles make work feel more like an exciting fun-park and less like a boring cubicle farm. As workers put in long ‘play’ hours, and thousands more clamor for their golden ticket into the playpen, the corporation feasts on a seemingly endless supply of living labor.

Even the prospect of death, according to the authors, ironically weds us to a life of work, and more precisely of working ourselves to death, by sustaining the fantasy of eventual exit. As the authors state, ‘We work *as if* we are about to die, *as if* we are about to be unburdened from the deadweight of work, but we never actually are until it is too late’ (3). Thus, we can no longer rely on death as the great level-setter because its prerequisite, life itself, has been all but consumed by the parasitic nature of moribund-style capitalism.

But the authors provide us with hints that this ‘ideology of escape’ is crumbling. While most of us could always see through the flimsy veneer of team-building exercises and the naïve attempts at humanizing work, the difference today is that

their senselessness and futility are placed in sharp relief against an economic environment marked by stagnating wages, decreasing job security, and an imperative to work only to be able to pay off mounting debt and take part in meaningless rituals of consumption. Such a sobering reality may seem to be a cause for celebration: like the alcoholic's fateful last drink, the sheer dreadfulness of our situation might finally rattle us onto a new path. But for the authors, the situation turns yet more toxic: 'the displacement of non-work into the office also entails the obverse, the shift of work into all pockets of life' (17). Any hard-won sobriety becomes awash in a slurring of work with life. As the job follows us into more of our waking – and even sleeping – hours, we lose the ability to know just where work ends and where life begins. Numbness and apathy spread still further. To borrow a line from Adorno (1982: 128), we are like 'flies that twitch after the swatter has half smashed them...empty personae, through which the world truly can only resound'.

The real tragedy of the contemporary worker comes into focus when the authors reveal how even our most treasured acts of defiance (e.g. proclaiming to be a communist, shouting 'capitalism sucks', and authoring *Dead Man Working*) are mobilized to further the exploitative reach of capitalism. In addition to providing the allure of escape – in this case, the allure of emancipation – acts spawned from a critical awareness now offer the latest boost to capitalism's productivity. The authors dissect how movements such as environmentalism and corporate social responsibility, which are often thought to aid in curbing capitalism's excesses, actually function to obscure their underlying causes and as a result reinforce the current state of affairs. As the authors state, 'the disingenuous code of responsibility provides a practical medium for people to express their concerns, but in a manner that precisely consolidates their role as an obedient, productive worker' (29). The temporary relief afforded from at least 'trying to make a difference' serves to wed us tighter to the corporation we hope to change.

As one might suspect, all of this cognitive, emotional, and ethical labor eventually takes its toll. 'The inconvenience of being yourself', to use one of the authors' more tame phrases, stems from having to endure the repeated demands of work on our bodies, minds and souls without recourse to lasting relief or genuine escape. In light of such an abusive relationship, it's no wonder why we might choose to hasten our own death, especially to avoid the more frightening prospect 'of *not dying*, [and] being wedded to a life that is not worth living' (3). Physical abuse, emotional trauma, suicide – all are welcome relief; anything to numb us from the thought of living forever and unable to die. But all are also expected of us as the lifeblood of moribund-style capitalism. As we increasingly give more of ourselves to work and increasingly feel less in return, we come to

internalize what the many coaches, counselors, gurus, and self-help books empathically tell us: 'It's not the workplace that's the problem. *It's you*' (39).

Through vivid imagery, the authors convey what eventually becomes the grand motif of the book: how both capital and labor require life-support. The former receives this through bringing more and more of life into the corporation and the latter through adopting extreme practices to rekindle that basic capacity to feel, or in some cases, not feel (e.g. sensory deprivation tank addiction). Both attempt to 'mainline' life by injecting it directly into their veins, but the drug merely serves as a pale substitute for the real thing.

Fresh air

The book's chapters lift around and riff on the vast tract of decaying dross that chokes contemporary working life (or what's left of it), at times conveying the back-story while at other times documenting its proportions and magnitude. The wide-ranging collection of pop-culture references and corporate fads scattered throughout the text – from *Mad Men* and *Aliens* to inner child therapy and Wall Street fight clubs – manages to wickedly entertain while remaining closely connected to the project's overall aim, which at bottom is a deadly serious plea to aim for the 'Big Exit': a life outside of work and away from the colonizing forces of capitalism.

A tantalizing prospect, but can it be achieved? The authors put forth some of the more obvious suggestions – 'de-working our bodies and social relations, separating life from that which has now colonized it' (72) – but not without losing sight of the enormity of the task at hand: in a world where life itself has become increasingly colonized, we must do nothing short of 'unlearn how to live' (67). The authors do an admirable job of teeing up this task within the tight confines of the book. Closing in on the final pages, the reader feels as if he's been in training all along for a full-blown sprint to the exit door. And yet, for all the subtle traps and conjuring tricks we're taught to look out for, and for all the unlearning, when we hear the starting pistol fire, we can't seem to move. We begin to doubt whether it even went off. And as we begin to struggle once again for air, we catch ourselves entertaining the fantasy that the pistol was actually turned on ourselves and that all of this will soon be over and done with. No escape.

In the end, the allegedly vibrant and fresh world outside of work remains a mystery. The geography of this region appears so dismal and so faint as to seem un-navigable. While the authors want to suggest that such 'imperceptibility' is a

necessary feature of this foreign terrain when viewed from our side of the divide, without providing at least the traces of an outline the book runs the risk of leaving its reader gasping for air with nowhere to turn. Worse still, the reader – now delirious – may erroneously write off the call to exit as the disgruntled broodings of two privileged academics dying a relatively decent death compared to the many already dead men and women working.

Aside from these risks, *Dead Man Working* masterfully pins down and dissects that strange, unsettling feeling we've all experienced at some point in the office: whether from having to take part in a 'brainstorming' activity so far removed from work, and so insulting to our intelligence, that we begin to harbor violent thoughts; or from noticing our friendly and trustworthy colleague—the one we share our violent thoughts with—wholeheartedly taking part in that very activity (not even a wink); or again, from reading the CEO's company-wide email announcing the death of a faceless co-worker and referring to the deceased by nickname (the CEO never really knew him) while praising 'his many years of service and dedication to the company' (the epitome, perhaps, of a *dead man working*).

To put it crudely, all of these moments possess the quality of forcing something where it doesn't belong. And all are accompanied with a feeling of powerlessness to put it right. Cederström and Fleming provide a startling glimpse into why this is happening, and they equip the reader with the conceptual tools necessary, if not to put it right, then at least to make refreshing sense of it. For this alone, their book is worth its (sadly light) weight in gold. At a meager 76 pages, the paperback edition now available through independent publisher Zero Books oddly mimics the unbearable lightness of contemporary working life, right down to its blinding cover that matches the petrifying light of the fluorescent-clad office. Intentional or not, one can at least suspect the book comes easy to carry by the floating office automatons who need it most.

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the author

Nathan Gerard is a recovering organizational psychologist and PhD candidate in organizational psychology at Columbia University.

E-mail: nmg2128@columbia.edu