

## ESSAY

# Notes from an underground future

Two times two equals...

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SINCE MY LATE teens, I've had a penchant for Russian literature. It started with Dostoevsky. It may have been because we were both clerks; Fyodor Dostoevsky's 'underground man', that is – he'd been a clerk, too, a petty clerk in the Russian civil service. That could have been our initial bonding, the basis of our strange friendship. We hit it off immediately, despite our epochal differences, despite our age gap (he was forty), our different tongues. Like him I was rude and enjoyed being rude. It was all I could do, of course, for not taking bribes, for not wanting in. I was serving my time, paying my penance, as a wages clerk at the dock board in Liverpool, England; it was the 1970s. An OPEC oil embargo had sent advanced economies into giddy nosedives, and the Sex Pistols had released a debut single, 'Anarchy in the UK'. They were heady times, full of crises and chaos, of psychological alienation and industrial annihilation, of punk rock and disco.

During Britain's 'Winter of Discontent' in 1978–79, strikes and piled-up rubbish seemed the social order of the day. I was adrift, often between jobs – between tiresome, pointless office jobs that, in Liverpool, most people thought I was lucky to have. I was a self-avowed underground man; Dostoevsky populated my imagination. Before long, I could recite whole passages of his 1864 *Notes From Underground* by heart. In around a hundred pages, our anti-hero – our 'paradoxalist', as Dostoevsky calls him – utters an

unnerving yet strangely uplifting refrain. This paradoxalist was woven from a weird cloth. He teems with opposite elements. He calls himself an insect and a mouse and seems stark raving mad. Or maybe he's completely normal? Maybe it's the world that's stark raving mad, driving normal people over the edge, into action.

The underground man reads a lot, sometimes even thinks too much, and has a 'hysterical craving for contrast and contradiction'. He wants, needs, to plunge headlong into society, to feel its thrills and dangers, its delights and disorder. Phoney order bores him, disgusts him. He has to get out. Out of his self and out into the world. One night he passes a tavern and glimpses a bar room brawl. There, a six-foot-plus army officer, brandishing billiard cues, is dispatching assailants out of the window. In enters the underground man, yearning to get tossed out of the window himself. But 'without a word of explanation' he's placed aside. The officer passes by 'as though he hadn't noticed me'. 'I could forgive blows,' the underground man says, 'but I absolutely cannot forgive him for having moved me, for having completely failed to notice me.'

How to get even, how to make the officer take notice of him? How to make the world take notice of him? A duel? A literary quarrel? A missive in the mail? Then, one afternoon, the underground man spots his enemy strolling along St Petersburg's main boulevard, the Nevsky Prospect, rarely moving aside for anybody and trampling right through people. This bully just strolls through everybody, like they're empty space. Ordinary people move aside, 'wiggle like eels' and make way for him, for professional authority figures like him, for those in power, for those with power. But what if you don't move aside? What if you stand your ground? The idea takes hold.

At first, the underground man balks. In one attempt, at the last second, he loses his nerve and steps aside. Another time, ready to go for it, he stumbles and sprawls across the sidewalk, falling at the officer's feet. Afterwards, he's feverish for days. Then, one afternoon, unexpectedly, he sees his antagonist again, out on the Nevsky. This time, closing his eyes, he doesn't budge an inch, not one inch. 'He didn't even look round and pretended not to notice me,' the underground man beams. 'But he was only pretending, I am convinced of that. I am convinced of that to this day! Of course, I got the worst of it – he was stronger, but that wasn't the point. The point was that

I had attained my goal, had kept my dignity. I'd placed myself publicly on an equal social footing.' And so, 'perhaps I am more alive than you are,' the underground man taunts. 'Take a closer look at it! We don't even know where life lives now, or what it is, or what it's called...'

THERE'S SOMETHING GOING on here inside the underground man's head; Dostoevsky calls it 'intensely developed individuality'. It's a 'hyper-consciousness', he says, emerging through 'the intricacies of sensuality'. Underground people revel in it; they can never be organ stops or piano keys. They feel, act impulsively, often irrationally, can never abandon free will, never live in any Crystal Palace. 'Let me ask you now,' Dostoevsky says, 'what can one expect from this person if they're endowed with such strange qualities?' They wouldn't be in love with any Crystal Palace, with 'pure' rationality, with 'two times two equals four'. Now, 'two times two equals four is a fine thing,' says Dostoevsky, but after two times two equals four 'there's nothing left to do, or even to learn'. Everything will be computed and designed with exactitude. They'll be no more actions or adventures. 'Well, I wouldn't be surprised in the slightest if, suddenly, for no particular reason, in the midst of the universal future rational wellbeing, somebody were to appear and, putting their hands on their hips, would say to us all: "How about it, why don't we knock this rational wellbeing into smithereens with one swift kick, with the sole purpose of sending all these logarithms to the devil!"'

The target of Dostoevsky's vitriol – the 'Crystal Palace' – is Nikolai Chernyshevsky's radical utopia, descriptions of which form the most radiant passages of his novel *What Is To Be Done?*, appearing in 1863, two years before Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*. The key scene is protagonist Vera Pavlovna's fourth dream phase, imagining human perfectibility, an ideal symbolised by a 'building, an enormous building, such as are now in but a few capitals...or no, there is not a single one like that now!...no, but there is one that points towards it – the palace which stands on Sydenham Hill. Glass and steel, steel and glass, and that is all. No, that is not all, that is only the shell of the building... But there, inside, there is a real house, an enormous house. It is covered by this crystal and steel building as by a sheath... Life is healthy and quiet here. It preserves freshness.'

Chernyshevsky had visited Joseph Paxton's famous Crystal Palace, pinnacle of London's 1851 Great International Exhibition, after it'd moved from Hyde Park to Sydenham Hill. Dostoevsky, too, had been there, in 1862, and wrote about it in *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*, his European travelogue from 1863. He'd gasped for breadth at Paxton's masterpiece, at the sight of this incarnation of ultimate truth, but recoiled in horror at the thought of living in a society modelled on it:

You feel that here something has been achieved, that here there is victory and triumph. No matter how independent you might be, for some reason you become terrified. 'Hasn't the ideal in fact been achieved here?' you think. 'Isn't this the ultimate?... Isn't it in fact necessary to accept this as the truth fulfilled and grow dumb once and for all?'

In the late 1950s, the American novelist and satirist Alan Harrington explicitly drew on Dostoevsky in his quirky non-fiction account of *Life in the Crystal Palace* (Alfred Knopf, 1959). One-time pal of Beat writers Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, Harrington was a chip off Dostoevsky's block, typically mixing black humour with poetic imagination, mockery (and self-mockery) with biting social critique. *Life in the Crystal Palace* centres around Harrington's many years working in public relations for an unnamed giant US corporation (actually, Standard Oil, in New Jersey), and 'begins,' the book's blurb says, 'where *The Organization Man* [William H Whyte's classic] left off, vividly reporting the author's experiences. It says to those who yearn for perfect security, "I've had it, and I gave it up." And it tells why.' Dostoevsky's spirit haunts Harrington's years at the corporation: having a job for life, being a company man, wearing an ordinary grey suit, having security, a pension, a chance to live without anxiety, an entire lifetime as an employee, a protected man, amiable, decent, polite, co-operative – what could be better? And the Crystal Palace, the glimmering symbol of corporate professional life, seems nothing less than the headquarters of the Good Society, of the happy life. Here all frustrations are banished. 'Even in younger men,' Harrington says, 'the hard muscle of ambition tends to go slack after a while...gradually you become

accustomed to the Utopian drift...when we moved to the suburbs, the company paid its employees moving expenses and helped them settle in their new homes.'

I began to feel what I now recognise was a gradually deepening contentment. If you are on the watch for symptoms, here are a few: (1) You find that you are planning your life defensively, in terms of savings plans and pensions, rather than thinking speculatively. (2) You become much less impatient over inefficiency, shrug your shoulders and accept it as the way things are. (3) Your critical faculties become dull; you accept second-best; it seems unsporting to complain. (4) Nothing makes you nervous. (5) You find that you are content to talk to people without saying anything. (6) You mention something like 'our Human Development Department' to outsiders and learn with surprise that they think you made a joke.

'I can't even get sick anymore,' says Harrington. 'This will sound ridiculous, but when the company obtained a supply of influenza shots, I found myself in the absurd position of refusing one. For some reason I wanted a chance to resist the flu in my own way. What is the moral of all this? I am not quite sure, but some time ago Dostoevsky put it in *Notes from Underground*: In the Crystal Palace suffering is unthinkable. You believe, do you not, in a Crystal Palace which shall be forever unbreakable – in an edifice, that is to say, at which no one shall be able to put out his tongue, or in any other way to mock?... I should fight shy of such a building.'

Underground man Harrington could never accept the numbing security of the big corporation. At heart, he's a dialectical personality, fighting shy of such an edifice, standing up to the monotony of cubicle life, wanting to stick his tongue out, just for the hell of it – to live a bit, out on the edge. But, circa 2016, it's a curious thing re-reading Alan Harrington's tale of bygone corporate America. It's a curious thing, too, re-reading Dostoevsky in mature adulthood, now that my own underground days seem so long ago. The underground is still in me, in my mid-fifties; yet even thinking nowadays that professionalised corporate and political life is based on any kind of rationality seems absurd to the grown-up me.

The problem with two times two equals four is that most professionals accept its principle, but end up sticking their tongues out at it too; sometimes, when it suits them, two times two equals five is a very fine thing. Today's austerity measures, deployed by neoliberal governments almost everywhere, are based as much on non-science (and nonsense) as any kind of rational science: pure two times two equals five. So the underground person sticking their tongue out, contesting structures of power, acting out on the Nevsky Prospect somewhere, is up against something much more than either Dostoevsky or Harrington could ever have imagined. It's a different underground now, and underground people are different, have to be different. So are our assailants, our antagonists. 'I wonder what he's doing now,' asks Dostoevsky, 'that dear friend of mine? Who's he trampling on now?'

IF WE WANT to see a real incarnation of Dostoevsky's Crystal Palace in a third millennium professionalised future, we should look no further than Dave Eggers's *The Circle* (Penguin, 2013), his barely fictionalised parable of the corporation, the omnipotent, multigrained, decaffeinated dream conglomerate of Google, Microsoft, Facebook and Paypal, set in a dazzling Californian campus, 'wild with Pacific colour'. The Harrington utopia of a job for life has transformed itself into a dystopic job to the death, death in paradise, where once flabby contentment now gives way to lean, jittery anxiety; life in work means having no life, living in permanent fear of being *dispensable*, of performing worse than your counterparts, your peers. Nothing is hidden anymore; all is transparent, trackable, observable, quantifiable. Nobody doesn't participate. As someone reminds protagonist Mae Holland, the young woman who's recruited wholesale into the Circle's professionalised ideal: 'Don't you see that it's all connected? You play your part. You have to *part-icipate*.' At the Circle, your *participation rank* is common knowledge. 'We see this workplace as a community,' another colleague reminds Mae, 'and every person who works here is part of that community.'

If the performance stacks up, everything is yours. But the performance never lets up, has to get better, faster, more efficient; nothing short of perfection is permitted, perfection in which there's everything left to do. The

Circle gets under your skin and becomes you; you sleep it, eat it, procreate it. This isn't so much a suburban *Leave it to Beaver* as *The Day of the Locusts*; but the locusts are now inside you, inside your head, eating away. Yet Mae is smitten and bitten, and sounds a lot like Chernyshevsky's Vera Pavlovna but in wide-awake time:

A few thousand Circlers began to gather in the twilight, and standing among them, Mae knew that she never wanted to work – never wanted to be – anywhere else. Her hometown, and the rest of California, the rest of America, seemed like some chaotic mess in the developing world. Outside the walls of the Circle, all was noise and struggle, failure and filth. But here, all had been perfected. The best people had made the best systems and the best systems had reaped funds, unlimited funds, that made possible this, the best place to work. And it was natural that it was so, Mae thought, who else but utopians could make utopia?

Eggers even has an underground man – a guy called Mercer, Mae's ex-boyfriend, a loser because he doesn't want in, knows it's a scam: he's there to pull tongues at the Crystal Palace. Mae once loved him but now hates his guts. He's her past, the mess outside, antiquarian bullshit; he spends his time on his passion, making chandeliers out of dead animal parts. 'Here's the thing,' Mercer tells Mae in one fraught scene, 'and it's painful to say this to you. But you're not very interesting anymore. You sit at a desk twelve hours a day and you have nothing to show for it except for some numbers that won't exist or be remembered in a week. You're leaving no evidence that you lived. There's no proof.'

'Fuck you, Mercer,' Mae rejoins.

'And worse,' he says, 'you're not doing anything interesting anymore. You're not seeing anything, saying anything. The weird paradox is that you think you're at the centre of things, and that makes your opinions more valuable, but you yourself are becoming less vibrant. I bet you haven't done anything offscreen for months. Have you?'

'You're such a fucker, Mercer.'

But fucker Mercer's big problem is wanting out. Somehow, he's worse being offline than on, worse unplugging himself and fleeing than standing his ground and engaging. It's like sheltering under a tree during a lightning strike. He writes Mae one last note:

By the time you read this, I'll be off the grid, and I expect that others will join me. In fact, I know others will join me. We'll be living underground, and in the desert, in the woods. We'll be like refugees, or hermits, some unfortunate but necessary combination of the two. Because this is what we are. I expect this is some second great schism, where two humanities will live, apart but parallel. There will be those who live under the surveillance dome you're helping to create, and those who live, or try to live, apart from it. I'm scared to death for us all.

He's right to be scared: fleeing in his pickup truck, SeeChange cameras track him and drones hunt him down. In fierce determination to get out, to escape beyond their gaze, Mercer ploughs his vehicle through a barrier and careens into a gorge – dead, very dead indeed. Everything is on film, recorded, remarked upon: 'Mae, you were trying to help a very disturbed, antisocial young man. You and the other participants were reaching out, trying to bring him into embrace of humanity, and he rejected that.'

THERE'S ACTUALLY ANOTHER underground man in Eggers' Crystal Palace. In a lot of ways, this character is more politically satisfying than Mercer, more of a real dialectical personality. He's an amateur masquerading as a pro, an insider who's also an outsider. Wearing 'an enormous hoodie', he even looks like a contemporary underground man, an occupier or black bloc revolter. This underground man is none other than the Circle's boy-wonder visionary, Tyler Gospodinov, the company's first 'Wise-Man', whom everybody knows as Ty. Mae knows him as Kalden, Ty's amateur alter ego, his shadow self, a kind of Edward Snowden whistleblower who warns of the closing of the Circle, of the totalitarian nightmare he'd help create. He's not running away from anything – he's hacking it, trying to disassemble

it from the inside. But he needs help; he reaches out to Mae, seeing her as ambivalent, as still a potential subverter, as a twisted dialectician. Yet as things move, she's too far gone, too straight. The other Wise-Men, says Kalden, have 'professionalised our idealism, monetarised our utopia'. They 'saw the connection between our work and politics,' he says, 'and between politics and control. Public-private leads to private-private, and soon you have the Circle running most or even all government services, with incredible private-sector efficiency and an insatiable appetite.'

Kalden knows more than Mercer. He's an outsider-insider, a maggot in the apple, trying to eat his way out from the core. He's not so much a great refuser as a double agent, calling out to others, to fellow underground men and women who aren't unplugged and offline but are tuned in, masters and mistresses of both worlds who know the limitations of each. They know what's what, know how to strategise, how to disrupt. Their value systems are intact – authentic, we might say. All know how resistance these days isn't so much about what you *do* as who you *are*: it's an ontological reality more than epistemological, something that cuts right inside you, into your beliefs, into your democratic hopes, into your anti-corporate desires. Resistance, in other words, needs to be wholesale, a total way of being. The enigma of revolt is to make revolt enigmatic, from the inside as well as the outside – don't make it obvious, nor even direct. If only our professional antagonists could be nailed in the street, bumped out of the way! 'There used to be an option of opting out,' Kalden says at the end of *The Circle*. 'But now that's over... The Circle needs to be dismantled.'

OVER THE YEARS, I've found myself as both a Mercer and a Kalden, an outsider as well as an insider, an underground man as well as an overground man. I've felt uncomfortable as both, as either/or. The two impulses tug away inside me – as with a lot of people, I guess. Conceptually, in my head, I know the inside is the place to do good work, to earn a living, to stand up for your principles, to have a platform for standing up for those principles, for affirming them. And, as an insider, people usually listen to you. But, instinctively and impulsively, impetuously, the underground grips me; I want to walk away, run away like Mercer, watch the whole thing blow up, go to fuck, a bit

like V watching London's Old Bailey blow up amid a great Tchaikovskian fanfare in *V for Vendetta*.

I'm lucky here. Or unlucky, depending on how you see it: I found my passion in life. It helped me escape, into the wilderness, into the mainframe. It's been a blessing and a curse, a challenge. For there's no career in my passion, never will be. That makes life hard because there are few job openings. But I got my chance, a second chance actually, and took it, coming across this passion in a strange place: *books*. I'm still not sure whether certain books led me to being a contrarian or whether being a contrarian led me to certain books, like *Notes from Underground*. But books helped me articulate the politics inside me, that dumbfounded me, were yearning to break out. Books explained why I'd been adrift in and between those tiresome, ridiculous jobs.

In the 1980s, I'd become a twenty-something 'mature' student at Liverpool Polytechnic. This time, unlike school, teachers *did* bother with me, did bother to teach me, did help me express this passion, find words for it, name it. They were talented, dedicated teachers, though hardly published anything – most drank too much, were the antitheses of today's professionalised academy. Most wouldn't last five minutes in an education business where senior professors now come on like budding CEOs and junior lecturers as assistant executives.

For a while, I thought academia might be a good way station for oddballs like me, for rank amateurs. It might be a way to be an insider and an outsider, a way to have a real job that wasn't a real job. I thought that maybe I could affirm my passion for books and ideas there and transmit this passion to younger people without having to disguise it, all the while getting paid for it. You know, like being an amateur with a profession. But I was wrong. It never worked out for me: I can't fit into any professionalised world, I just can't.

I mightn't be the only one. These days, corporations preach the virtues of inclusion and participation at work, sometimes hiring expensive 'motivational consultants' to get people enthused. Yet, contra Eggers's Circle, the more money bosses throw at boosting productivity, attempting to inspire staff enthusiasm and commitment, the more sluggish and indifferent these employees become. Big-time slackers get fired, replaced by eager debutantes, by more malleable human fodder. But after a while even they begin to flag. The

reason is perhaps obvious: the senselessness of the work involved, its meaningless nature, the impossibility ever to *feel* motivated, ever to *feel* personally connected to what you do for the bulk of your waking hours. And I'm talking about many professional jobs here, not just menial ones.

It's a terrible squandering of people's potential, a veritable human tragedy. Sluggishness equates to apathy, which in turn prompts more sluggishness. No carrot and stick can ever animate deadened bodies and minds, deadened souls – *dead souls*, Gogol called them, another Russian who knew. The other thing is that employees get worn out, get exhausted mentally and physically. Every year in Europe, repetitive strain injury increases by 20 per cent. In the paper-pushing, keyboard-tapping and check-out-scanning service sector, RSI rises as much as 50 per cent each year. The French National Agency for the Improvement of Work Conditions suggests that musculoskeletal disorder is 'an illness resulting from actions that are deprived of meaning'.

The scholar Guillaume Paoli has taken this state of affairs to task; he's put his own existential gloss on Marx's famous falling rate of profit thesis. Paoli argues that in the workplace there's a concurrent tendency for the *rate of motivation* to plummet as well. In fact, at the moment when global capital seems to have reached its ultimate exterior constraining limits, an internal factor now menaces: the growing dissatisfaction of human resources, without which capital is nothing. The limits to capital aren't, then, objective but *subjective*: subjectivity is the political faultline of the future. Thus, when a professional ruling class appeals to everybody to lean in, to get motivated, to thrive together, a crisis of motivation deepens. It's a negative correlation, always will be – and a good thing too.

Importantly, we're not talking about mass walkouts and general strikes here; it's more about dragging one's feet, about absenteeism, about slowdowns, about being counter-productive, draining the system of its legitimation, being unwilling to equate one's life with the inexorable flow of useless commodities – which takes away the necessity of having to work to afford them. 'Do I really want to live this way?' Paoli asks. 'What am I willing to sacrifice for it?' Is the task for a progressive left to invoke full employment, to strive for an economy with more 'bullshit jobs' (as anarchist David Graeber calls them) – bullshit jobs usually deprived of *pay* as well as sense – or is it to politically

harness demotivation, to leverage it strategically, to bring the workplace down, to hack it because we are hacked off?

A lot of unemployed are glad they no longer have a life on the rack. Yet the perpetual menace of bureaucratic harassment and humiliation stalks, the constant professional intrusion into private life, having to prove you're 'actively seeking work', actively seeking senseless work that nobody really needs. If the jobless person is 'unhappy', it's usually not because they can't find work but because they have no money. 'Don't demand work,' Paoli says, 'demand money; not actively seeking work but actively seeking money.' Or, in an intriguing phrase: 'Actively seeking obscure resources.' Some of those obscure resources might come from an obscure yet obvious source: they're commandeered by a professional managerial class who patrol and survey the world of employment and unemployment, who doctor the job figures, who hark the banalities about job creation and workfare, who man the dole centres and government agencies, and who frequently pay themselves too much.

Imagine how obscure resources might become less obscure, more publicly available: eliminate control measures against the unemployed, shut down all those agencies that manipulate the statistics and keep tabs, and lay off those professional managers. That wouldn't be a bad contribution to budgetary trimmings and austerity drives; afterwards, the sums saved might be directed to automatic and unconditional allocations to the unemployed – ex-professionals included. Meanwhile, if the jobless are unhappy it's also because work is seen as the only value we know. It's as if its opposite – unemployment – means boredom, means nothing to do, not knowing anybody, social exclusion.

But can we take advantage of being *beings* with that inestimable existential resource: *time*? The time for amateurism, for meaningful 'specialisation', for finding your passion, your true calling. How many lawyers in Britain have found their true calling as bakers, competing in the TV series *The Great British Bake Off*? The law profession seems a big duller of the senses, I bet everywhere. Ditto architecture, where bright, young creative architects, yearning to engage in socially useful things, end up having to find work around mindless, blatantly commercial projects – stuff that means nothing to anybody and is usually badly done. The roster of listless, reluctant, bored professionals – even highly paid professionals – is long, and growing as we

speaking. They're performing as themselves despite themselves. Do people dream of being corporate lawyers or merchant bankers, private equity managers and tax accountants? Do these people still dream? Aren't we such stuff as dreams are made on?

ONE GREAT ROMANTIC dream is to reimagine a society that breaks free of the vicious circle of undefined productivity, of productivity for productivity's sake, of accumulation for the sake of capital accumulation. Marx wrote *Capital* as a manifesto on how capitalism generalises unemployment; he warned of the progressive production of a 'relative surplus population' who float in and out of jobs and whose destiny is entirely contingent on the whims of the business cycle. Yet, at the same time, Marx also worked away at his *Grundrisse* manuscript, penning passages with bold leaps of the utopian imagination. Even in this dire system, he said, *immanent* possibilities reside, immanent possibilities for a planet that's been transformed into a vast arena of 'fixed capital'.

More than a hundred and fifty years on, Marx's reality is here, now: the only labour that really counts isn't the labour of hardware but the labour of thoughtware – immaterial labour, cognitive no-collar capitalism. Marx's tack in the *Grundrisse* is that of an optimist: he sees a world that 'suspends living labour', that revolves around 'dead labour', that produces social life under the domain of the 'general intellect'. Any society that organises production around automation and high technology is a society equipped with all the powers to reduce 'necessary labour' time: all the instruments are available, all the wherewithal is here for creating socially disposable time, for reducing labour time to a bare minimum, for freeing up everybody's time to engage in a more passionate and fulfilling life *after* work.

But this vision of a post-work future is a future denied, in denial, stymied by an ideology of productivity, perpetuated and promulgated by a ruling class that cajoles and seduces us into accepting its productivist meme as a given, as the only possible reality. They've parasitised our minds, peddled the privileges of work and the job. It's they who adjudicate worthiness and rank; it's they who forever tut-tut those without work. What counts isn't the effort or the pleasure that flows from that effort, but the enslavement of labour to

capital. What counts isn't the satisfaction that flows from the act of labour, but the status of the social relationship that commands production. Effort isn't productive unless it's done at the behest of some boss. Economists can't deal with a usefulness of people outside of the corporation, outside of stock value, outside of shareholder dividend, outside of cost benefit, outside of a market, outside of work for work's sake. Work is only ever productive when its process is controlled, when it is planned and monitored by professional agents, by managers and the managers of managers.

Work for most people means time spent doing something that has absolutely no meaning for the doer: an alienated activity, with an alienated product (if there is a product), commandeered by an alienating organisation, all conspiring to shape an alienated self. Many twenty- and thirty-somethings these days are learning how to re-evaluate their 'career' choices, as well as the whole notion of career itself, because they're smart enough to know that they might not have anything deemed 'career' anymore. In fact, there's a whole generation of college-educated twenty-somethings who know they'll never work a 'proper' salaried job. They're not turned on by temping or interning, either.

Perhaps, during crises, during the crisis we seem permanently in today, we can scheme alternative survival programs, other methods through which we don't so much 'earn a living' as 'live a living'. Perhaps we can self-downsize and address the torment of work that forever haunts: work is revered in our culture yet at the same time workers are becoming superfluous; you hate your job, your boss, hate the servility of what you do, of how you do it, the pettiness of the tasks involved, yet want to keep your job at all costs. You see no other way of defining yourself other than through work, than what you *do* for a living. Perhaps there's a point at which we can all be pushed over the edge, like the underground man, and voluntarily take the jump ourselves, discover other aspects of ourselves, other ways to fill in the hole, to make a little money, to maintain our dignity and pride and survive off what philosopher-journalist André Gorz called a 'frugal abundance'.

Perhaps it's time for us to get politicised around non-work and undercut the professionalisation of work and life. In opting out, or contesting it from within, perhaps we can create a bit of havoc, refuse to work as we're told, turn

demotivation into a positive device, into a will to struggle for another kind of work, where use-values outbid exchange values, where amateurs prevail over professionals. If, in times of austerity, capitalists can do without workers, then maybe it's high time workers (and ex-workers) realise that we can do without capitalists, without their professional agents and their professional institutions – that we can invent work without them, perform in other ways for ourselves.

BUT THE PROBLEM of *performativity* is stubborn; it's another meme that eats away inside us, that cuts across class and goes up and down the whole employment ladder, from people performing at the bottom, reluctantly and usually with little motivation, to those at the top who lean in, who imbibe all the business management babble and wear tags as 'story strategists', 'futurists' and 'corporate storytellers', proposing 'humanising narratives' for their corporations and organisations. It's a new form of self-presentation, of self-pacification, of self-deception, of convincing yourself that what you do is important, like Mae at the Circle. Performativity encapsulates the rules of the game in the 'reputation economy', an ever-expanding industry of branding and blanding personal identity, an endless anxiety about how you appear to professional audiences, forgetting disagreement, falling in with the pleasing conformity of groupthink.

What we're seeing all around us, enveloping us practically everywhere, is how inauthenticity is so widespread that it's now authentically real. Spin is so ubiquitous, so seemingly omnipotent, that almost everyone is too afraid to admit it, afraid to point the finger at it, to say, look, the emperor is starkers – to admit there's no substance to our lives anymore, to what we do, to what we read, to what we watch, listen to, even to what we dream. In the 1940s, in *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre wondered from what source these negative attitudes about oneself arose. It may seem surprising to talk about 'negative' attitude when so much professional speak emphasises the positive, the affirmative, thinking big, thriving, positive reinforcement and so on.

But could it be that positive posturing is necessary to enable people to live with the awful truth of the daily lie they're now telling themselves, a feature of the self Sartre calls 'bad faith'? 'We shall willingly grant,' Sartre says, 'that

bad faith is a lie to oneself, on condition that we distinguish the lie to oneself from lying in general.' Sartre believes that bad faith can be a normal aspect of life for a very great number of people, that people can live almost happily in bad faith. Bad faith cuts so profoundly that it becomes true, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, a prophecy of trying to find self-fulfilment, a game one plays with oneself, with your self-appearance in society.

Sartre, like Dostoevsky, portrays a bleak social and psychological landscape, bleaker than Marx's: breaking out of bad faith with sincerity, through self-recovery, isn't so simple (not that Marx ever saw it as simple). Bad faith is an iron cage we've constructed around ourselves, a prison in which we're simultaneously inmates and warders. When you've succeeded in persuading yourself that bad faith is really good faith, and you get rewarded by society's bad faith, you're well on the way to living with yourself – with your own, inauthentic self.

We have accepted notions about how we all should behave, about what we should look like. These notions get internalised, get perpetuated through ritual and routine, through ideology; they 'recruit' us into specific categories, 'hail' us into specific roles. And usually, willingly or grudgingly, we accept them. We perform as we should. It takes great acts of courage (or folly) to do otherwise – sometimes self-destructive acts of courage, like the underground man's, carried out to purge our bad faith, to get rid of the lie within our own consciousness, to stop performing, to stop this imaginary representation of the real conditions of life.

But here this paradoxicalist must stop his 'notes' from the underground, even if these notes can never really stop...

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