

Jobs Not to Be Done

Anti-Work Theory and the Resilience of Mutual Aid

TODD CARMODY, *Gemic*

This paper explores recent developments in anti-work theory to identify key learnings for ethnographers in industry. It focuses in particular on how anti-work perspectives allow us to rethink the managerial notions of resilience that dominate across many of the industries that collaborate with corporate ethnographers. In this tradition, achieving resilience is a matter of “finding yourself” at work – of ensuring that a job is not just a paycheck, but an avenue of self-fulfillment. In order to explore what resilience might look like if we bracket the question of work, this paper turns to COVID-era mutual aid projects. Two key learnings help reframe anti-work theory for the EPIC community: the necessity of 1) rethinking the notion of reciprocity that sustains our commitment to work (you only get out of work what you put in) and 2) making positive claims on behalf of freedom (not freedom from work but freedom to make the conditions of your life).

INTRODUCTION

If recent news reporting and cultural commentary are any indication, there are many lessons to learn from the “great resignation.” But most accounts align on a single takeaway – that the voluntary workplace departures that began in early 2021 radically transformed the worker’s relation to the labor force. Whether demanding unionization, a living wage, or greater flexibility, this now-familiar story goes, people started voicing their dissatisfaction with the status quo. They set out, en masse and as never before, to get more out of their working lives. Framed as such, these lessons are relatively easy for ethnographers in industry to take on board. Not only has the study of work been foundational to the academic disciplines of anthropology and sociology from which many practitioners hail, but ethnographers in industry are routinely called on to explore the outsized importance of work in people’s lives. The COVID-19 pandemic, it would thus seem, has brought sharper relief to something that the EPIC community has long intuited: that people want more out of work than just a paycheck.

But what if this is not the only or even the most important lesson to be gleaned from “the great resignation”? What if the real takeaway is not that people want more out of work – new ways of making work meaningful – but new ways of defining themselves and their lives *outside of work*? What if the point is not to make work better, but to work less or to avoid work altogether? These are the conclusions reached by a growing body of interdisciplinary thought on anti-work politics. What began as a niche field of research and activism on the margins of Marxist, feminist, disability, and critical race studies is now finding surprising traction in popular culture. The visibility of recent trade books like Sarah Jaffe’s *Work Won’t Love You Back*, the popularity of the anti-work thread on Reddit, and growing enthusiasm for universal basic income proposals are but three data points suggesting a broader trend – that anti-work politics are moving into the mainstream and may even be fueling a backlash against work itself.

Where does this backlash leave ethnographers in industry? What can anti-work theory bring to the EPIC community? This paper explores the history of and recent developments in anti-work thinking to identify key learnings for ethnographers in industry. It will focus in particular on how anti-work perspectives offer a new understanding of conventional ideas about *resilience*. There are many ways, of course, to define resilience, most of which may seem to have little to do with work. But across many of the industries that collaborate with corporate ethnographers, the term *resilience* has a distinctly managerial ring. This is not by

chance. Since the emergence of the “human resources” paradigm in the mid-1970s, managerial theorists and practitioners have sought to better align workers’ desires with organizational objectives. As one early champion wrote, “We seek that degree of integration in which the individual can achieve his goals *best* by directing his efforts toward the success of the organization” (McGregor 1960, 55). Resilience from this vantage is a matter of massaging – if not erasing – work/life distinctions so that individuals can find fulfillment in productivity (Costea et al 2007). As the authors of *Resilience at Work: How to Succeed No Matter What Life Throws At You* put it: “Human beings have the unique ability to utilize activities, like work, for creative expression and fulfillment of life purpose and meaning. Unfulfilling work stifles these human capacities” (Maddi and Khoshaba 2005, 180).

But what does resilience look like if, taking the lessons of anti-work theory on board, we bracket the question of work? This paper looks for potential answers by turning not to the great resignation but to a parallel social development, namely the proliferation of mutual aid projects during the COVID-19 pandemic. As an overview of recent ethnographic research demonstrates, mutual aid projects are fertile ground for thinking about what might come after work. In particular, mutual aid projects highlight two learnings that help us reframe anti-work theory for ethnographers in industry: the necessity of 1) rethinking the notion of reciprocity that sustains our commitment to work (you only get out of work what you put in) and 2) making positive claims on behalf of freedom (not freedom from work but freedom to make the conditions of your life).

In what follows, I survey the theoretical underpinnings of recent anti-work theory, charting a perhaps unlikely course from Aristotle and Luther to Marx and contemporary managerial theorists. The paper next turns to recent ethnographies of pandemic-era mutual aid initiatives to flesh out the questions of reciprocity and freedom at the core of the anti-work project. I conclude by exploring the usefulness of anti-work thinking and organizing to ethnographers in industry by drawing on recent examples from my own project work.

THE WORK SOCIETY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Why should we assume that all work is or should be inherently meaningful? And why do we cling to this idea even in moments of social rupture – like the COVID-19 pandemic – where change feels most possible? Hardly new, the questions at the heart of anti-work theory are rooted in the broader constellation of ideas and institutions that social theorists often call “the work society.” As the philosopher André Gorz notes, work societies consider work at once

a moral duty, a social obligation, and *the* route to personal success. The ideology of work assumes that the more each individual works, the better off everyone will be; those who work little or not at all are acting against the interests of the community as a whole and do not deserve to be members of it; those who work hard achieve success and those who do not only have themselves to blame. (Gorz 1980, 126)

In work societies, the value of work is not only or even primarily economic. Work is the means by which individuals find recognition in the overlapping social, political, and moral communities that constitute the broader collective. Though it might not always feel this way, in other words, we do not dedicate ourselves to work out of economic necessity alone; social and political norms tell us to. In recent years, thanks to dramatic advances in industrial productivity and automation, this contradiction has become hard to overlook. As the political scientist James Chamberlain has observed, “The value of employment in contemporary society far exceeds its function in distributing material rewards and enabling us to satisfy various needs and wants” (Chamberlain 2018, 2). For feminist theorist Kathi

Weeks, the conclusion at hand is clear: work produces not only goods and services but also social and political subjects. And in so doing, it crowds out other possible modes of political, social, and cultural community. In work societies, we become a *we* first and foremost as workers (Weeks 2011).

To be sure, only people whose activities are recognized as work can join this *we*. Work societies of all kinds have historically used this distinction to police who belongs and who does not and to shore up established hierarchies of race, gender, sexuality, class, and ability. As such, many people whose lives are consumed by labor (or toil) are nonetheless excluded from full civic participation in the work society. But given the difficulty that even the most privileged individuals experience in trying to opt out of the work society, the question remains: Why do we prioritize work above all else? In exploring this question, it is helpful to recall that work was not always the center of social life in the West. For much of antiquity, in fact, work was considered a curse. Plato, for instance, equated manual labor with slavery, and Aristotle argued that work distracted people from the cultivation of virtue, life's truest purpose (Svendsen 2016, 19). Work continued to be a burden into the Middle Ages in Europe, though the monastic tradition lent it the additional freight of religious penance. It was Martin Luther who, during the Reformation, brought the mantra of "prayer and work" out of the monastery and into society at large. No longer a cloistered practice of atonement, a lifetime commitment to labor in God's name became the basis for a universal work ethic (Ciulla 2000, 42-3). The secularization of this ethic is Max Weber's famous subject in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). There Weber argues that the "coming of the modern economic order" evacuated the Protestant work ethic of its religious ethos and reduced it to a "worldly morality" of rational conduct. By the twentieth century, this "joyless lack of meaning" no longer needed the "transcendental sanction" of the Reformation. "The Puritan wanted to work in a calling," Weber concludes. But "we are forced to do so" (Weber 2001, 25, 123).

Weber may have been too pessimistic, however, both about the work ethic's "transcendental" hold and about its staying power. Indeed, as a psychological justification for why we work so much, the Protestant ethic has not disappeared so much as it has taken new shape over time. In the Fordist-era of factory and assembly line production, for instance, men embraced the work ethic not to be looked favorably by God but to shore up their masculinity and find social recognition as "breadwinners." For Irish and eastern European immigrant men, moreover, embracing the work ethic was also a means of "becoming white" (Roediger 2001). In our moment, a handful of examples should suffice to show that rumors of the work ethic's demise have been greatly exaggerated. Consider, for instance, how progressive activists mobilize the moral vocabulary of work to make the case for immigration reform. Undocumented immigrants deserve a pathway to citizenship, this argument goes, because they have already demonstrated their personal commitment to hard work. A similar dynamic is at stake in the blurring of work and personal life that defines what Richard Florida dubbed "the creative classes" (Florida 2002). Clearly, to "discover oneself" in work is not to escape the power of the work ethic. It is to embrace economic productivity as the truest measure of individual authenticity. From the so-called creative class to the gig economy and the culture of mindfulness, the work ethic lives on.

In addition to the work ethic, work societies also find a conceptual touchstone in what has come to be known as the labor theory of value. At its core, the labor theory of value maintains that only labor can produce economic value. We can only know what a good or commodity is truly worth when we know how much labor has gone into its production. Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776) is the locus classicus for the labor theory of value, but Karl Marx also looms large. For many commentators, in fact, the Marxist project tout court

can be summarized as an effort to return work – and all the value it creates – to the workers. As one famous interpreter of Marx’s philosophy put it, labor “is the self-expression of man, an expression of his individual physical and mental powers. In this genuine activity, man develops himself, becomes himself; work is not only a means to an end – the product – but an end in itself, the meaningful expression of human energy; hence work is enjoyable” (Fromm 1961, 42-3). This is a familiar, if somewhat caricatured, Marxist argument: we must tear down the economic structures that alienate us from the very wellspring of our humanity – our labor. But a similar take on the labor theory of value is also implicit in the management discourse of resilience we have already touched on. The scholar Peter Fleming has called this approach the “just be yourself” style of management (Fleming 2009, 8). Workers are asked to bring their “authentic” selves into work, thus incorporating “the whole person into the production matrix” and making both individual and company more resilient in the process.

From political theory to Marxist activism and managerial practice, anti-work theorists begin by interrogating the cultural forces that have led us to prioritize work above all else. Only after making the familiar unfamiliar and the common-sensical strange are we in a position to ask what comes next. What other ways of organizing political, social, and cultural community come into view when work is no longer the horizon of identity or belonging? Pandemic-era mutual aid projects offer a glimpse of one such future.

MUTUAL AID

The great resignation may not have been quite as unprecedented as the often breathless reporting in the popular press would have us believe (Fuller and Kerr 2022). But public discourse itself certainly feels different, especially with the arrival of COVID-19. Not only have critiques of the work society become increasingly mainstream, but they have also heightened public awareness of social inequality – and focused attention on the needs of those hardest hit by the pandemic. In this context, nagging questions about why work should matter so much have spilled over into perhaps even more urgent questions about how we should be spending our time. Hence the upswell of community-based initiatives during the pandemic, from food banks to free meal delivery services, seed swaps, and the home-based manufacture of personal protective equipment (PPE). There isn’t yet a definitive study on the subject, but participants on the ground argue that COVID-19 has sparked the largest and most diverse mobilization of “regular people” helping each other that has ever happened (Sitrin 2020, xvii). From community support for people with high needs and low access to resources in Iraq to “solidarity shopping” in Italy and efforts to fight the re-institutionalization of people with disabilities in South Korea, new forms of community and care have found a reach as global as the pandemic itself.

Observers have adopted the term “mutual aid” to describe this broad range of grassroots projects. On the one hand, mutual aid is a useful shorthand because it underscores a baseline ethos shared across a diverse set of initiatives – people helping people in a time of need. On the other hand, the term mutual aid also draws a connection between community responses to COVID-19 and earlier moments of social cooperation, from Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy to the Black Panther Party’s free breakfast programs and even the mutual aid societies established by free people of color in North America as early as the eighteenth century (Solnit 2010). For some activists, the term mutual aid also signals a specifically anarchist understanding of social solidarity. Theorists in this camp find a touchstone in the work of Russian writer Peter Kropotkin, whose book *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902) argued – contra social Darwinists of the day – that “mutual support, mutual aid, and mutual defense” play a more important role in human life than the

competitive struggle for survival (Kropotkin 1902). Today, left-aligned and explicitly anarchist activists see mutual aid as part of a two-pronged political agenda. As the lawyer, activist, and writer Dean Spade argues, mutual aid is a means of responding to pressing needs and contemporary crises while also organizing to remake the structures that create such needs and crises in the first place (Spade 2020).

Though the issue has not garnered as much attention in the mainstream press, questions about work – what it is and why it matters – have also been central to COVID-era mutual aid projects. We can look briefly at two case studies to illustrate what is at stake here. The first case study is D.C. Mutual Aid Network, a coalition of community organizers and activists in Washington, D.C. Originally convened in 2015 by Black Lives Matter-DC to combat police violence against African Americans, D.C. Mutual Aid Network expanded during the COVID-19 pandemic to address a host of other social issues, from food insecurity to domestic violence and housing discrimination. From the beginning, participants had a nuanced sense of the project’s urgency and impact. As one activist posted to social media:

It’s been one of those weeks. One of the longest weeks of my life. Since Tuesday I helped build the foundation of a hyper-localized bloc of organizers. The Ward 6 Mutual Aid Team has utilized the model initiated by an amazing group of D.C. organizers who formed the D.C. Mutual Aid Network. This grassroots, community-led effort initiated by Black Lives Matter D.C., No Justice No Pride, Black Swan Academy, BYP100 and others formed in response to the inevitability that our systems will not protect, support, or sustain the lives of poor, working class Black and Brown people here in Washington, D.C. (Jun and Lance 2020)

But while participants and community members recognized the necessity of the activism and outreach endeavors performed under the banner of the D.C. Mutual Aid Network, the question of what kind of work they were doing was far less clear.

Across its various activities, members of the D.C. Mutual Aid Network were at pains to distinguish their efforts on behalf of the community from *charity work*. The group’s Facebook page makes this much clear. “Mutual aid is people working together to meet each other’s material needs (food, housing, healthcare, etc.).” Charity work, on the other hand, is hierarchical and reciprocal. It subordinates the needs of the recipient to the generosity of the giver, while also requiring that anyone who asks for help first show that they are “deserving.” Charity recipients might be required to attest to their sobriety, prove their citizenship status, or – in the case of state-based welfare and SNAP benefits – demonstrate their willingness to work. Community initiatives like D.C. Mutual Aid Network, by contrast, “strive to be transparent, collaborative, and powered by the people.” This work is not “protecting each other, not policing each other.” Rather than requiring beneficiaries to demonstrate that they deserve to be helped, “it requires each of us to actively create the world we want to see” (“DC Mutual Aid Network” n.d.).

If mutual aid is not charity work, neither is it “gainful employment” in any conventional sense, as a second case study illustrates. A grassroots network spanning England, Scotland, and Wales, Scrub Hub was formed in March 2020 to produce the PPE that healthcare workers wear to prevent cross-contamination. Scrub Hub volunteers – mostly women – sourced material, arranged deliveries, and sewed scrubs in their homes. The more productive they became, however, the more Scrub Hub volunteers found themselves treated as cheap labor. The National Health Services Trusts, which distributed the PPE made by Scrub Hub, imposed hierarchical management and quality control systems. These measures not only made the activities this “army of volunteers” performed more difficult, but they also encouraged Scrub Hub participants to think of themselves as “service providers” and of the

healthcare workers they were helping as “service users” (Aidan and Sam 2021). In an effort to combat what amounted to a recasting of mutual aid as wage labor, Scrub Hub groups endeavored to bring healthcare workers into the production process by “centering their designs around the immediate needs that the workers reported, such as the requirement for long sleeved plastic gowns as opposed to the flimsy sleeveless aprons provided as standard, or by circumventing the institutional scrub distribution hierarchy which left many social care providers ill-equipped” (Lachowicz and Donaghey 2021).

Taken together, these ethnographic vignettes of the D.C. Mutual Aid Network and Scrub Hub shed light on the anti-work politics of mutual aid projects writ large. In endeavoring to counteract the assumption that mutual aid is charity work, the D.C. Mutual Aid Network fostered a mode of social relation irreducible to reciprocity. Work societies are bound by the assumption that you only get out what you put in; your status in life and position in the world correlate directly to the quality of your labor. Dispensing with the morality of the market, mutual aid imagines collective life as a far more delicate weaving together of social interdependencies. Reciprocity gives way to mutuality: the obligations, responsibilities, and support that are irreducible to immediate recompense. For its part, Scrub Hub embodies an anti-work politics that goes beyond negative conceptions of freedom. Instead of seeking “freedom from work,” participants sought active and meaningful involvement in determining the paths their lives might take – and the kinds of connections they might forge with others.

ANTI-WORK THEORY AND ETHNOGRAPHIC PRACTICE

This essay has aimed to take stock of the rise of anti-work politics in mainstream culture by tracking several related strands of thought and practice. We began with the growing acknowledgment – in public discourse, on social media, and as a matter of individual intuition – that work might not be inherently meaningful. From the viral misgivings that fueled the Great Resignation, we turned to the theoretical underpinnings of anti-work theory and to recent efforts to imagine mutual aid as an alternative to the work society and the managerial notions of resilience that prop up the work society today. There are clear lessons for ethnographers in industry in the path taken thus far. Indeed, this essay’s central takeaway is less a conclusion than a point of departure. Our task is to help clients understand that anti-work sentiments, however articulated, are often less about declaring one’s “freedom from work” than about actively constructing the conditions of one’s life. And as with pandemic-era mutual aid, the goal is often not to enforce reciprocity – everyone gets out what they put in – but to create the conditions for collective support. Once we take this perspective on board, the next step for ethnographers in industry is to better understand what and how people want to build lives without work at the very center.

But ethnography, of course, is never just a means to an end. Being in the field is also a chance to rethink our preliminary assumptions and theoretical aims. I want to bring this point home by turning briefly to two projects on Gen Z internet culture that my colleagues and I undertook on behalf of clients in social tech. In the first of these projects, desk research suggested that many young Nigerians have trouble accessing the gig-work platforms they feel could help redefine their relation to work and to the economic systems they have inherited. It would have been easy to conclude that these signals point to unmet needs and new opportunities in upskilling and local worker verification programs. But contextualizing desk research with interviews in the field brought a new perspective to light, suggesting that young Nigerians’ efforts to rethink the place of work in their lives was bound up with broader shifts in attitudes toward institutional authority. Just as work was losing its central

place as the arbiter of social value and meaning, many young Nigerians were beginning to question traditional institutions like family and the government. As one informant told us, “The youth today identify as the ‘Soro Soke’ [speak out] generation. For my parents growing up, speaking was a sign of disrespect. They were taught not to speak their minds. But today, technology is opening the lives of young people and giving them the power to speak out against the political elite and the status quo.” In order to grasp shifting attitudes toward work in Nigeria, we advised the client, it is important first to understand work as a social institution whose authority is no more set in stone than is the authority of parents and political elite with which it is interwoven.

In another project, also for a tech client, our team was tasked with understanding how Gen Zers engage with eating- and health-related information online. We sent ethnographers across the US and India to better understand the social worlds and information pathways of young users. Given our experience with the Nigerian market, we were not surprised to learn that questions of work were top of mind for Gen Zers in the US and India when it came to eating and health. Many participants approached eating and health as a means of accessing what they took to be the “good life,” and often enough the “good life” involved working less or not at all – but still eating well (and looking good). At the same time, though, our experience in the field underscored a less obvious but perhaps even more consequential learning from anti-work theory for ethnographers in industry – namely that our commitment to the ideal of work dies hard. As with Weber, so goes Gen Z: even among the most staunchly anti-work members of this younger generation, the work ethic is less likely to disappear altogether than it is to transform into something else. As one key participant in the study on eating and health put it, “It’s a flex to spend 12 hours in the office and post about it online. But it’s also a flex to spend five hours a day at the gym and to let everyone on Instagram and TikTok know.” The upshot, this participant intuited, is that it’s not enough to give up on flexing at the office if you haven’t given up on flexing at the gym. You’re not truly anti-work if you merely transfer the work ethic to other parts of your life. That’s not the good life; that’s not real resilience.

It can be difficult, of course, even for the most sophisticated theorists of the work society, to know when our love of working out is actually just love of work. But grappling with such distinctions – on the ground and in the field – is a job for ethnographers to do.

Todd Carmody is an innovation and strategy consultant based in Gemic’s Berlin and New York offices. He is the author of the book *Work Requirements: Race, Disability, and the Print Culture of Social Welfare* (Duke University Press 2022).

REFERENCES CITED

Chamberlain, James, 2018. *Undoing Work, Rethinking Community: A Critique of the Social Function of Work*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Ciulla, Joanne B., 2000. *The Working Life: The Promise and Betrayal of Modern Work*. New York: Times Books.

Costea Bogdan, Norman Crump, and Kostas Amiridis, 2007. “Managerialism, the Therapeutic Habitus and the Self in Contemporary Organizing.” *Human Relations* 61 (5):66 1-85.

“DC Mutual Aid Network.” Facebook Group. Accessed 18 May 2022
<https://pixel.facebook.com/groups/492881801379594/permalink/499132654087842/>

- Fleming, Peter, 2009. *Authenticity and the Cultural Politics of Work: New Forms of Informal Control*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Florida, Richard, 2002. *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, and Everyday Life*. New York: Basic Books.
- Fromm, Erich, 1961. *Marx's Concept of Man*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing.
- Fuller, Joseph, and William Kerr, 2022. "The Great Resignation Didn't Start with the Pandemic." *Harvard Business Review*. Accessed 25 May 2022. <https://hbr.org/2022/03/the-great-resignation-didnt-start-with-the-pandemic>.
- Gorz, André, 1980. *Farewell to the Working Class: An Essay on Post-Industrial Socialism*. London: Pluto Press.
- Jun, Nathan and Mark Lance, 2020. "Anarchist Responses to a Pandemic: The COVID-19 Crisis as a Case Study in Mutual Aid." *Kennedy Institution of Ethics Journal* 30.3-4: 367 – 378.
- Kropotkin, Peter, 1902. *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution*. New York: McClure Phillips.
- Maddi, Salvatore R. and Deborah M. Khoshaba. *Resilience at Work: How to Succeed No Matter What Life Throws At You*. New York: Harper Collins.
- McGregor, Douglas, 1960. *The Human Side of Enterprise*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Roediger, David R., 2007. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. London: Verso.
- Sitrin, Martina, and Collectiva Sembra, ed., 2020. *Pandemic Solidarity: Mutual Aid During the Covid-19 Crisis*. London: Pluto Books, 2020.
- Solnit, Rebecca, 2010. *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster*. New York: Penguin.
- Spade, Dean, 2020. *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)*. London: Verso.
- Svendsen, Lars, 2016. *Work*. New York: Routledge.
- Weber, Max, 2001. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Translated by Talcott Parsons. London: Routledge.
- Weeks, Kathi, 2011. *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*. Durham: Duke University Press.