



## The playing fields of late capitalism

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**review of:**

Niels Åkerstrom Andersen (2009) *Power at play: The relationships between play, work and governance*. London: Palgrave Macmillan (HB, pp. 192, £69.00, ISBN 9780230228207).

Neo-liberalism seems to persist through a double life. For sure, it believes in itself like all forms of fundamentalist thought, but it also unconsciously divines its own impossibility. It thus grows outrageous characters to compensate, to fill the void, like a petulant child who invents far-fetching tales after raiding the cookie jar. And is this not also the case today when the corporate world and the public sector tell us that the crime scene of exploitation (and self-exploitation in the immaterial workforce) might be thought of as a kind of playful adventure, a child-like funny game that in the end makes us strategic, rational adults? One of the more amusing accounts of such attempts to imbue play and fun into the rhythms of an otherwise stultifying work-a-day can be found in Ben Hamper's (1992) laconic account of life in a car factory. Not that dissimilar to the knowledge workhouses that now predominate the global south, labour in this factory was tedious, soul deadening and merely a means to achieve something 'other' than work. With the aim of seeking to instill some of that 'life' back into a lifeless labour process, human resource managers devised an ingenious plan: Let's take one of the workers off the assembly line, dress him up in an garish orange cat suit, call him 'Howie the Quality Cat' and make him wander the plant, joking with folk and engaging in light-hearted small talk about the virtues of zero-defects.

Unfortunately for the hapless worker who was chosen for the role, his life at the factory moved from merely boring to one of hellish anxiety. Howie instantly become the target of ridicule, practical jokes, and various kinds of humiliating stunts involving fire and oil. Even though Howie still beamed with a big quality cat smile, he slowly began to resemble a frightened stray with a bad case of the mange. And as the pressure mounted he was soon a broken quality feline: to the delight of his fellow workers.

Howie had obviously become the displaced target for worker frustration at the exploitative and needlessly oppressive conditions of factory life. However, what is perhaps more interesting is the complete failure to co-opt the flows of fun and play that has always existed in the subterranean networks forged among workers themselves. A rich tradition of sociological research highlighting the importance of fun and play at

work is instructive here. Workers have long known the benefits of play for escaping the regulative nature of work. Indeed, before some corporate boardroom hack or ‘funsultant’ decided that play might enhance productivity, the informal sphere engendered a space of autonomy and sometimes anti-work sentiment that managers often distrusted since it was beyond their control. Michael Burawoy, Donald Roy and more recently Andrew Ross, for example, have indicated how this well-maintained zone of imperceptibility serves to help workers sidestep the obstructions of cold economic rationality and sometimes subvert it. Indeed, this informal economy of joy not only afforded some relief from the gratuitous nature of organized labour but is often secured at the expense of the managerial prerogative (jokes, wanton sabotage, time wasting, etc.). Commentators have rightly warned about romanticizing this secret life of the organization (such as Collinson, 1992). Nevertheless, its political import in the context of capital/labor relations has readily been noted by researchers, managers and workers alike, especially with regards to autonomy and the potential for democratic self-management.

The role of games and its intersection with fun and play is the topic of Niels Åkerstrom Andersen’s interesting *Power at Play* (2009). The book seeks to map the emergence of the concept of play within managerial discourse and explain the way in which it disrupts and reinvents fundamental power relations in organizations. From an historical vantage point, Andersen does a good job at demonstrating the various shifts in management forays into play, fun and games ranging from competitive games (1860s onwards), training and simulation games (1955 onwards) and social creation games (1980s onwards). The book, however, is not interested in games and play *per se*, but the shifting background conditions that such managerial interventions are symptomatic of. As the author argues,

the epistemological interest of the book pertains to diagnostics of the present and enquires into the reasons why play has exploded over the past 15 years in private, public and voluntary organizations, and what is at stake in this explosion ... this includes, not least, the way in which play allows for decision and power to become coupled together and the applications of this. (9)

The analysis of this historical development is important and of much value for any reader interested in games, play and fun in the workplace. While the causes of such discursive permutations are not explored in great depth, the last part of the book – concerned with the ‘social creation games’ – does seem to resonate with the broader trend of corporatizing the protean sociality of the workforce. Such games are diverse, ranging from icebreakers to team building exercises and puzzle solving cells. For example, one team building game consists of ‘reconfiguring a group of loosely connected team members into a productive and dynamic team, capable of self-management, creating own goals and strategies, and establishing its own identity and mutual responsibility’ (60). Here we see simulation and imitation of an organic social relation assuming importance whereby workers imagine what it might be like to work together if it were not for the obstacle of power. But this mimetic feature is complex and must be conceptualized carefully if we are not to cede credit for democratic self-management to the false generosity of the modern firm. Like the Hobbesian justification for the Leviathan, the corporation too would also like us to believe that without it we would be nothing.

Andersen's book intends to link the recent appearance of games, play and 'fun' at work to the articulation of power under different organizational conditions, ranging from what the author terms formal bureaucratic administrative forms to polycentric modes of organizing. The last two chapters entitled 'Political Play With Boundaries' and 'Coupling, Play and Pedagogy' respectively seek to link games, play and power. The former chapter does so by way of two case studies about a voluntary work organization and a state school context. The latter is more theoretical, conceptually embedding power at the heart of playfulness at work via a well-wrought analysis. The author makes some insightful observations here about how the use of play as a learning tool might function to reinforce control relations through rationalization. Moreover, fun and games might be a method of ushering in more insidious flows of power. In each case, however, the discussion does become a little bogged down in the complexities of Luhmann-inspired analytics (including deliberations about 'parasitary coupling'; 'loose coupling'; 'fixed coupling'; and 'hegemonic couplings'). Indeed, I would have liked the investigation to move beyond these neo-functionalist pre-occupations and delve more deeply into the political struggles that lie behind the injection of play and fun into workplaces today.

On the topic of power, the book posits a Luhmannian definition:

power is exercised when the power-inferior feels unsure about the power-superior and steers himself from the perspective from the possible intentions of the power-superior. Thus, power presupposes the freedom of the power-inferior ... modern power is non-coercion. (140)

Given this arcane and ultra-liberal conception of power, perhaps it is not unsurprising that the book's analysis of it, even when critical, has difficulties in extricating itself from the pages of management manuals and 'how to' handbooks. I certainly did find the wide array of texts referenced fascinating (with titles like *Fun and Gains* and *The Fun Factor*). But we do not hear much from the recipients of these occasionally infantile interventions. As Howie the Quality Cat's' singed faux-fur might intimate, a more weighty political register is present here rooted in the struggle for self-valorization, non-exploitation and escape from the ideology of work. Even when the book is critical (which is not difficult when confronted with titles like 'Making Work Play' – and why such wordplay is almost mandatory in this genre is beyond me), the analysis is still elaborated mainly from a managerial point of view. Little attention is given to the tension between worker-initiated forms of play *against work* and the manufactured games and fun exercises designed to *deepen work*. Indeed, informative here is the vast and silent sub-history in which workers have tried to get by, cope and muster protest within the informal networks of play and games.

If we were to reinscribe play and fun from the point of view of the multitude (which must ironically include managers since they work and are exploited by capital as much as anyone else), then we might identify a kind of constitutive political 'dark matter' that lies behind these managerial interventions today. What do I mean by this? One thing that we do know about managerial rationality is that it is not playful or fun at all. We may see fun around the moment of work (since exercises are performed away from the actual task). It might provide the subject matter for play when it fails or when a boss loses their temper. But in and of itself management is the expression of dead labor since in its ideal and distilled form we are fundamentally left with a machinic social task that objectifies and manipulates people. But here is the hitch for the contemporary

corporation and the emergent forms of capitalism. If the production process cannot do without living labor as both its source of value and pre-conditional infrastructure (which is more and more the case today as workers' emotional and social competencies become the new means of production), then it must invariably turn to this under ground economy for vitality and ideas. The corporation assumes a bio-political or 'biocratic' dimension when it seeks to prospect life itself. Andersen's identification of 'social creation games' as the most recent paradigm of play is, I think, indicative of this turn to the social for the things that the formal corporate form cannot provide itself. To be fair, the author does touch upon the notion of parasitical supplementation, but seems to immediately get caught in the web of Luhmann's abstruse systems theory. Analyzing how a 'learning system' might connect with a 'play system' and vice versa, the author states:

A parasitary coupling is in fact not even a coupling. Instead, I will discuss how a system becomes a parasite on another system – when system A unambiguously links up to system B's motivational side and only perceives B of instrumental benefit for A. This becomes apparent if system A does not relate to the reflections of system B. A observes B as a benefit without independent functionality. (145)

I'm not sure if this is what I had in mind. Let me present an example to explain. The parasitical nature of contemporary corporatism manifest in private, public and voluntary organizations today is no more evident when it comes to fun at work. As noted earlier, the social function of management is generally only funny from an external point of view: When being ridiculed when it fails (think of *The Office's* David Brent), is needlessly excessive in its interventions, or ironically when it actually attempts to be funny (Hamper's poor Quality Cat). It is an old critical truism that the capitalist form inherently cannot reproduce itself by own mechanism. Because it consists of an ossified and formal structure of dead labour it needs a non-capitalist prop to continue. Today this is seen in the immense interest that the firm has in expressions of non-work or even anti-work in order to create a sense of life within the moment of exploitation. In this sense, the corporation does not create play or fun, but taps into play (often originally formed against work) before rendering it into yet another lifeless and often humiliating abstraction. This is no doubt the case in the factory or the IT startup as Ross has very nicely described in his book *No Collar* (2004). Indeed, when managed fun (including games and planned games) enters the formal discourse of the consultancy firm, the call-centre or wherever, it is often experienced as something non-playful and coercive, and in the case of Hamper and others, the target of fierce criticism. The point is not that workers hate fun, but see it for what it really is: A smoke screen to deepen work and consequently the social factory of unhappiness.

But it is the anti-capitalist and anti-regulative impulse of worker initiated games, play and fun that I think is interesting. This is not simply because of my own particular views, but also because it does go to the heart of the political permutations that are taking place in the world of work and beyond today. The importance of play and frivolity has been explored a great deal in the critical literature given its juxtaposition with economic rationality (see Marcuse [1955], for example, for a wonderful investigation whose erudition is only matched by 'Bifo' Berardi's [2009] recent contribution). Moments of fun might be found within the broader context of work, but the basic axiomatic principles of capitalist rationality are still as anathema to play today

as they were in Weber or Marx's time. Again this is why the computation of fun represented by Howie the Quality Cat was merely a prelude for some proper play. The fooling around by these workers certainly may have had an unintended effect of inadvertently reinforcing broader class relations (see Burawoy, 1979) but in and of itself still represented a moment of non-work: time wasting, anti-management jokes and various forms of sabotage. On this count, we might do well to reread Ross' (1988) learned analysis of the Paris Commune and its vertiginous codification in the drunken poetry of Rimbaud (as the child-poet avers to his fellow workers in 'Blankets of Blood': *It's our turn! Romantic friends. The fun begins/O Waves of fire, we'll never work again!*). The abolition of these authoritarian structures and the surplus scarcity that maintained them was a joyous and playful moment. Not because it was intentionally designed to be such but because it released the worker from his or her identity, from the imprisoning idiom of the *métier*. And in a society structured by the ideology of work, this identity includes everyone as Rimbaud's lyrical scorn attests (*bosses and workers/all of them peasants, and common*). Self-management and a driving counter-work imaginary transformed the social into living labour, freeing it from the tyranny of compartmentalized roles that had little to do with being human. This event transmuted work into a living activity again, replete with moments of initiative, play and serious non-coercive problem solving (of which the weak and disingenuous simulacra we might find in a HSBC or Google training game). Ross (1988) even suggests that the Commune reactivated a counter-modulation of pleasure and playfulness that was strictly forgetful of work as defined by fathers, teachers, priests and the Gates Corporation. Importantly, this did not mean that things didn't get done or children went hungry as if the communards were blissfully high on a utopian dream. Indeed, participative mutual aid, co-operation and democratic multi-tasking abound. For it was only after a prolonged, nasty dirty war that this zone of imperceptible sociality came to be termed idleness. Here, on the contrary, 'by a striking paradox, laziness, remained outside the work order, but moved fast, too fast' (Ross, 1988: 53).

Of course, none of this is to romanticize the commune or any other instance of democratic self-management (although I see nothing wrong with that *per se*). It simply intends to argue that when games, play and fun appear as isolated concepts in a discourse of power they cease to have meaning. Or, more accurately, they *ought* to cease to have meaning. Why? Well, not dissimilar to the reified notion of work, when they are practiced in a democratic milieu of self-management, outside of bosses, deadlines and directives, they are everything and nothing: Play and work collapse into themselves for they are not separate from the world as such, especially once the cultural logic of the 'boss function' disappears. In the meantime, the salience of play and games in the realm of contemporary work organizations indicates something is still very wrong. That this suggestion is not raised to the level of a political question only compounds the worry. 'Let's play!' Well, no let's not, at least not in the manner suggested by an unimaginative consultant.

Andersen's book offers an extensive and thorough overview of the way in which games and play has evolved and been represented in the business literature. The book has made this reader think about the relationship between play and work in a more serious manner. While play and games are certainly ambivalent figures within the run-away train that we call the 'modern economy', I have been invited to reflect on what it might

mean to rediscover the happiness of play, a happiness that perhaps lies beyond capital and labour.

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