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theory & politics in organization

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Free Work

an *ephemera* conference
in collaboration with Essex Business School, University of Essex

11-13 May 2011

Senatsreservespeicher, Cuvrystr. 3-4, Berlin-Kreuzberg, Germany

Invitation

How do we understand the relation between freedom and work? For some, ‘freedom’ and ‘work’ are inevitably contradictory terms, while for others new forms of work such as knowledge or creative work offer the opportunity of freeing ourselves. In times of unemployment and job precariousness, the freedom to work is of great concern, especially when working for ‘free’ – whether as an unpaid intern or a professional required to work overtime – is increasingly becoming an essential component of contemporary working life.

Many thinkers have conceptualised the relation between freedom and work. For Karl Marx, a clear incompatibility exists between the realm of freedom and the realm of labour. The sphere of production is one in which labour is determined by necessity and external expediency, and we can only hope to organise it collectively. True freedom, defined as ‘the development of human powers as an end in itself’, is at odds with the realm of labour, although ‘it can only flourish with this realm of necessity as its basis’ (1991: 959). It is this insight that drives hopes for a *freedom from work*, in a leisure or post-work society (Aronowitz et al., 1998).

A similar idea guides Hannah Arendt’s (1958) distinction between labour and work. For Arendt, labour is governed entirely by biological need, whereas work exceeds the realm of necessity to include the freedom to produce a world. Much of the hope of the nineteenth and twentieth century lay in attempts to transform labour into work and thus allow for the possibility of free work. But Arendt saw the opposite trend: the twentieth century, she said, is best understood as a ‘society of labourers’, which seeks to reduce work (and action) to ‘a job necessary for the life of society’ (1958: 5).

In Max Weber’s (2002) protestant work ethic, we see the quest for free work infused with a theology of redemption, with *freedom* to be gained *through work*. In contemporary business gospel, we once again recognise the theme of redemption through work. The knowledge worker, or ‘creative class’ (Florida, 2002), is thought capable of finding freedom from earthly demands in a realm of pure expressivity where work cannot be distinguished from play. The internet is the latest in a line of technologies sustaining a hope for a technology-enabled *freedom at work* (e.g. Blauner, 1964).

Where *freedom in work* is promised to all of us, and work even necessitates the exercise of our creativity, innovation and authenticity at work, it is nonetheless often unpaid. So contemporary capitalism relies on incorporating the free labour of those who produce culture in the digital economy (Böhm and Land, 2009; Terranova, 2000); it appropriates the work of ‘culturepreneurs’ for the branding of the ‘creative city’ (Lange, 2005; Lanz, 2009); and develops techniques of crowd sourcing that blur the boundaries between creative potential and corporate interest (Arvidsson, 2007).

The possibility of free work is also conditioned upon its socio-spatial opportunities. ‘Free’ spaces such as the digital commons or abandoned, vacant city areas that seem less determined by ownership, capital, or institutionalisation enable alternative working practices of artistic, activist or open source communities (e.g. Sheridan, 2007). Yet, these productive, innovative and creative free work forces taking place in a space beyond monetary value creation seem to be increasingly instrumentalised in line with the ‘new spirit of capitalism’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005).

Freedom to work today also means workfare, precarity, sweatshops and child labour. As the French multitudes take to the streets, their 35-hour-week is extended and their retirement age is increased. Meanwhile, work in the humane workplaces of the new economy comes with hidden costs (Ross, 2004), and the post-bureaucratic organization makes freedom a privilege for those with potential and pushes all others into vicious cycles of opportunism (Maravelias, 2007). It is perhaps no wonder that here some of the most radical responses to contemporary forms of work involve attempting to free the soul from work, to move from alienation to autonomy (Berardi, 2009), or to insist on communism as the necessary condition of freedom (Badiou, 2010).

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Venue

The conference takes place at the former Senatsreservenspeicher in Berlin-Kreuzberg. This former storehouse, which held the emergency rations of West-Berlin for over 40 years, is now a lively cultural centre for Berlin's urban art and music scene.

The former Senatsreservenspeicher is located in Cuvrystrasse 3-4 in Berlin Kreuzberg (see [Google Map](#)). The closest S-Bahn station is Schlesisches Tor (U1). It takes about 60 min from both Berlin airports (Schönefeld and Tegel) to reach the location. Further information about public transport travel can be found at www.bvg.de.

Registration

Space at the conference is extremely limited. Please email conference@ephemeraweb.org if you would like to participate, and we will see what we can do! The conference fee is €100 for the waged and €50 for PhD students / unwaged.

Accomodation

Here are some links to hotels and hostels in walking distance to the conference venue:

- <http://www.diefabrik.com/4-0-lage.html>
- <http://www.michelbergerhotel.com/>
- <http://www.ibishotel.com/gb/hotel-3108-ibis-berlin-city-ost/index.shtml>

Special Issue

Selected papers from the conference will be published in a special issue of *ephemera: theory & politics in organization*, due to be published in 2012. If you would like to submit to this issue (and are not a presenter), please drop us a line. Full papers must be submitted by 1 June 2011.

Further information

For queries, you can contact one of the conference organizers:

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About ephemera

ephemera is an independent journal, supported by the School of Business and Management, Queen Mary, University of London. We provide our content free of charge, and charge our readers only with free thought. *Ephemera* encourages contributions that explicitly engage with theoretical and conceptual understandings of organizational issues, organizational processes, and organizational life. The journal welcomes the amplification of the political problematics of organization within academic debate. The journal's collective regularly host events such as *Free Work*.

With thanks for supporting the conference to Essex Business School.

Provisional Programme (as of 9 May 2011)

The conference will run one stream only throughout the three days. Places are extremely limited, so please do let us know you want to join if you have not already done so. However, there are three open sessions to which we invite the public: the opening panel on Wednesday, the keynote on Tuesday, and the book launch on Friday.

During short breaks, refreshments will be provided. Lunch will be organised spontaneously in cafés close to the venue.

Wednesday 11 May 2011

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| 14.00- | Registration |
| 14.30-16.30 | Walking Tour with Andreas Reich: <i>History and Politics in Berlin</i>
Around Kreuzberg, starting from and returning to venue. Andreas designed a tour specifically for the conference, speaking to our theme, so we would very much encourage you to come early to join him. |
| 17.00-19.00 | Welcome with Birke Otto and Lutz Henke

Opening panel. <i>Convenor: Sverre Spoelstra</i>
Jana Costas, Free University Berlin
Susanne Ekman, Lund University
Christian Maravelias, Stockholm University |
| 19.00- | Welcome reception – Senatsreservespeicher, Cuvrystr. 3-4, Berlin-Kreuzberg. |

Thursday 12 May 2011

- 09.00-10.30 **Session 1: Consumption/work.** *Convenor: Birke Otto*
“Because we’re worth it”: The organisation of consumption in advanced capitalism’ – Cecilia Cassinger, University of Essex
“Selling back fat asses”: On soap, free work and the governmentality of allegedly subversive street art in Berlin’ – Lutz Henke, Artitu
‘Artistic freedom at the supermarket: Creative talents in the retail sector’ – Claus Noppeney & Nada Endrissat, Bern University of Applied Sciences
- 10.30-11.00 Break
- 11.00-13.00 **Session 2: Artwork.** *Convenor: Bent Meier Sørensen*
“And if I don’t want to work like an artist...?” Contemporary work models reflected in the world of arts’ – Brigitte Biehl-Missal, Aberystwyth University
‘Locating work in Santiago Sierra’s artistic practice’ – Andrés Montenegro, University of Essex.
‘Artistic work and production in contemporary art and life’ – Ontheconditionsofproduction
‘Designing money’ – Ole Bjerg, Copenhagen Business School
- 13.00-14.00 Lunch
- 14.00-15.00 **Keynote presentation.** *Convenor: Armin Beverungen*
‘Work fate / fate work’ – Stefano Harney, Queen Mary, University of London
- 15.00-15.30 Break
- 15.30-17.00 **Session 3: Politics of freedom.** *Convenor: Kate Kenny*
‘The Free University of Liverpool: A protest’ – Lorena Rivero de Beer, Free University of Liverpool
‘Freedom and transparency: Vattimo’s La società trasparente reread from a management perspective’ – Joop de Zwart, Avans University of Applied Sciences
‘Working through the allotment’ – Abigail Schoneboom, York University
- 19.00- Conference Dinner – Rio Grande (www.riogrande-berlin.de), May-Ayim-Ufer 9, Berlin-Kreuzberg.

Friday 13 May 2011

- 09.30-11.00 **Session 4: Free work experience.** *Convenor: Stephen Dunne*
'Work experience without qualities?' – Joanna Figiel, University of Essex
'DIY music practitioner as interface: A study of networks, community and biopower in immaterial labour' – Susan Gill, Dublin Institute of Technology
'Migrant labour markets – mixed embedded? The case of Vietnamese entrepreneurs in Berlin' – Antonie Schmiz, Humboldt University Berlin
- 11.00-11.30 Break
- 11.30-13.30 **Session 5: Self-work.** *Convenor: Martyna Sliwa*
'Voluntary work in a culture of the self' – Carolina Lilja Gkogkaki & Anna Pfeiffer, Lund University
“Set your creative forces free!” The liberated body as a hybrid managerial tool' – Bent Meier Sørensen & Kasper Villadsen, Copenhagen Business School
“Choose your deficiency!” Free choice in the state of employability' – Stefan Tramer, Lund University
'Work-life arena: An online game about the challenges of modern work-life' – Ditte Vilstrup Holm and Anders Raastrup Kristensen, Copenhagen Business School
- 13.30-14.30 Lunch
- 14.30-15.30 **MayFly book launch.** *Convenor: Steffen Böhm*
'Critique of Creativity: Precarity, Subjectivity and Resistance in the "Creative Industries"' – with Gerald Raunig, Gene Ray and Ulf Wuggenig (editors), and Isabell Lorey (contributor)
- 15.30 Conference close