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Unlovable Labour: Rejecting the "Do What You Love" Ideology

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Miya Tokumitsu's article 'In the Name of Love' is polemic against what she refers to as the DWYL (Do What You Love) movement that has been most recognisably popularised and transformed by Steve Jobs. She denounces this movement as an insidious ideology cleverly disguised as an uplifting lifestyle which has as its tenets labour, profit, and individualism; through her analysis of these tenets, she unveils them as alienation, erasure, and precarity, respectively. Her insights aid her in her aim to demonstrate that these ideological pillars do not support the wellbeing of the proletariat but rather reinforce the rugged structure of the bourgeoisie and of capitalism itself. This critique relates to and draws heavily from sociological concepts such as Karl Marx's theory of alienation (seen in 'Estranged Labour'), Max Weber's work ethic (seen in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*), and Mark Fisher's precarity (seen in his interview with Richard Capes published in *K-Punk*). While Tokumitsu's critique is cautionary, it does not offer any substantive means to counteract the underlying cause of the DWYL ideology and would benefit from several of the propositions offered by Johann Hari's *Lost Connections*. By unifying Marx, Weber and Fisher's diagnostic talents with Hari's prescriptive suggestions, Tokumitsu's critique can be enhanced both theoretically and practically, bolstering an already well-developed argument against what can only be described as exploitative propaganda.

Marx's concept of alienation is present throughout Tokumitsu's critique. Of the four aspects of alienation Marx describes, alienation from *Gattungswesen*—roughly translated as 'species-essence'—is the most prevalent and pressing per Tokumitsu's view. A worker is thought by Marx to be alienated from their species-essence, that is, their very nature as

humans, as they perform labour under capitalism.[1] This alienation is deeply personal, and its long-term effects ultimately isolate and restructure humans in devastating ways: workers lose their ability to see themselves as subjects who are distinct from and have power over objects, a phenomenon that Marx argues reduces them to animals; they lose their ability to pursue their will according to their imagination, that is, they lose the ability to pursue purposeful and fulfilling activities; and finally, they lose the ability to connect with one another in psychologically meaningful ways. Alienation—according to Marx's theory—ultimately deprives those relegated to the lowest classes of their ability to think and thus to affect their lives and destinies, perhaps depriving them of free will itself.[2]

As alienation restructures workers' identities, it invariably strips them of their ability to connect with others and with themselves. Tokumitsu expands upon this theory, noting that 'by keeping us focused on ourselves and our individual happiness, DWYL distracts us from the working conditions of others while validating our own choices and relieving us from obligations to all who labor, whether or not they love it'. She further argues that 'according to this [the DWLY] way of thinking, labor is not something one does for compensation, but an act of self-love. If profit doesn't happen to follow, it is because the worker's passion and determination were insufficient. Its real achievement is making workers believe their labor serves the self and not the marketplace.' Tokumitsu's criticisms here are twofold, and both have their genesis in Marx's theory of alienation. The first is that the DWYL ideology obscures the worker's connection to their fellow workers (and, importantly, their fellow humans) by promoting an individualistic mentality the likes of Hoover's 'rugged individualism', which was used to convince workers that not only was self-sufficiency admirable, but that being anything other than self-sufficient was a fault of character and of

[1] It is important to note that Marx did not consider human nature to be transcendent of either time or cultures. In Marx's analysis, human nature is in some ways transient, though important elements persist.
[2] This latter charge is not one Marx levels explicitly, but given the pattern of his criticisms, it does not seem unreasonable to think he would agree with it.

self. The second is that the DWYL ideology emphasises profit as the primary aspiration of the labourer, a panacea to personal and societal tumult. Both of these are fundamentally flawed ways of looking at labour and the products thereof; the DWYL ideology divorces workers from reality and makes them unable to participate in fundamentally human pursuits (pursuits that satisfy their species-essence's will).[3] Furthermore, this ideology obscures labour relations to the point that workers are deprived of their empathy for their fellow human beings. While these criticisms are sound, they alone are not sufficient—Tokumitsu's argument must be examined further.

Marx's theory of alienation provides Tokumitsu with a theoretical framework for her argument, but it is Weber's work ethic that provides her with a sociological explanation for the underlying causes. Weber's seminal work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* outlines the ways in which ascetic Protestantism influenced subsequent perceptions of the importance and value of profit, particularly in the United States. Noticing first a correlation between Protestantism and involvement in business, Weber attempts to demystify the origin of the modern spirit of capitalism. He predicates his argument on the observation that the spirit of capitalism extols profit as an end in itself, i.e., as something worthwhile of pursuit for its own sake. He notes the Calvinist notion of predestination is likely the origin for much of this belief, averring that belief in predetermined damnation or salvation leads one to look for signs of divine favour or disfavour—Calvinists began to see profit as a sign of this sort. Eventually, they came to see these as not just signs of favour but as valuable pursuits; so, Weber concludes, Protestants justified the pursuit and acquisition of profit because of its close association with the divine; similar religions did so to a lesser extent, and modern capitalism began to emerge. Of vital importance, Weber adds, is the fact

[3] The will of the species essence is difficult to pin down in exact terms—here it can be thought of as the ability to take actions that have both future intentions and conscious intentions. This is what Marx thought differentiated humans from the other animals.

that once capitalism more fully emerged, Protestant ascetic and ethical values were abandoned or forgotten, and this led to a vastly different system, closer to the capitalism the United States operates under today.

Weber's analysis complements Marx's theory of alienation in several ways, the most important being that it explains the deviation of capitalism from an ethical framework, leaving workers susceptible to exploitation. Tokumitsu's analysis indicates a trend toward the latter portion of Weber's theory wherein 'work becomes divided into two opposing classes: that which is lovable (creative, intellectual, socially prestigious) and that which is not (repetitive, unintellectual, undistinguished)' (Tokumitsu). Contrary to the Protestant emphasis on the importance of ascetic labour, 'under the DWYL credo, labor that is done out of motives or needs other than love (which is, in fact, most labor) is not only demeaned but erased' (Tokumitsu). The focus has shifted from so-called 'unlovable labour' to 'lovable labour'. This is a dangerously enticing ideology—it dictates that certain types of labour are by nature more deserving of recognition than others. The ramifications of this ideology, Tokumitsu argues, are that certain types of labour are outright erased, that is, they are not acknowledged as labour at all. By convincing labourers that certain types of work are unworthy of recognition as such, the DWYL ideology has effectively convinced a swathe of workers that their labour and the labour of their peers is not worthwhile or deserving of recognition.

Proponents of the DWYL ideology convince labourers that their work is inconsequential in order to prevent the formation what Mark Fisher calls 'an agent capable of acting' (659) against capitalist realism, '[the] belief that capitalism is the only viable political economic system' (664). More generally, the DWYL ideology coerces workers away from unionising to protest long hours, meagre compensation, and excruciating schedules—in short,

it keeps them from protesting unfair working conditions.[4] Capitalist realism has been pervasive for quite some time, and as resistance to capitalism is amplified in the 21st century, so too are the voices of 'capitalist realists', people who believe in the misguided and repressive belief that capitalism is the only functional socioeconomic framework. Capitalist realists believe that we must accept capitalism in spite of its flaws, all of which are purportedly immutable, a belief that instils complaisance and submission in the minds of the working class.

While capitalist realism plays a role in Tokumitsu's critique, it is the concept of precarity—referenced often by Fisher—that is most integral to her argument. Precarity is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as 'a state of persistent uncertainty or insecurity with regard to employment, income, and living standards', and is crucial in understanding why the DWYL ideology is so insidious. Precarity is what drives the DWYL ideology; members of the working class are systemically impoverished so that they cannot hope to change the system under which they live without losing their ability to subsist. Minimum wage workers in the United States, for example, are now financially unable to afford housing in any U.S. state, even when working 40 hours a week.[5] Housing insecurity is only one example of precarity, but given how broadly it affects the populace, it is the easiest to recognise; precarity makes workers unable to bargain for better conditions because they cannot afford to take time off from work. The cost of unionisation (both literal and metaphorical) has become the loss of fundamental necessities—housing, food, and health. The DWYL ideology uses this principle, one rooted in fear and suffering, to manipulate workers into believing that there is only one way out: by either pursuing a vocation that will

[4] What defines unfair working conditions is beyond the scope of my analysis. Nonetheless, unfair working conditions exist, and labourers often lack the power to negotiate to improve them; hence, precarity multiplies.
[5] For evidence of this, see Romo 2021 and NLIHC. Links to these sources can be found below.

bring them contentment or by forcing themselves to be content with the vocation they already have.

These may be mistaken for two distinct ways to escape precarity, but they both take advantage of the desperation and suffering of the working class and convince them to take solace in capitalist realism; they yield effectively the same result: the worker becomes further alienated from their labour and from themselves, restructuring the way they see labour in a way that is advantageous to the bourgeoisie. Given this, the singular method of escape from precarity is to conform to and proselytise the capitalist realist ideology. The former path might be dubbed the 'Steve Jobs approach'—through the exploitation of other workers, an entrepreneurial individual can make their passion profitable. The latter path is more common—it requires an individual to restructure their mentality to believe that they love menial labour or that they can come to be satisfied with unethical working conditions. In the aggregate, these paths strip the working class of their power (destroying Fisher's agent of change) and replace it with a hollow, artificial love for their work.

How, then, are the proletariat to escape from this trap? How are they to restore their power, to produce Fisher's agent capable of destroying capitalist realism? Tokumitsu suggests that they must do so by negotiating for better working conditions, which, as established, is extremely difficult for those most vulnerable to and affected by precarity—it will require cooperation with those less susceptible to precarity's effects, and the dilemma lies in the fact that members of this latter group are those most committed to the DWYL ideology. For this reason, Tokumitsu urgently rejects the DWYL ideology and exhorts others to do the same.

While this analysis is correct and a necessary first step, it is excessively theoretical; the proletariat cannot produce an agent of change armed only with words. Johann Hari's findings in *Lost Connections* can be of use here—Hari cites evidence from Sir Michael

Marmot that indicates that ‘a lack of control and a lack of balance between efforts and rewards were causing such severe depression that it was leading their [the British civil service’s] staff to suicide’ (79). For context, this study was conducted on members of the British civil service and surveyed workers at each ‘tier’ of employment, from secretaries to high-powered civil servant—it found that as control (employment tier) increased, the chance of depression, severe emotional distress, and other negative health effects decreased.[6] Hari’s most important critique is that depression is not merely biological, that is, it is not always or even primarily caused by chemical imbalances in the brain; these imbalances are themselves caused by other factors: the extreme power imbalance between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie and the severe emotional neglect that accompanies this imbalance.

If the findings of this study are at all true of workers in general, it will become clear that it is not merely the risk or reality of impoverishment that destroys the health and lives of the modern worker, but the widening power imbalance between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat along with the severe emotional neglect which accompanies this imbalance. These factors combine to affect workers in a fashion nearly identical to Marx’s theories regarding alienation. The solution, then, must obviously be to rectify this power imbalance and emotional neglect, an extremely tall order given the state of the modern world. Still, Hari seems to suggest (or at any rate to endorse) the use of worker cooperatives in certain industries in order to resolve these systemic issues. There is evidence to indicate that worker cooperatives have a greater degree of longevity, are more resilient in times of economic crisis, and are more environmentally conscious compared to standard capitalist firms.[7] In addition, worker cooperatives are more productive, are happier, and have a greater degree of interpersonal trust than their capitalist counterparts.[8] Worker cooperatives are at least one tool

[6] These findings are better summarised in the study itself, which can be found on the stress site (see works cited). The study has a much greater wealth of longitudinal data than can be accommodated here.
[7] See Burdín 2014, Coop-law.org, Olsen 2013, and Booth 1995.
[8] See Pencavel 1995, Kaswan 2019, and Sabatini 2014.

that can be used in the fight against labour inequity and have proven potential to improve the lives of those workers most affected by precarity.

As for other practical suggestions for reform, David Graeber of the London School of Economics suggests that the economy has failed to utilise the technological innovations of the past century. He argues that ‘technology has advanced to the point where most of the difficult, labor-intensive jobs can be performed by machines. But instead of freeing ourselves from the suffocating 40-hour workweek, we’ve invented a whole universe of futile occupations that are professionally unsatisfying and spiritually empty’ (Illing, Graeber). If society automated these meaningless jobs rather than coercing people to perform them for meagre pay under poor conditions, millions of people would be able to enjoy shorter work weeks, more manageable schedules, better compensation, and, if Hari is right, better mental health. In the short run (used here in both the colloquial and economic sense), automation will undoubtedly leave workers jobless, and this is a practical issue that needs to be addressed. In the long term, however, it can be predicted to improve the working conditions of the economy as a whole and provide new opportunities for labourers.

Automation played an integral role in Marx’s ideation of a communist utopia, and if these practical suggestions seem themselves too utopic, it is only because capitalist realism has succeeded in convincing us that there is no viable alternative to capitalism. Cooperatives and automation are nothing more than suggestions, albeit those with a decent deal of research to support them, but they will not be able to eradicate the struggles the proletariat face. Still, they have real potential to improve the lives of a downtrodden class of people, and they ought to be taken into serious consideration. To modify Tokumitsu’s critique to accommodate these suggestions, we can say the following: the DWYL ideology is a tool used to prop up an exploitative system by convincing workers that labour, profit, and individualism are what

matter most. These aspirations hide a great deal of human suffering that arises from alienation, erasure, and precarity, and can be addressed in a couple of ways.

The first is based in theory, which is to reject the DWYL doctrine by seeking to embrace and reify the difficulties of one's own labour and the labour of one's peers—to combat ideological warfare by producing Mark Fisher's agent of collective action. The second is practical, which is to advocate for cooperative forms of employment where realistically applicable, as well as to replace unnecessary, meaningless labour with gratifying, purposeful labour by utilising automation and other technological advances—to rectify structural and systemic inequity through the use of practical innovations. Only by implementing these changes can we hope to produce improvements in the lives of the workers whose livelihoods have gradually eroded as time has gone on, to restore their power and allow them to reclaim their rights as both workers and humans.

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