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Journal of
Economic and Social Thought
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Volume 2 June 2015 Issue 2

Roland Paulsen, *Empty Labor. Idleness and Workplace Resistance.* Cambridge U. Press, 2015, 217 pp. $29 Paperback.

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Book Review

The brilliance of this book starts with the idea to interview employees who work less than 50 percent of their working time – yes, less than half – and continues with a totally unexpected empirical finding: It is not always because they do not want to work more, it is sometimes simply due to bad management. Paulsen also provides us with important theoretical insights in his analysis of earlier perspectives on resistance. The interviewees come from a wide variety of occupations, such as marketing, soft-ware development, finance, manufacturing, mining and service industry, sales and social services, and they include ordinary employees as well as managers.

He defines "empty labor" as "everything you do at work that is not your work" (p. 5). According to an American study there is an average of 1.7 hours a day of empty labor for employees. In order to map empty labor he constructs a typology, built on two dimensions. One is "potential output" in work, that is work tasks in relation to working time, which can be high or low. The other is work obligations, meaning employees' inclination to take on extra work for the firm, independent of other things. These obligations can be strong or weak. It all comes together in a fourfold table (Table 1), in which the outcomes are called slacking, enduring, coping and soldiering.

Table 1. *Types of empty labor*

	Low potential output	High potential output
Strong work obligations	*Enduring*	*Coping*
Weak work obligations	*Slacking*	*Soldiering*

Source: Paulsen 2015, Tab. 4.1.

Slacking is a combination of low potential output and weak work obligations: In a famous broadcasting company, well-known for its cool indoors architecture, a web developer's actual job takes about one hour of her working hours. The rest of the working day she and her colleagues spend on being disc jockeys for the music in their head sets, exchanging jokes and views on where to have lunch on Messenger, and surfing the web for things that interest them personally. Her closest manager does not seem to care and she thinks he would regard her as crazy if she

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complained of having so much empty labor on her hands. She really does not care that much about the situation, but still feels she has to hide most of the empty labor. Who could know what she is really doing in front of her computer?

Enduring also includes low potential output, but now in combination with strong work obligations: This is people who really would like to have less empty labor.A florist is working for a big furnishing company which has set up a flower shop at its entrance. She is alone in the shop, but she has only two or three customers a day and it is impossible to invent work tasks to fill the whole day. There is only so much cleaning the shop and watering the plants she can do. She spends most of the afternoons in a café across the street, having coffee and reading while keeping an eye out for customers. She has spoken to the managers about the problem, but they only suggest that she uses more time on cleaning.

Coping is the combination of high potential output and strong work obligations. These people actually work more than half of their working time – and that is what they want to do. They feel strong obligations to clients or patients while they are driven by a potent work ethic, usually finding their job meaningful. At the same time they create "time perks" as safety valves against being over-worked and as a sign that they are in control of their work. An allowance administrator says that for example taking a private telephone call during working hours gives him a sense of freedom and a feeling of being in charge of his time.

Soldiering, finally, is what interests Paulsen the most. In soldiering there is also high potential output, but the employee harbors weak work obligations. The trick is to get away with creating a lot of empty labor without getting caught, because if you do you will lose your job. Soldiering can be done both individually and collectively and the most elaborate example of collective soldiering of the whole book is this: The scene is a laboratory in a big factory and the work there is to test the water used in the rest of the factory. This takes two hours each morning and then the employees, including the manager of the department, do not have anything else to do, so they amuse themselves with organizing a book club, playing games and whatever they think is fun. Now and then they are visited by a group of higher managers, but they always get warnings in advance from other departments. Whenever a warning is issued they all put on their white coats, hats, eye protection, masks and gloves, showing how busy they are with their test bottles, ovens and bacteria cultures. The laboratory manager is so busy that he does not even have time to talk to the higher managers – he very clearly shows them that they disturb him in his important work.

Paulsen writes in the anti-work tradition of Aristotle, Paul Lafargue, John Maynard Keynes, Bertram Russell, Herbert Marcuse and André Gorz. His perspective on work is that it is "the very institution around which our most oppressive power structures are constructed" (p. 4) and he does not hide that he supports seeking and creating empty labor. He even devotes a whole chapter (chapter 5) to giving advice how to avoid working at work for dummies – something I never thought I would find in a book by a sociologist of work. As advice so often do, some of them can become a bit sententious, but they are probably effective for people interested in procuring as much empty labor as possible in their jobs. The main advice is to get a job with a high level of opacity, which means that it is difficult for outsiders to know what it entails and to judge the relation between effort and time. If other people have only vague ideas of what you are really doing and the time needed, the field is open for a lot of empty labor. On ethical grounds Paulsen does not, however, give us details of how to create empty labor. He does not want to risk revealing to employers how employees go about it in their work as it always must be done secretly. Still, he suggests occupations such as web designer, librarian, churchwarden, business development manager and

janitor as having a high degree of opacity and thereby rich possibilities for empty labor.

Tasks in work that employees tend to avoid the most are those that they regard as meaningless. I have no problem with agreeing with this in my own job as a university professor. Flooded by forms to fill in and summons to attend administrative meetings, I confess that I immediately recognize myself in this statement: “Every researcher knows how it feels when the job prevents us from doing research: every researcher has experienced meaningless work” (p. 175). This also leads to the more general observation that much of what employers and managers regard as work is seen by employees as meaningless activities.

The typology is the *how* of empty labor. To understand Paulsen’s analysis of the *why* of empty labor, the reasons people give for engaging in soldiering, we must be aware of his criticism of earlier studies of resistance at workplaces and the solutions he suggests. Paulsen is critical of how sociology of work has regarded workers and their actions. Especially he attacks the perspective – existing long after the decline of the human relations school – depicting work organizations and management as rational and workers as emotional and irrational. In fact, he suggests that it is the other way around. He is equally critical of theories in working life research portraying workers as passive victims of employer machinations. All this has impaired the study of worker resistance, he says, and therefore he seeks theories that can emphasize workers as active subjects in workplace struggles. He does this in two chapters (Ch. 2 and Ch. 3) in which he scrutinizes the erring ways of some of his predecessors and suggests remedies to their theoretical deficiencies. He starts by mapping out ideas that, he argues, have hampered research not only on empty labor but also on the whole field of resistance and organizational misbehavior. The main question is why the group of employees who are involved in empty labor has almost never attracted any attention in working life research.

A first idea behind this neglect is the argument that the capitalist production process develops in ways that tie workers to its rational machinery – the worker becomes only an “appendage to the machine”. Subjectivity at work is suppressed to such an extent that workers can only resign themselves to the system. A second claim is that workers have become imbued with a false consciousness, making them accept the dominant ideology’s explanations of their subordination. This idea goes one step further from the first one: There is not only resignation among the workers; there is consent to their position. Thirdly, workers’ subjectivity tends to disappear altogether by becoming part of structures or discourses. What is common to these three approaches is that they deny the subject; they reject all notions of workers acting to resist work and working conditions. The main message of Paulsen’s answer is, I think, that workers are seldom – probably never – fully disciplined, and work is seldom – probably never – rational.

Striving to develop an alternative theory of workers as active agents at workplaces, he takes his point of departure in the maxim that “resistance requires a subject” (p. 40). Thereby he builds on the French sociologist Alain Touraine’s notion of subjectivity. Touraine – strangely ignored in Anglo-Saxon social science– defines the subject as the will of the individual to become an actor, thus emphasizing the possibility of resisting power structures in the social order in which the individual lives. This notion provides Paulsen with a basis for analyzing workers not as suppressed into resignation or fooled into consent but as actively manipulating their working conditions and being able to make empty work.

So, let us return to the question of why workers appropriate working time for their own purposes. Concentrating on soldiering, he distinguishes (in Ch. 6) between four “vocabularies of motive”: adjustment, withdrawal, direct dissent and framed dissent. Adjustment is not really an act of resistance as it occurs when there are not enough work tasks to fill the time. Withdrawal means creating some free time at work as the job is regarded as characterized by routine and coercion. Direct dissent is motivated by indignation over some concrete phenomenon at the workplace, such as a bad boss,

stupid colleagues or an unethical company. Framed dissent, finally, is not directed toward such concrete things but toward the system itself – and therefore also often performed in collective forms. The motive is to cheat the system or sometimes even to change it.Paulsen then discusses (Ch. 7) slacking(low potential output, weak work obligations) and enduring (low potential output, strong work obligations).The interesting point when it comes to slacking, is that it may not only be due to bad management but be the result of outright management misbehavior (remember the laboratory). When it comes to enduring – virtually ignored by the sociology of work, according to Paulsen –his conclusion is expressed as “the higher up you are, the emptier labor becomes” (p. 131), and one could add, the more pay you get. His main explanation for the involuntary empty labor involved in slacking and enduring is opacity inherent in the job and a measure of habituation on the part of the employee.

An influential line of argument in the literature is that resistance is not really resistance, but rather incorporated in and functional for work. As Paulsen points out (Ch. 8), this is usually conveyed in abstract and counterfactual terms that are very difficult to refute properly. He also admits that he does not have enough data to really settle whether these statements has anything going for them or not, but he discusses the question in a very nuanced way. There are, he says, arguments about three types of incorporation, namely profitable, mental and simulative incorporation. Profitable incorporation means that empty labor can be functional for the firm, for example through making it easier for the employee to balance work with life outside work. Mental incorporation is rather close to this in that it benefits the company through letting off steam among employees that might otherwise take more dangerous oppositional outlets. It may also stimulate more efficient work later. Simulative incorporation is a bit more complicated as it presumes that simulation of institutions is more important today than the factual value of these institutions. He finds the profitable and mental type less convincing and some of the arguments for them downright deceitful. However he seems to be a bit more positive to the idea of simulative incorporation in that empty labor means that workers simulate work rather than really work.

This analysis of non-work at work nuances our common picture of a constantly intensifying work-pace. Of course there are things that can be questioned such as Paulsen’s claim that resistance in the sphere of labor always has to be hidden; it cannot exist in the open. But what about wildcat strikes or sit-downs? Or how to handle the empirical fact that organizational misbehavior – in the meaning of breaking management rules – often is necessary for production processes to function. This is well demonstrated by the form of worker struggle called “work to rule”: If workers strictly follow all management rules production soon breaks down. The production process functions only when workers want it to function by breaking rules that hinder them working the way they want to make production flow.

Still, to my mind, Paulsen’s book is an important impulse to renewing the study of resistance. In fact, I think it is comparable to the importance of Ackroyd and Thompson’s (1999) book on organizational misbehavior at a time when most sociologists of work claimed that resistance was a thing of the past. For sociology of work it opens up a whole new field of research: empty labor.

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