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Book review

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Frayne, D. *The Refusal of Work: The Theory & Practice of Resistance to Work*. London: Zed Books. 2015. 270pp £11.89 (PBK) ISBN 9781783601172

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Many people have looked back misty-eyed at the predictions of John Maynard Keynes, a British economist, that in the twenty-first century, most people would be working for fifteen hours per week and the most pressing social problem would be managing how people spend their leisure time. At a time when wages are declining and hours worked are increasing, this low-work future could not seem further away. The moralisation of work has also intensified in recent years, with UK politicians of all stripes claiming to stand up for 'hardworking people'. This work dogma, as we may call it, is central to David Frayne's book *The Refusal of Work* which establishes his intention to challenge the centrality of work in modern society.

The book is divided into two sections. The first is largely a theoretical engagement with, and contextualisation of, contemporary problems with work. Chapter one argues that if we are to deal with these issues, we must also create a society which values wellbeing over material goods. In what follows, Frayne dissects the emotional and affective damage of contemporary work, the consumption-assisted colonisation of our lives by work (chapter 3), and the moralisation of work (chapter 4). This section is informed by a range of theorists but significant chunks of this are straightforward applications of well-established theories, including Marx on alienation, Parsons on the sick role, and Adorno on authenticity. These are all functionally useful but not analytically eye-opening to the seasoned sociologist. However, Frayne is clearly aiming for a wide audience who might need the broad strokes of an introduction to these theories. More contemporary theorists of work – Franco Berardi, Colin Cremin, and Kathi Weeks, for instance – are also covered and Frayne is particularly effective at invoking the role which affect now plays in work. Emotions are no longer something outside of work or an inconvenience to capitalist production. Rather, they are central to its smooth running, with the methods by which workers are commanded to 'be themselves' being particularly telling (p. 60).

The second section presents a thematic analysis of Frayne's interviews with people who have chosen not to work. A broadly chronological narrative is presented starting with the 'breaking point' (chapter 5) which triggered the refusal, followed by the 'alternative pleasures' (chapter 6) which people find away from work and, then, an analysis around the politics of consumerism and the accusations of moral failing applied to them, by themselves and by others (chapter 7). Although Frayne, or his research participants, do not offer a fully formulated political alternative, what we do encounter are personal accounts of people who have come to the end of their tether. This shows us that despite our deeply held fears about the consequences of not working, there are social, psychological, emotional, and physical benefits to it. Many of Frayne's participants express their attempts to 'resist this restless sense of desire associated with consumerism' (p. 170) and this psychological connection between work and consumption is particularly well drawn by Frayne. The emotional and psychological strain of making this break should not be underestimated, but doing so could be key to enabling people to leave their various forms of (often low-paid) employment.

In the final chapter, Frayne formulates more fully what is only hinted at by his interviewees: that the refusal of work could be a route to 'authentic' autonomy (rather than simply an escape from drudgery) but the extent to which this autonomy has been colonised by the work dogma makes such a break difficult. The connection between increasing demands for emotional engagement at work and the dissatisfaction many people feel is clear. However, more consideration of where the expectation that work should be fulfilling emerged from could be enlightening in considering how to resist. The particular kind of refusal which Frayne's participants present seems to be largely on an 'artistic' rather than a 'social' basis. The interviewees frequently chastise the inauthenticity of contemporary work which is exacerbated by the encouragement of self-expression and other attempts to humanise the workplace. This 'artistic critique', as it were, has perhaps taken precedence over a more overtly politicised 'social critique' (focused upon justice and inequalities) because it is more easily assimilated with contemporary capitalist structures. A broader social critique of

this kind might be possible through the alliances which Frayne proposes through connecting the refusal of work with the benefits it will have for health, gender equality, family life, and other areas.

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References

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