

Smokestack Lightning

Bob Black

Bob Black is a revolutionary, smirks David Ramsey Steele, “the way Gene Autry was a cowboy” (“The Abolition of Breathing,” *Liberty*, March 1989). A Marxist turned libertarian, Steele is miffed that to me his forward progress is just walking in circles. Steele’s is the longest harshest review *The Abolition of Work and Other Essays* has ever received, and while no nit to my discredit is too small to pick,¹ my critique of work is the major target. Steele tries, not merely to refute me, but to make me out to be a gesticulating clown, by turns infantile and wicked (they are probably synonyms for Steele). “I’m joking *and* serious,” he quotes me in opening, but if I am a sometimes successful joker I am serious only “in the sense that a child wailing for more candy is serious.” Steele wants to bomb me back into the Stone age, just where my ideas (he warns) would land the handful of humans who might survive the abolition of work.

For a fact I am, as accused, joking and serious. Because he is neither, Steele is fated never to understand me. Metaphor, irony, and absurdity play — and I do mean *play* — a part in my expression which is, for Steele, at best cause for confusion, at worst a pretext for defamation. I write in more than one way and I should be read in more than one way. My book is stereoscopic. Steele complains I failed to make “a coherent case for some kind of change in the way society is run.” But I did not (as he implies) make an incoherent case for what *he* wants — new masters — I made a coherent case for what *I* want, a society which isn’t “run” at all.

When a libertarian who ordinarily extols the virtue of selfishness calls me “self-indulgent” he shows he is prepared to sacrifice secondary values if need be to meet

¹ Since I took German in college, it so happens I *do* know that “Nietzsche” doesn’t rhyme with “peachy.” I am sure that Ray Davies of the Kinks, Steele’s fellow Briton, likewise was well aware that “the Regatta” doesn’t rhyme with “to get at her,” not even in Cockney. We poets stretch the

a threat of foundational dimensions. Emotionally the review is equivalent to an air raid siren. Do *not* (repeat do *not* take this “half-educated” mountebank seriously!

Steele careens crazily between accusing me of snobbery and, as when he calls me half-educated, exhibiting it himself. If with three academic degrees I am half-educated, how many does Steele have? Six? Who cares? Much of what I write I never learned in school, certainly not the Austrian School. Steele says I am “out of my depth” in economics, oblivious to my vantage point exterior and (if all goes well) posterior to the dismal science of scarcity. I never dip into that malarial pool, not at *any* depth — I drain it. I am not playing Steele’s capitalist game, I am proposing a new game. I am not a bad economist, for I am not an economist at all. Freedom ends where economics begins. Human life was originally pre-economic; I have tried to explore whether it could become post-economic, that is to say, free. The greatest obstacle, it seems to me — and Steele never does overtly disagree — is the institution of work. Especially, I think, in its industrial mode. Like most libertarians, Steele so far prefers industry to liberty that even to pose the problem of work *as* a problem of liberty throws a scare into him.

Much toll must have gone into Steele’s only serious criticism which does not depend on a previous faith in *laissez-faire* economics, the attempt to reveal my definitions of work and play as confused and contradictory. He quotes my book (pp. 18–19) thusly:

Work is production enforced by economic or political means, by the carrot or the stick... Work is never done for its own sake, it’s done on account of some product or output that the worker (or, more often, somebody else) gets out of it.

Steele comments: “This seems to say at first that work is work if you do it because you have to or because you will be paid for it. Then it seems to say something different: that work is work if you do it for the sake of an anticipated goal.” The first sentence is roughly accurate, the second is not. *All* human action is purposive, as our Austrian Schoolmarm would be the first to agree, which is to say all human action is goal-directed. Work, play, everything. Play too has an “anticipated goal,” but not the same one work has. The purpose of play is process, the purpose of work is product (in a broad sense).

Work, unlike play, is done *not* for the intrinsic satisfaction of the activity but for something separate which results from it, which might be a paycheck or maybe just no whipping tonight. The anticipated goal of play is the pleasure of the action. Steele, not me, is confused when he glosses my definitions to collapse the very distinctions I set out to draw with them.

Elsewhere in the title essay I offer an abbreviated definition of work as “forced labor,” as “compulsory production.” Predictably a libertarian like Steele contends that

language, but not, like Steele, the truth.

the economic carrot is not coercive as is the political stick. I didn't argue against this unreasonable opinion there because only libertarians and economists hold it and there are not enough of them to justify cluttering up the majestic breadth and sweep of my argument with too many asides. Steele, I notice, doesn't argue about it either. All this proves is that I am not a libertarian, a superfluous labor since I make that abundantly clear in another essay in the book, "The Libertarian as Conservative." On this point Aristotle, a philosopher much admired by libertarians, is on my side. He argues that "the life of money-making" is "undertaken under compulsion" (*Nic.Eth.* 1096a5). Believe it, dude. But even if Ari and I are mistaken we are neither confused nor confusing. There is nothing inconsistent or incoherent about my definitions, nor do they contradict ordinary usage. A libertarian or anybody else who can't understand what I'm saying is either playing dumb or he really is. People who are maybe not even half-educated understand what I say about work. The first time my essay was published, in pamphlet form, the printer (the boss) reported "it got quiet" when he took the manuscript into the back room; he also thought the workers had run off some extra copies for themselves. Only miseducated intellectuals ever have any trouble puzzling out what's wrong with work.

Work is by definition productive and by definition compulsory (in my sense, which embraces toil without which one is denied the means of survival, in our society most often but not always wage labor). Play is by definition intrinsically gratifying and by definition voluntary. Play is *not* by definition either productive or unproductive, although it has been wrongly defined by Huizinga and de Kovens among others as necessarily inconsequential. It does not have to be. Whether play has consequences (something that continues when the play is over) depends on what is at stake. Does poker cease to be play if you bet on the outcome? Maybe yes — but maybe no.

My proposal is to combine the best part (in fact, the only good part) of work — the production of use-values — with the best of play, which I take to be every aspect of play, its freedom and its fun, its voluntariness and its intrinsic gratification, shorn of the Calvinist connotations of frivolity and "self-indulgence" which the masters of work, echoed by the likes of Johan Huizinga and David Ramsey Steele, have labored to attach to free play. Is this so hard to understand? *If productive play is possible, so too is the abolition of work.*

Fully educated as he must be, Steele thus flubs my discursive definitions of work. I am no define-your-terms Objectivist; I announce definitions only as opening gambits, as approximations to be enriched and refined by illustration and elaboration. Work is production elicited by extrinsic inducements like money or violence. Whether my several variant formulations have the same *sense* (meaning) they have,

in Frege's terminology, the same *reference*, they designate the same phenomenon. (Ah picked up a li'l book-larnin' after all.)

According to Steele, what I call the abolition of work is just "avant-garde job enrichment." I display "no interest in this body of theory" because it has none for me (I am as familiar with it as I care to be). "Job enrichment" is a top-down conservative reform by which employers gimmick up jobs to make them seem more interesting without relinquishing their control over them, much less superseding them. A job, *any* job — an exclusive productive assignment — is, as "Abolition" makes clear, an aggravated condition of work; almost always it stultifies the plurality of our potential powers. Even activities with some inherent satisfaction as freely chosen pastimes lose much of their ludic kick when reduced to jobs, to supervised, timed, exclusive occupations worked in return for enough money to live on. Jobs are the worst kind of work and the first which must be deranged. For me the job enrichment literature is significant in only one way: it proves that workers are sufficiently anti-work — something Steele denies — that management is concerned to muffle or misdirect their resentments. Steele, in misunderstanding all this, misunderstands everything.

I have never denied the need for what the economists call production, I have called for its ruthless auditing (how much of this production is worth suffering to produce?) and for the transformation of what seems needful into *productive play*, two words to be tattoo'd on Steve's forehead as they explain everything about me he dislikes or misunderstands. *Productive play*. Plenty of unproductive play, too, I hope — in fact ideally an arrangement in which there is no point in keeping track of which is which — but play as paradigmatic. *Productive play*. Activities which are, for the time and the circumstances and the individuals engaged in them, intrinsically gratifying play yet which, in their totality, produce the means of life for all. The most necessary functions such as those of the "primary sector" (food production) already have their ludic counterparts in hunting and gardening, in *hobbies*. Not only are my categories coherent, they are already operative in every society. Happily not so many people are so economically sophisticated they cannot understand me.

If Steele really believes that there can be no bread without bakeries and no sex without brothels, I pity him.

Whenever Steele strays into anthropology, he is out of his depth. In "Primitive Affluence" I drew attention to the buffoonery of his portrait of prehistoric political economy, a few cavemen on loan from "The Far Side" squatting round the campfire shooting the shit for lack of anything better to do and every so often carving a steak out of an increasingly putrid carcass till the meat runs out. Racism this ridiculous is sublime, as shockingly silly as if today we put on an old minstrel show, blackface and all. The hunters didn't do more work, he explains, because "they saw little

profit in it because of their restricted options.” For sure they saw no *profit* because the concept would be meaningless to them, but their options weren’t as restricted as ours are. If the San are any example, they normally enjoyed a choice we only get two weeks a year, the choice whether to sleep in or get up and go to work. More than half the time a San hunter stays home. What Steele considers “options” are not choices as to what to do but choices as to what to consume: “When such hunter-gatherer societies encounter more technically advanced societies with a greater range of products, the hunter-gatherers generally manifest a powerful desire to get some of these products, even if this puts them to some trouble.”

This generalization, like the others Steele ventures, only appears to be empirical. In fact it is a deduction from an economic model which assumed away from the start any possibility that anybody ever did or ever could act as anything else but a more or less well-informed rational maximizer. Historically it is insupportable. While the hunter-gatherers (and horticulturalists and pastoralists) often did take from the European tool-kit, they wanted no part of the work-subjugation system by which the tools were produced. The San like to turn barbed wire stolen from South African farmers into points more effective and more easily fashioned than those of stone, but they do not like to work in the diamond mines. “Most of humankind,” Steele supposes, “has been practicing agriculture for several thousand years, having at some stage found this more productive than hunting.” The “at some stage” betrays the contention for what it is, a deduction from the axioms, not historical reportage. Steele would have a cow if somebody said, “Most of humankind has been practicing authoritarianism for several thousand years, having at some stage found this more free/orderly/stable/satisfying than libertarianism.”

The parallelism is not fortuitous. Overwhelmingly, stateless societies are also classless, marketless, and substantially workless societies. Overwhelmingly, market societies are also statist, class-ridden, work ridden societies. Am I out of line in suggesting there just *might* be a challenge for libertarians in all this which is not fully met by Steele’s red-baiting me?

Steele’s pseudo-factual contention assumes the consequent, that what everybody everywhere wants is higher productivity. Although Steele characterizes my goal (a little less inaccurately than usual) as something like anarcho-communism or “higher-stage” communism (he remembers the jargon of his Marxist phase), it is Steele who sounds like the collectivist, reifying “humankind” as some kind of organism which “at some stage” *chose* to go for the gold, to take up the hoe. Just when and where was this referendum held? Supposing that agricultural societies are more productive (of what?) per capita, who says the surplus goes to the producers? Steele may no longer agree with what Engels said in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* but he surely remembers the issues raised there and cynically suppresses what *he* knows but his intellectually impoverished

libertarian readership doesn't. Peasants produced more, working a lot harder to do it, but consumed less. The wealth they produced could be stored, sold and stolen, taxed and taken away by kings, nobles and priests. Since it could be, in time it was — “at some stage” what was possible became actual, the state and agriculture, the parasite and its host. The rest is, literally, history.

If agriculture and the industrial society which emerged from it mark stages in the progress of liberty we should expect that the oldest agricultural societies (now busily industrializing) are in the vanguard of freedom. One stretch of country enjoyed the blessings of civilization twice as long as the next contender. I speak of course of Sumer, more recently known as Iraq. Almost as libertarian is the next civilization, still civilized: Egypt. Next, China. Need I say more?

And once one or more of these agricultural slave societies got going it expanded at the expense of its stateless workless neighbors whose small face-to-face societies, though psychologically gratifying and economically abundant, couldn't defeat the huge slave armies without turning into what they fought. Thus they lost if they won, like the nomadic armies of the Akkadians or Mongols or Turks, and they also lost, of course, if they lost. It had nothing to do with shopping around for the best deal.

Steele fails (or pretends not) to understand why I ever brought up the primitives at all. It's not because I've ever advocated a general return to a foraging way of life. If only because the specialized stultification of the work we have to do unfits us for the variegated *skilled play* which produces the abundance the hunter-gatherers take for granted. Donald Trump worries a lot more about his economic future than a San mother worries about hers. A hunter-gatherer grows up in a habitat and learns to read it. I've quoted Adam Smith to the effect that the division of labor, even if it enhances productivity, diminishes the human personality. Now if there is anything in my entire book a libertarian ideologue ought to answer or explain away it is what the old Adam said about work, but Steele is careful to cover up this family scandal altogether. (How many libertarians, for that matter, know that Smith was a Presbyterian minister? Or that “benevolence” was crucial to his utilitarian ethics? Or that he advocated compulsory schooling precisely in order to counteract the debasing impact of work?)

Hunter-gatherers inform our understanding and embarrass libertarians in at least two ways. They operate the only known viable stateless societies. And they don't, except in occasional emergencies, *work* in any sense I've used the word. They, like we, must produce, but they don't have to work usually. They enjoy what they do on the relatively few occasions they are in the mood to do it; such is the ethnographic record. Some primitives have no words to distinguish work and play because there is no reason to draw the distinction. We're the ones who need it in order to understand what's befallen us. Remarkably, I agree with Steele that

we moderns cannot “approximate that lifestyle very closely and still maintain advanced industry, though we could gradually approach it by reduced hours and more flexible work schedules, and a few individuals [this is a dig at me] approximate it fairly closely by a combination of occasional work and living off handouts.” Very well then, let’s not “maintain advanced industry.” I want liberty; Steele, in *Liberty*, prefers industry. I think the rag should rename itself *Industry* if that’s where its deepest loyalty lies.

In “Abolition” I was deliberately agnostic about technology because I meant to make the abolitionist case in the most universal terms. It is not necessary to agree with my actual opinions of industrial technology (very skeptical) to agree with my opposition to work, although it helps. Steele doesn’t trouble to keep his accusations consistent, on one page charging me with “the ambitious mission of stamping out social cooperation and technology” thus effectuating “the elimination of more than 95 percent of the world’s population, and the reduction of the remnant to a condition lower than the Stone Age” (even *lower!*) — and on the next page saying I repeat “the usual communist claims” that “‘automation’ can do almost anything.” What Steele quaintly calls the Stone Age is the one million years in which all humans lived as hunter-gatherers and we have already seen there is much to be said for a lifestyle most of us have sadly been unfitted for. For Steele “the usual communist claims” serve the same diversionary function “the usual suspects” do when rounded up.

At least two science fiction writers who likely know a lot more about high tech than Steele does, the cyberpunks Bruce Sterling and Lewis Shiner, have drawn on “The Abolition of Work” in sketching zero-work lifestyles which variously turn on technology. In *Islands in the Net*, Sterling extrapolates from several anti-work stances: the “avant-garde job enrichment” (as Steele would say) of the laid-back Rhizome multinational; the selective post-punk high-tech of Singapore’s Anti-Labour Party; and the post-agricultural *guerrilla* nomadism of Tuareg insurgents in Africa. He incorporates a few of my phrases verbatim. Shiner in *Slam* recounts an individual anti-work odyssey expressly indebted to several Loompanics books, including “a major inspiration for this novel, *The Abolition of Work* by Bob Black.” If I am skeptical about liberation through high-tech it mainly because the techies aren’t even exploring the possibility, and if they don’t, who will? They are all worked up over nanotechnology, the as-yet-nonexistent technology of molecular mechanical manipulation — that SF cliché, the matter transformer — without showing any interest in what work, if any, would be left to be done in such a hypertechnology civilization. So I find low-tech decentralization the more credible alternative for now.

It is false, but truer than most of what Steele attributes to me, that I think “the tertiary or services sector is useless.” I view most of this sector — now the largest

— the way a libertarian views most of the government bureaucracy. Its dynamic is principally its own reproduction over time. The services sector services the services sector as the state recreates the state. In *I Was Robot* Ernest Mann carries forth a long utopian socialist tradition by recounting all the industries which exist only in order that they and others like them continue to exist and expand. According to the libertarian litany, if an industry or an institution is making a profit it is satisfying “wants” whose origins and content are deliberately disregarded. But what we want, what we are capable of wanting is relative to the forms of social organization. People “want” fast food because they have to hurry back to work, because processed supermarket food doesn’t taste much better anyway, because the nuclear family (for the dwindling minority who have even that to go home to) is too small and too stressed to sustain much festivity in cooking and eating — and so forth. It is only people who can’t get what they want who resign themselves to want *more* of what they can get. Since we cannot be friends and lovers, we wail for more candy.

The libertarian is more upset than he admits when he drops his favored elitist imposture, the lip uncurls, the cigarette holder falls and the coolly rational anti-egalitarian Heinlein wannabe turns populist demagogue. In *Scarface* Edgar G. Robinson snarls, “Work is for saps!” In *Liberty*, David Ramsey Steele yelps that the *saps* are for *work*. When it says what he wants to hear, *Vox Populi* is *Vox Dei* after all; not, however, when the talk turns to Social Security, farm subsidies, anti-drug laws and all the other popular forms of state intervention. Steele assures us that workers prefer higher wages to job enrichment. This may well be true and it certainly makes sense since, as I have explained, job enrichment is not the abolition of work, it is only a rather ineffectual form of psychological warfare. But how does he know this is true? Because, he explains, there has been virtually no recent trend toward job enrichment in the American marketplace. This is blatant nonsense, since for the last fifteen years or more workers have not had the choice between higher wages and *anything* for the simple reason that real wages have fallen relative to the standard of living. Payback is the kind of trouble the prudent worker does not take to the counsellors in the Employee Assistance Program.

What I espouse is something that money cannot buy, a new way of life. The abolition of work is beyond bargaining since it implies the abolition of bosses to bargain with. By his delicate reference to the standard “job package” Steele betrays the reality that the ordinary job applicant has as much chance to dicker over the content of his work as the average shopper has to haggle over prices in the supermarket check-out line. Even the mediated collective bargaining of the unions, never the norm, is now unavailable to the vast majority of workers. Besides, unions don’t foster reforms like workers’ control, since if workers controlled work they’d have no use for brokers to sell their labor-power to a management whose functions

they have usurped. Since the revolt against work is not, could not be, institutionalized, Steele is unable even to imagine there is one. Steele is an industrial sociologist the way Gene Autry was a cowboy. He commits malpractice in every field he dabbles in; he is a Bizarro Da Vinci, a veritable Renaissance Klutz. Surely no other anthropologist thinks “The Flintstones” was a documentary.

With truly Ptolemaic persistence Steele hangs epicycle upon epicycle in order to reconcile reality with his market model. Take the health hazards of work: “If an activity occupies a great deal of people’s time, it will probably occasion a great deal of death and injury.” Thus there are many deaths in the home: “Does this show that housing is inherently murderous?” A short answer is that I propose the abolition of work, not the abolition of housing, because housing (or rather shelter) is necessary, but work, I argue, is not. I’d say about housing what Steele says about work: if it is homicide it is justifiable homicide. (Not all of it, not when slumlords rent out firetraps, but set that aside for now.) And the analogy is absurd unless *all* activities are equally dangerous, implying that you might just as well chain-smoke or play Russian roulette as eat a salad or play patty-cake. Some people die in their sleep, but not because they are sleeping, whereas many people die because they are working. If work is more dangerous than many activities unrelated to work which people choose to do, the risk is part of the case against work. I have no desire to eliminate all danger from life, only for risks to be freely chosen when they accompany and perhaps enhance the pleasure of the play.

Steele asserts, typically without substantiation, that workplace safety varies directly with income: “As incomes rise, jobs become safer — workers have more alternatives and can insist on greater compensation for high risk.” I know of no evidence for any such relationship. There should be a tendency, if Steele is right, for better-paid jobs to be safer than worse-paid jobs, but coal miners make much more money than janitors and firemen make much less money than lawyers. Anything to Steele’s correlation, if there *is* anything to it, is readily explained: elite jobs are just better in every way than grunt jobs — safer, better paid, more prestigious. The less you have, the less you have: so much for “trade-offs.”

Amusingly the only evidence which is consistent with Steele’s conjecture is evidence he elsewhere contradicts. Occupational injuries and fatalities have increased in recent years, even as real wages have fallen, but Steele is ideologically committed to the fairy-tale of progress. He says “workers have chosen to take most of the gains of increased output in the form of more goods and services, and only a small part of these gains in the form of less working time.” It wasn’t the *workers* who took these gains, not in higher wages, not in safer working conditions, and not in shorter hours — hours of work have *increased* slightly. It must be, then, that in the 80’s and after workers have “chosen” lower wages, longer hours *and* greater danger on the job. Yeah, sure.

Steele — or Ramsey-Steele, as he used to sign off when he used to write of the hippie paper *Oz* in the 60's — is, if often witless, sometimes witty, as when he calls me “a rope stretched over the abyss between Raoul Vaneigem and Sid Vicious.” My leftist critics haven't done as well. After I called *Open Road* “the *Rolling Stone* of anarchism,” it took those anarcho-leftists a few years to call me “the Bob Hope of anarchism,” obviously a stupendous effort on their part. But Ramsey-Steele can't keep it up as I can. “The Abolition of Breathing” (what a sense of humor this guy has!) is, its hamhandedness aside, an especially maladroit move by a libertarian. I am in favor of breathing; as Ed Lawrence has written of me, “His favorite weapon is the penknife, and when he goes for the throat, breathe easy, the usual result is a tracheotomy of inspiration.”

As it happens there is light to be shed on the libertarian position on breathing. Ayn Rand is always inspirational and often oracular for libertarians. A strident atheist and vehement rationalist — she felt in fact that she and three or four of her disciples were the only really rational people there were — Rand remarked that she *worshipped* smokestacks. For her, as for Lyndon LaRouche, they not only stood for, they *were* the epitome of human accomplishment. She must have meant it since she was something of a human smokestack herself; she was a chain smoker, as were the other rationals in her entourage. In the end she abolished her own breathing: she died of lung cancer. Now if Sir David Ramsey-Steele is concerned about breathing he should remonstrate, not with me but with the owners of the smokestacks I'd like to shut down. Like Rand I'm an atheist (albeit with pagan tendencies) but I worship nothing — and I'd even rather worship *God* than *smokestacks*.

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