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Carl CEDERSTRÖM and Peter FLEMING (2012)
Dead Man Working
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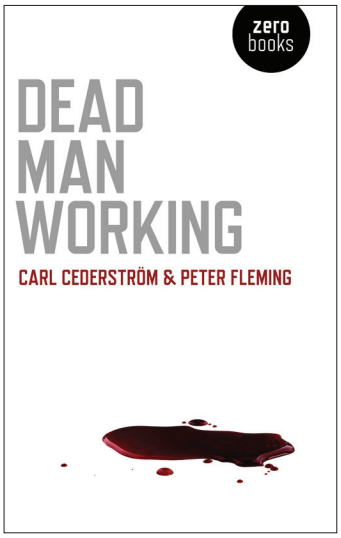
Reviewed by
Daniel KING
Nottingham Trent University
daniel.king@ntu.ac.uk



"Even its most ardent supporters admit that capitalism died sometime in the 1970s," Carl Cederström and Peter Fleming declare in the opening to their new book Dead Man Working. They go on to state, meanwhile, that despite this death, capitalism has "become the only game in town". The question they pose is what is it like to live and work in modern society given this state of affairs?

What is it like to work today? What is modern corporate culture like? And what does this tell us about who we have become? In little over 70 A5 pages, this fast-paced, entertaining and at times morbidly fascinating read sets out to answer these questions. Drawing on sources as diverse as Žižek, Marx, Foucault, Stephen King and Louis Theroux, the authors offer a cultural critique of the nature of modern work. To this end Cederström and Fleming describe experiences as diverse as a floating box which creates sensory deprivation, their experiences of a protest movement and some interesting takes on TV documentaries. Cleverly weaving poetry, TV documentaries and films together with complex academic theory in an accessible and interesting way, this book offers a diagnosis of what we have become.

The image the authors present of the modern worker is bleak, troubling and macabre. Their central assertion is that the modern worker is dead, or perhaps half-alive, swallowed up by the demands of the modern corporation. Everyone is obsessed with work, seeing it as core to their identity and life and central to us as social beings. As the authors declare towards the end of the book, "there is no clear separation between what we do and who we are" (p. 69). Every waking moment is a time for work. In near-apocalyptic tones, the authors describe the immense hopelessness of existence. We are the living dead, paralyzed, crippled, and filled with self-loathing. We lead a sombre existence, caught up in the perpetual meaninglessness of work, engaged in soul-deadening activity. We long for death as a means of escape.

This is not to say that work today is passionless and full of grey-suited automatons merely following orders; in fact it is quite the reverse. The modern worker has to give their heart and soul to their work, be passionate and committed and love what they do, give their all, express their unique personality and be free in their job. Post-industrial work demands every fibre of the workers' bodies, requiring that they be free. Yet this freedom and passion, offered to us by "liberation management", are not, Cederström and Fleming

argue, any form of liberation at all. In fact they are a stronger form of control, and one that envelops everything that we do, suffocating and eventually killing us. The modern worker is dead. This book performs the autopsy.

The book's opening chapter describes the nature of this dead man working. The image the authors depict here is one of the living dead, caught in the endless tedium of the office. Workers are humiliated by team-building exercises and alienated by their jobs; they exist between life and death, and long for the latter. This concept, according to which work can be suffocating, alienating and oppressing, is of course nothing new. Henry Ford's workers scarcely had to be told that their jobs were oppressive. The difference now is that we are expected to believe in what we are doing. Indeed, as the authors state: "Whereas under Fordism workers could mentally tell the boss to 'fuck off' as they left the factory, now they take it [their work] home with them. Turning-off is no long an available option" (p. 13). We have internalised the boss function; we control ourselves. Our work engulfs us; "we are the job" (p. 7). This is the "new culture of work that demands every fiber of your organism to be switched on" (p. 6).

Cederström and Fleming call this the new form of control biocracy; in it, "life itself is an essential 'human resource' to be exploited, the struggle between capital and life". This is the focus of the second chapter. In some senses this is one of the most powerful arguments that the authors provide. Gone are the structures of the bureaucratic organization with its rules, limits and restrictions on working hours. The authors cite Ricardo Semler's The Seven Day Weekend (2004) as an example of this approach. Whilst Semler presents this as greater freedom, playing golf on Mondays and seeing a movie on Tuesday afternoons whilst working more productively on Sunday afternoons, Cederström and Fleming alert us to the darker side of this approach, with workers longing for the "good old days". The trend "intensifies our unfreedom".

One of the central arguments put forward here is that capitalism has reappropriated some of the resistant forces that have been used against it. This is picked up in the third chapter. The student protests of May 1968 which occurred throughout the world (Ali and Watkins 1998), with arguably its strongest articulation in France as 'Mai 68' and the battle against the control of hierarchy and bureaucracy with the potential for greater freedom (Cohn-Bendit and Cohn-Bendit 1968) have, rather than a source of opposition, become a resource which has allowed the tentacles of capitalism to reach ever further into our everyday lives. The "key leftist motifs like emancipation, free self-expression and anti-authoritarianism had been co-opted by modern management discourse" (p. 21). In an argument which mirrors those of DeKoven (2004) and Khilnani (1993), Cederström and Fleming argue that this so-called liberation is in fact an extension of capitalistic ideology. "Only then, when the worker is 'free', can creativity, innovation and free-thinking thrive" (p. 22). The old divisions between work and play, management and worker have collapsed and with this a new, hyper-real intensity has been brought to capitalism. As the authors repeatedly state, "'liberation management' has realized that no one can exploit workers better than workers themselves" (p. 4).

This power on the part of liberation management is explored in greater depth in chapter four. Cederström and Fleming argue that we need to bring our whole selves to work: the good and the bad. Under liberation management, the modern firm "cares about us, and asks us to be natural and genuine" (p. 36). Drawing on but extending emotional labour theory, the authors claim that

it is not enough to offer fake cheerfulness, but in addition to this "we need to carefully cultivate the unruly and natural sides of ourselves to get ahead, and we should never hesitate to bring these to work" (p. 37). Feelings offer a source of value. We have to become emotional administrators and managers of our personalities.

The fifth chapter introduces some of the more unusual aspects of the book. In what the authors call "failed escape attempts", they present cases of adults dressed and acting like babies and flotation tanks for stressed-out city workers. These cases, it is claimed, reveal the emptiness of our existence. The sixth chapter extends the notion of escape attempts to investigate suicide attempts. They explore the case of low-paid factory workers in China who struggle to cope with the oppressive conditions in the factory, working to near-exhaustion in a compound with tennis courts, swimming pools and gyms that they are not allowed to access; highly-paid bankers killing themselves in dramatic fashion, jumping, for instance, from a prestigious restaurant with glass of champagne in hand to performing sadomasochistic acts of suicide whilst being verbally abused by prostitutes; and French telecom workers who struggle to cope with the restructuring of their firm. One of the most interesting examples is the Wall Street Fight Club, where bankers beat each other up in ways inspired by the book and film Fight Club. Cederström and Fleming conclude, however, that suicide is another failure and not a real escape.

The final chapter, presented as a postscript, attempts to lay out some form of alternative. The authors' suggestion is symbolic suicide, where we kill the boss function within ourselves. Drawing on 1980s films based on novels by Stephen King, namely The Shining and The Fire Starter, they offer the little girl Charlie from the latter film as a model of escaping what we have become. They suggest that the little girl represents a withdrawal from power. By becoming the little girl we can move to a stage which comes prior to the colonization of our bodies and lives. They describe this as a "process of de-working our bodies and social relations" (p. 72), of escaping the boss function and self-entrapment.

Dead Man Working is accessible, interesting, and lively in its style of writing, weaving together complex theories with TV documentaries in ways that make it a pleasure to read. Under another pen this text could admittedly have been a difficult read, but our authors wear their learning lightly, introducing complex academic theories in such a way that they seem neither turgid nor impenetrable. At the same time, however the text is highly inaccessible, and assumes a great deal of prior knowledge. Nods are continually made in the direction of Marx, Foucault, Hardt and Negri, C. Wright Mills and Žižek, with little explanation of who they are and what they said or the background to their arguments. The reader thus needs to be well versed in many of the central concepts tackled, firstly to understand properly the claims that are made and secondly to appreciate the nuances of the arguments expounded.

There are certainly Nietzschean undertones throughout Dead Man Working; these can be seen in the regular appearance of figures like Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari. At the book's heart is a response to the question Nietzsche poses in his essay "Schopenhauer as Educator": how have we become who we are? And how do we become another? (1997). As we have seen, the response is a rather bleak and at times dark portrayal which will probably resonate with many people's experiences.

It would be easy to come away from reading the book with a sense of despair. The authors' dystopian view of work, in which every aspect of workers' lives is controlled, is certainly bleak. One question which emerges is what is the impact of presenting work through this lens? If work is simply drudgery and any portrayal of liberation is in fact another trap, where does that take us? If we cannot believe in what we are doing, maybe we can at best adopt an ironic sense of distance from our work, acting out a fantasy of belief in the corporate machine without the belief ever becoming real. Alternatively, and this may be a more rational response, we can become completely instrumental in our approach, and if we cannot believe that we are going to achieve a social purpose or that work has any meaning, then we should simply try to make as much money as possible. At least material wealth might cushion us from an otherwise meaningless existence!

Cederström and Fleming offer us little solace in learning to cope with this world. We live in a post-industrial society in which we are completely trapped. Each action that management theory presents as more empowering and liberating is unmasked as a further trick through which we deepen our servitude. Indeed, this portrayal represents a classic argument from Critical Management Studies (CMS): everything which is claimed by management to be more liberating, such as culture (Willmott, 1993), humanism (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992) or "liberal management", is actually a more powerful way of controlling us. Management attention has moved from the controlling of of bodies (as under Taylorism and Fordism) to the controlling of hearts, minds and beliefs, and indeed our souls.

Is the world really as gloomy as all this? In this relentless pursuit of the "dark side" the authors present only the blackness, ignoring any "emancipatory potential" that these approaches offer. One would hope for what Alvesson and Deetz call "transformative re-definition" (2000: 139), moments in which alternatives can be fashioned. The point here is that by presenting work in such a totalizing fashion, where the only way out seems to be to return to a childlike state, we are unable to see the possibilities that exist within the present. Not all work is drudgery and not all aspects of liberation management automatically lead to more insidious forms of control. In this regard, Dead Man Working suffers from the same fate as the extremely critical end of CMS. It is well constructed and convincingly argued but offers little hope and no alternative.

This issue is all the more pertinent in the case of Dead Man Working given that the authors are presumably seeking to connect with an audience broader than simply academics. The book's style, publisher (Zer0 books, which holds the avowed ambition of bringing academic debates into the public realm) and the subject matter all mean that the authors should be able to reach beyond academia. One wonders, therefore, if they do not have a responsibility to offer us some way of rethinking who we have become.

The authors could also be deemed guilty of believing the very managerial hype which they critique. Whilst their depiction certainly represents the lives of many professionals (including academics – indeed, I am writing these words on a Saturday afternoon on my kitchen table as my two-year-old daughter runs around and plays by my feet), many people's jobs can simply be left in the office. We do not actually hear the voices of the workers themselves. This book is, rather, an argument weaved together from accounts provided by management gurus and critical theorists. As such, it provides an excellent analysis of what is being said about the nature of work, but it does not provide

us with an insight into whether people actually believe the rhetoric that comes from these sources. It therefore runs the risk of over-emphasising the role of theory and managerial rhetoric, with little appreciation of actual experience (and indeed strategies of resistance) of those within this society.

One also wonders whether the authors fully believe in the critique they are presenting. If their account of working life is accurate, why, as part of their job, would the authors offer a book such as this about the pointlessness and monotony of work? Indeed, the very act of writing the book and the fact that it is published seems to indicate that there are opportunities, albeit perhaps brief ones, for more creative and life-affirming endeavours.

Overall, this is an interesting and insightful read that captures many of the best but also troubling aspects of a critical study of contemporary work and society. It deserves to be widely read and debated as a book that offers a wake-up call for us all.

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