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978-1-107-06641-0 - Empty Labor: Idleness and Workplace Resistance

Roland Paulsen

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## *Empty Labor*

While most people work ever-longer hours, international statistics suggest that the average time spent on non-work activities per employee is around two hours a day. How is this possible, and what are the reasons behind employees withdrawing from work? In this thought-provoking book, Roland Paulsen examines organizational misbehavior, specifically the phenomenon of “empty labor,” defined as the time during which employees engage in private activities during the working day. The author explores a variety of explanations, from under-employment to workplace resistance. Building on a rich selection of interview material and extensive empirical research, he uses both qualitative and quantitative data to present a concrete analysis of the different ways empty labor unfolds in the modern workplace. This book offers new perspectives on subjectivity, rationality and work simulation and will be of particular interest to academic researchers and graduate students in organizational sociology, organization studies, and human resource management.

ROLAND PAULSEN is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Department of Business Administration, Lund University. Dr Paulsen has received several awards for his work, notably from the Nordic Sociological Association and the International Labor Process Conference. His first book *Arbetsamhället: Hur Arbetet Överlevde Teknologin* [*The Society of Labor: How Labor Survived Technology*] stirred up a national debate in Sweden on the meaning of work.

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# Empty Labor

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ROLAND PAULSEN

*Lund University, Sweden*



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## *Foreword*

The significance and positive nature of paid labor is taken for granted in many societal debates and also most research. Of course, “bad” working conditions are always seen as bad, but work in itself is for most seen as something positive, even essential to the needs and wants of most people. Unemployment is highly problematic, even when welfare societies ease the financial strain of not being employed. Full or near-full employment is the ideal, to avoid people’s suffering from lack of activity or meaningful existence associated with work, often equated with paid labor. So is the case even in advanced economies, half a decade after the arrival of affluent society and well into post-affluence, where technology takes care of most of the production. Needless to say, the social value of the outcomes of work is often debatable.

At the same time it is common to express worries about many people working too much or being exposed to high demands on performances. Boundaryless work, harsh work tempo, stress, uncertain, temporary employment conditions, and low tolerance for underachievers are common themes in debates and research. In contemporary capitalism, competition is hard, and people in the labor force are facing tough demands in an increasingly squeezed working life. So we are often told.

Within the sociology of work, it is tempting and common to adhere to this template for truth-telling and join the mainstream. But without denying that these descriptions often make sense, there are other stories to be told. Not all parts of the labor market are driven by fierce competition intensifying people’s work days.

Roland Paulsen’s book falls outside the mainstream of labor studies. He does not buy the assumptions of the blessing of work (as long as it is liberated from bad conditions) and neither the thesis that a rationalized economy and working life put hard pressure on

employees to work intensively and risk health and work satisfaction. His point of departure is rather the opposite: work (paid labor) is an antithesis to freedom, but it is not necessarily so that tight control and intense pressure to work characterize the average work day for most people.

Paulsen suggests that researchers may not understand so much of the inner dynamics of working life. They may be caught in their own work ideology and in the production of knowledge that benefit themselves: here is the thesis of the significance of work and problematic work conditions as a popular point of departure. And what researchers assume, they tend to find and confirm. In his study, Paulsen proceeds from an original, interesting and very productive idea – the study of empty labor. This refers to individuals who during paid work hours do not engage in – for the employer – productive activity, but are concerned with private matters – taking a nap, surfing on the net, or chatting with colleagues or friends. The study of empty labor leads him to a quite different image of contemporary working life than the one that is salient in the mainstream of labor studies. A great deal of people are not so positive about their work and are not so formed and constrained by labor contracts, work ideology, or a repressive management holding a tight grip over the labor process.

The basic problem addressed is about resistance and agency within paid employment in relationship to the ideological and practical demands of work society and its organizations.

Key questions then become: How do we deal with work society? What do we do with our wish to work less and live more? Does *status quo* necessarily mean acceptance? Or what happens with the unrealized longings for another life?

The book connects to the research area *organizational misbehavior* – the complex relationship between resistance and adaptation in workplaces. The empirical subject matter is to describe and understand motives for empty labor, e.g. for not working while being paid for doing so. According to a number of international studies, the work day for many people is characterized by quite a lot of empty labor. There are indications that between 1.5 and 3 hours per day are spent on non-work. This has inspired Paulsen to ask two sets of questions, within the overarching aim of understanding the links among empty labor, subjectivity, and worker resistance:

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*How?* How is it possible to get away with working half of your working hours or less? Is it an individual pursuit or is there collective organization? Is it known to management or is it concealed? How do you manage not getting noticed? How do you spend the hours freed by empty labor?

*Why?* What motivates empty labor? Do slackers themselves conceive of it as an expression of dissent or just laziness? Is it something that you can mention to your colleagues, your friends or is shame involved? Is it politically motivated and in that case, how – against management, the firm, work itself, or what?

Central for good research are good research questions. They call for creativity, critical distance, and an ability to go against conventional thinking. These are important qualities in this book. Not only the questions, but also by the very nature of social science, the always tentative answers provided in this book demonstrate these qualities. So does the careful, reflective, sometimes ironic writing style, a text full of clever remarks and observations and many inspiring thoughts and suggestions for further research questions. Paulsen demonstrates that this is indeed a rich area to explore further.

Having read a great deal during my 30 years as a researcher I very often feel that new texts do not add much in terms of new insights. Paulsen's book is definitively an exception. It represents social science when it is at its best: it has something important to say and it says it with credibility and elegance.

Mats Alvesson, Lund University

## *Preface*

I write this with a fine view of the Indian Ocean. I can hear splashing noises from the pool behind, children laughing and screaming, and beneath me the pulse of crashing waves. I read the freeze has knocked out the railroad lines in Sweden again. It is early February and at this time of the year it usually gets dark around 3.30 p.m. back home. People are now waiting on the platforms, in the cold, with tingling fingers, numb feet, silently suppressing that deep rage that is so hard to put into words. Where I am now, life is quite different. The Balinese workers' main concern seems to be to sweep away the flowers that keep falling from the trees. This is our second time at this island, and we will probably stay another week or so. Officially, we are on a conference trip to Bangkok. Unlike my wife, who also works as a researcher, I have not informed anyone at work that the trip includes a five-week stay in Indonesia. Why should I? As I see it, where, when, and how I work is of no importance as long as I do it. The question that recurs to me, particularly at moments like this, is rather whether I work at all.

If pressing these keys is “work,” it certainly is different from the work I watched my parents do as I grew up. Sometimes, mostly with the sense of being a fraud, I find myself thinking of my father, his thick-skinned hands and the burn-marks on his forearms from that half lifetime spent in the kitchen. During my PhD studies they would often return to it: “but what will you do for work once you’re finished?” Today, I can still appreciate a vague sense of disbelief on their end – vague, but justified. Clearly, it cannot be right that some people continue to “work” on far-flung beaches with the wind in their hair, idly pondering how to best formulate something in a language they have not really mastered, whereas others have to “work” with things that no one would do voluntarily, damaging both mind and body while trying to normalize stress levels that most academics could scarcely fathom.

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Every now and then I hear colleagues saying that academic research is not only work, but *hard* work, that you can get *burned out* if you are not careful. My experience is very different. Yet I sympathize with those who are less content with this job than I am. If truth be told, right now I would rather try windsurfing than writing this preface. But my body does not even react to those impulses anymore. “Work” in the abstract sense – as compulsion, as morality – is always present, like a twinge of guilt, like a John Calvin figurine planted on my right shoulder, continually asking me: “Do you *really* deserve this? Is it *really* okay for you to take time off right now?”

Most sociologists know of discipline, both personally and theoretically. We have studied it for more than a century, and there is no sphere of life where we have not observed its manifestations. In some sociological classics, you might even get the impression that discipline is the most prominent characteristic of the modern worker. This book will yield another understanding of today’s employees. Even if discipline is there, it is never absolute. The universal capacity to establish a cynical distance to whatever power we obey is now so well documented that it has itself been described as a form of ideology. Sometimes discipline is very real – cognitively, behaviorally or both – other times, it is no more than a charade. This should not surprise anyone; wage labor is to a large extent constituted by a set of well-rehearsed charades. Yet, as the expanding research on organizational “misbehavior” illustrates, there is another reality beyond. Slacking off at work is doubtlessly the most widespread form of organizational misbehavior. It is also a misbehavior that must remain particularly covert in order to recur. This clandestine existence may be a reason why so few have studied it.

Another reason may be that sleeping employees represent a theoretical challenge to the supposed rationality of wage labor. The general assumption, from which I myself suffered when initiating this project, seems to be that “there is always work if you want it”; that productivity losses stem from individual misfits lacking in work commitment, from mere aberrations in an otherwise efficient machine. This study reveals that there are other rationales than “instrumental reason” regulating the modern workplace. Most fundamentally, I would like to stress the fact that hard work does *not* necessarily pay off. What you produce, how much you contribute to your organization, will not allow you to reap any rewards unless your work is recognized by others. At work, it

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is not what you do, but how you *look like* you are doing it. This order will always disadvantage the humble – and stimulate illusion tricks.

Under such simulacric conditions, withdrawing from work – at work – becomes an equivocal act. Is it resistance, adjustment or something in between? Unfortunately, there is a tendency in the research on organizational misbehavior to answer questions of this type with no regard for the different contexts in which the misbehavior takes place. As the reader will discover, there is indeed, under certain circumstances, an element of silent defiance at play. This observation should, however, not be exaggerated into a rejection of the very phenomenon of discipline. What I want to suggest is simply that the disciplinary power of work is far from uncontested and that the rationality that we often attribute to work is ill-founded. Even if the phantasm of work cannot be eradicated under present conditions, I hope that this book will inspire some of you to act against it.

This study emerged from a range of interviews which I conducted over a period of three years. I am indebted to many people, from both academia and “the real world” outside. Without the generosity and kindness of all the interviewees who gave me their valuable time, there would have been nothing to write about. Thank you all for sharing your stories, and thanks to the Maska.nu Crew for allowing me to advertise for participants on your website.

While writing, I was very fortunate to be able to visit two institutions outside Sweden. For my three-month stay at the Department of Human Resource Management, Strathclyde University, I want to thank Dora Scholarios and Paul Thompson, who received me in the best possible way. As the reader will notice, Paul has had a tremendous impact on how I approached the subject of this book, and I feel very privileged to have met and discussed earlier drafts and ideas with him. My one-year visit at the Department of Sociology, Cornell University, was one of the best experiences of my life. Thank you, Richard Swedberg, for tutoring me in the art of theorizing and for being such a shining example of how great intellect can be combined with great humility.

I have also benefited from the efforts of a number of Swedish colleagues who have commented on this manuscript and earlier versions of it. There are too many to mention here, but I would particularly like to thank Michael Allvin, Mats Alvesson, Patrik Aspers, Ugo Corte, Erik Hannerz, Kaj Håkanson, Jan Ch. Karlsson, Rafael Lindqvist, Vessela Misheva, Lennart Räterlinck, and Lena Sohl.

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Two sections of the book were previously published in altered forms, and I thank the publishers for permission to reuse parts of those articles. Chapter 4 is derived from “Non-work at Work: Resistance or What?” in *Organization* (Forthcoming, 2014), and Chapter 6 is a reworking of “Layers of Dissent: The Meaning of Time Appropriation” in *Outlines – Critical Practice Studies* 1 (2011): 53–81.

Since several of the people I have thanked here would find the less “neutral” passages of this book quite disturbing (not to mention all the failings of which I am not yet aware), I should point out that although they have contributed to my formation and the completion of this project, I am the only one responsible for the final outcome. If anyone else should be blamed, it would have to be my love, muse, partner in crime, and most devoted reader, Anna Lindqvist. Thank you, Anna, for all that you are, and for giving me the idea to initiate this study that eventually, as an absolute proof of the absurdity of work, took so much of our spare time. I dedicate this book to you.