

RECREATION;
OR,
LIFE OUTSIDE WORK

BY ANDREW D R ABBOTT,
AUTHOR OF 'THE BATTLE OF THE IMMORTALISING OBJECT
VS THE ETERNALISING MOMENT'



“Recreation is a subtle withdrawal and a passive resistance to the laws of the survival of the fittest in a landscape of imagined scarcity, and instead offers a form of communism centred on the production and sharing of resources.”

LEEDS:
SIGNIFICANT PURSUITS PRESS
MMVIII

**Recreation;
or,
Life Outside Work**

Andy Abbott

2008

PART ONE

On Amateur Potential

Professionalism

When I wrote the following words, or the bulk of them, I sat alone in a shed designed and made as a house of contemplation for all things recreational. By recreation I allude to those pursuits that occupy time outside of the necessary labours of life; that supersede passive consumption and become engaging activities undertaken for little other reason than for the pure novelty, enjoyment or fulfilment of the instigator and participants.

I felt it necessary to create a space in which these thoughts could occur unfettered by the noisy grind of the mechanisms of the everyday. The statement that men continue to lead lives of quiet desperation can only be refuted on the grounds that such desperation is silent. As the Situationists were keen to point out four decades ago, we have exchanged the struggle for survival for the right to be bored to death. Nowadays, in order to distract ourselves from the fact we have willingly accepted this suspicious pact we emit a continuous drone about keeping busy, vocational callings, networking and career ladders. One of the few audible words that appears from this

low-level babble, mainly due to the frequency of its occurrence, is ‘professional’.

Taking into account the weight of historical evidence, it is, at the very least, peculiar that we use a word like ‘professional’ in anything other than a derogatory context. Beneath the many inferences the word ‘professional’ has - as a yardstick for a well-finished task for example, or as descriptive of a job that requires skilled training - at base, and working from dictionary definitions, a profession is a paid occupation. To act professionally, then, insinuates that one is doing something *for* money, regardless of whether one enjoys the act or not. Professional activity, or an act undertaken as part of a profession, is, therefore, *a means to an end*, and it is this understanding of professionalism that informs my reflections written here.

Incidentally, the term that refers to activity performed for its own sake, but that generates income as a by-product, is ‘vocational’. I would suggest that the blurring, abuse and misuse of these terms is not accidental in a culture for which the naturalisation of extracting profit at every conceivable opportunity is key to its sustenance.

For many of us the naturalisation of the means-ends mentality that is applied to every aspect of our everyday existence, aided by the uncritical deployment of terms such as professional, has taken a discreet but nonetheless powerful hold. We wake early in the morning in order to get the early train to miss the crowds that might make us late for work to do something we would rather not be doing for seven or eight hours of the day to earn money to afford the lavish food and holidays we deserve because we work so hard. Everyone appears comfortable with the idea that this is a compromised state of affairs. One would rather not have to work, but sadly ‘that’s the way of the world and its best to get by as best as you can’. Eavesdropping on any conversation between lunching work colleagues or post-work mobile phone conversations is likely to confirm this widespread disenchantment.

We still, however, use the word that best describes this compromised existence as a form of aspirational branding. If something is executed ‘professionally’ then we take that to mean it is done to the highest possible standard notwithstanding the fact that for the executors it has every chance of being undertaken begrudgingly to pay the bills. To

have a professional outlook or to act professionally is regarded as commendable behaviour despite the fact that this implies that one concentrates on what can be gained from the activity rather than what it *is*.

Certainly there are examples of professionalism where it can be said that the professional in question sincerely enjoys their daily task, and given the choice would be doing the exact same activity in the same way whether they were generating income or not. It is equally true though that these cases number so few as to be comparable to lottery winners and freak inheritors of hidden family fortunes.

Industry

The case against professionalism runs deeper than a simple dislike or shirking of the responsibilities of work, and has broader implications beyond the personal or daily. Our fixation with professionalism constitutes not only a set of compromised individual realities but a compromised economic infrastructure under which we operate.

Let us take as an example the workers villages set up by philanthropic industrialists in the early to mid nineteenth century. Historically there is nothing

unusual about entire communities in a particular geographic area sharing the same mode of existence. This is true of Kenyan mountain tribes existing as hunter-gatherers and resisting agriculture as much as it does to villages of textiles workers who make similar use of the natural resources at hand; a suitable water supply for instance.

The industrial revolution saw a giant acceleration in the homogenisation of the daily grind however. The invention and implementation of the steam engine standardised and reduced the processes in producing cloth to the nth degree, and with it the day-to-day activity for entire families and communities. The poverty and squalor endured by the vast majority of mill workers and the environmental devastation that expanded hand in hand with this process of industrialisation is documented well enough to resist outlining here.

It would be foolish however not to note that the apparent benefits are also observable enough to forfeit a detailed explanation. The ‘progressive’ industrialisation of the country created areas of great monetary wealth and some of the most impressive and enduring architecture as a result. Bradford, and in particular Saltaire workers village in which I

reside, is a shining example of a one-time wool capital of the world. Of course, the great monetary wealth to which I refer was the property of a relative handful of industrialists regardless of their philanthropic ideals.

Despite this gigantic class divide and unashamed inequalities in monetary wealth it remains a period that my neighbours often refer to with a great deal of nostalgia; a time when communities were living a simple and sometimes hard life, but one that guaranteed a job for life as much as it did affinity and a close relationship with one's neighbourhood. The drawbacks of such professional security however, would only become apparent in less fortunate times. The textiles industry in Bradford and the UK as a whole suffered a rapid decline when competition from overseas destabilised the position as world wool leaders, and with it the assumption that work in a particular field would be a dependable resource. After generations of textiles, mill and manufacturing workers, and with paid work in those professions in short supply, the lack of adaptability and the reliance on a profession bred by specialisation materialised as heightened anxiety and

social decline in those areas once so favoured by industry.

Economy

The purpose of my brief and over simplified plotting of the rise and fall of the industrial manufacturing economy is not to further demonise a specific moment in history but to identify the self-destructive systems that still exist in the current dominant economic conditions. The lesson to be learned from the gutting of entire communities and cities such as Bradford following global shifts in favour is not that competition from abroad should be eradicated, but that fluctuations in productivity and fortune are inherent to the form of neo-liberal capitalism.

Furthermore, I am not outlining a problem specific to a period in history that we have now moved beyond. I have seen firsthand the same anxiety and uncertainty about the future once felt by the workers relying on the manufacturing industry in Yorkshire, currently experienced by textiles workers in Northern Italy, due now to competition from China and South Asia. These parallel declines are examples of the predictability of the indiscriminate

logic of capital to burn up its own resources and move on to greener, more easily exploited, pastures. With this in mind the words ‘creative industries’ are liable to catch in my throat and I ask myself whether it wasn’t enough to desecrate the work of the hands without now repeating the same process with our intellectual capacities?

Adaptability to the aforementioned fluctuations in local economy, then, is a necessary survival tactic to a mode of production that is always expanding; that constantly seeks new territory for survival and shows no allegiance to one place. It seems logical that the over-specialisation and division of labour inherent to ‘professionalism’ is a counterpoint to this adaptability. Men and women who have been schooled with a particular ‘ideal’ profession in mind, based on personal likes and dislikes and aptitudes for certain tasks that are subsequently honed and focused over years of training are likely to find themselves ‘made for’ a certain job. The unfortunate situation intrinsic to neo-liberal capitalism is that there is no certainty that that job will stay fixed.

It seems to me, then, that this is why the schooling and education system is looking towards ‘transferable skills’ as a way to keep afloat in the

waters of casino capitalism, and as a tool to regenerate the economy of those areas that have already been dealt direct blows. Young people are being equipped with capacities to exist in the knowledge economy and the creative industries, with ways of thinking and problem solving, of affective or intellectual labour power. Simultaneously changes in the way we work through collaborative and horizontal models of management are commonplace, with more ‘ownership’ and responsibility for decision making in the hands of the worker.

What the professional world is looking towards then, as a more appropriate model for survival in the neo-liberal or neo-conservative environment, is the adaptability shown in its opposite; the ‘amateur’. In the sphere of amateur activity, the area where tasks are undertaken purely for the enjoyment of doing so, as a form of recreation and creative relaxation, and as an antidote to the alienating effects of work, there exists the potential to acquire the adaptability the professional world so desperately needs to ensure its dominance. An instinctive learning occurs within those activities executed for their own sake, a mostly unknowing acquisition of knowledge and social

wealth, that are by-products, rather than the sole aim, of a good time had.

As it is the nature of capitalism to identify and co-opt any model with the power to challenge its authority and drain it of its socially transformative potential, neo-liberal policies have made attempts to exploit this insurgent amateurism before it grows to become something unmanageable. The American form that this has taken is to ‘empower’ and make use of the voluntary sector, through the advocacy of family and community values and morals, as a replacement for services that the state proclaims to deliver. The power of amateur activity, however, equally lies in its form of organisation, and here it is less easily assimilated.

Self-organisation

It hardly needs mentioning that those pursuits that are embarked upon for love, not money, are much more likely to be people-led rather than institutionalised. Frequently present there is the willingness to contribute, take responsibility and dedicate time, regardless of remuneration, that is so often absent from the professional sphere. This

results in a model of organisation often denoted ‘bottom-up’ as opposed to ‘top-down’. I am not suggesting here that all hobbies and amateur activity are in direct opposition to professionalism, indeed many hobbyists adopt behaviours apt to the professional sphere, through competition or by viewing amateur activity as a stepping-stone towards entrance into the professional world, but for the majority the fact that this is a pipe-dream doesn’t prevent them from involving themselves in the pursuit with full gusto.

Take for example, the five-a-side football team that meet regularly on a Wednesday evening for an indoor kick-about. Not one member would be likely to turn down a contract with a premier league team if he or she were offered such a thing, but the improbability of this ever occurring does little to curb the enthusiasm and dedication they might have for meeting and playing. Similarly the pub rock covers band, comprising middle aged blues lovers are less concerned with musical career options than making best use of their spare Wednesday evenings and entertaining their friends and family.

This lack of concern with the conventional ideas of progress present in activities that take a ‘professional’ form, affords the amateur a degree of autonomy whereby they create their own set of criteria by which to judge the successes of their engagement. The amateur creates their own playing field and set of rules to enjoy the game. These rules reduce the importance of, or disregard altogether, the means-end mentality associated with notions of the professional. The amateur creates his or her own standard based on the quality of engagement, not the quantity of produce. The amateur therefore has potential to explore new areas that the professional dares not venture; the activity becomes less compromised; there is freedom and potential for risk as there is less to lose.

Amateur activity in its truest form is both self-judged and self-governed. Its distance from the professional sphere means it possesses what cultural critics like Adorno saw as the ultimate privilege of art; that is ‘the function to have no function’. Similarly, when these ‘functionless’ activities are undertaken out of a potentially unidentifiable, but nonetheless shared, necessity by a group they take the form of self-organisation. In an amateur group of

this sort there exists a common vested interest and engagement in the process, as the outcomes of the project are both transparent and attainable due to the shared knowledge involved in its execution. In this sense the people involved in the activity also have control over it, creating what might idealistically be seen as a model for a party of autonomy.

It is here then, in the potential for the undoing of the centralisation, uneven development, and class power characteristic of capitalism that I hear the true resonance of recreation. Recreation simultaneously represents and builds a space away from the clamour of market-based contemporary life where, because everything is done for a reason, we have to distract ourselves from the actual doing itself. Recreation is a subtle withdrawal and a passive resistance to the laws of the survival of the fittest in a landscape of imagined scarcity, and instead offers a form of communism centred on the production and sharing of resources.

Even when hobbies and pastimes cannot be said to knowingly act out the slow undoing of capitalism, and are just a way of filling time, they still provide a much more interesting set of relations than can possibly occur in the professional world. My time

reflecting in the shed, and immersed in the amateur sphere, has led me to the conclusion that where work unites, play excites. Additionally I believe it to be true that the adaptability provided through hobbyist activity makes for richer characterisation and provides myriad paths from the common conversation starter, 'What do you do'? Amateurs and recreationalists make up that marginalised group of people intending to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life. Amateurs of the world unite!

PART TWO

Pastime Tales

The following anecdotes have been drawn from my time spent immersed in the world of self-organised and amateur activity in and around Leeds.

Janet and Howard

Howard is seventy-three years old and lives in Ossett near Wakefield, West Yorkshire. In his spare time he makes origami from used bus tickets and discarded lottery tickets. Howard has made all kinds of objects and animals ranging from one-inch vases, utilizing up to thirty different sheets of paper, to dollar-bill peacocks that fan their tails. Howard can make a crane in less than six minutes and once made a batch of over a thousand. He arranged them to spell out the word 'peace'.

Janet is part of a club that ensures the preservation of the neglected Settle-Carlisle railway line by taking guided walks out to various stops along it each Saturday. She is of a similar age to Howard and lives in Bradford where she worked for Field's packaging for most of her life. Field's survived the decline in the manufacturing industry in Bradford longer than most because it had made a timely move into design. Janet used to design packaging – mainly boxes for various other products and companies. It's amazing how many different kinds of boxes there are despite the fact that they mostly do the same job.

It wasn't until Janet met Howard for the first time in Leeds on a hot day in May 2008 that she began to consider what she had done for most of her life as creative. Howard's collection of miniature paper frogs, various birds, flowers and ornaments and the passion with which he described the making process reminded her of the good times at Fields, when it felt like they were doing something innovative and new. Howard made Janet her own crane from part of a leaflet for the Friends of the Dales Rail brochure - as a gift, naturally. Janet liked Howard's lottery ticket origami so much that she requested to commission him to make a much larger paper swan for a family member's wedding. She would, of course, take him out for a coffee as part of the payment so they swapped numbers to arrange that business to begin with.

Brian and Anne

Brian was a member of the very young team in Leeds Service Crew in the eighties. He's put all that crap behind him now but they were good days. Great lads. Felt like they were part of something. He met Anne through a scooter club years later. Of course she was a Leeds United supporter so they got chatting. Anne was a lot younger than Brian but after some initial embarrassment her credentials as an ardent LUFC fan brought Brian to the point where he would admit to his mates that they were going out. The weird thing was that Anne's uncle Dave had been part of the crew that initiated Brian back then and they even used to run together on occasion. During a scrap with some black lads in Huddersfield, he'd seen Dave bottled and hadn't stepped in, just froze up and skulked away. It's still one of the few secrets between Anne and Brian. Brian just doesn't know how to bring it up and he gets tetchy each time they meet up with uncle Dave, constantly praying nothing comes up that will jog his past cowardliness.

Sally and Alex

Sally and Alex are young lovers. They currently both study at Leeds University but moved from different areas of the UK; Sally from a small village near Leicester and Alex from Bideford, a picturesque town in North Devon. Being in their first year at University has afforded them enough time to become completely infatuated with one another.

When Sally and Alex are not spending their time together, because of commitments to family or friends for instance, or outside of the University term, they talk on the phone. In periods where they might not see each other for a number of days or even weeks, their desire to be closer to one another results in their phone conversations lasting up to an hour and a half each night. The days can also be punctuated with up to twenty text message conversations, mostly just silly stuff peppered with smilies. Obviously, internet technology has made their communicative pastime much more affordable and turned what might have been a sporadic luxury into a genuine pursuit in its own right.

Each evening they talk about what has happened over the course of the day, and then, when that has been exhausted, move on to talk about plans for later that evening or maybe even tomorrow. In this way Sally lives most of her solitary days twice over, once in person and then replayed in minute detail over the phone in the evening. After having mutually decided that the conversation is over and they have played the game of seeing who will hang-up the phone first, Sally often feels melancholic and empty.

To make matters worse the double-endurance of their separation also has the perverse effect of making the time that Sally and Alex manage spend together move at twice the speed. Recently they have started experimenting with a potential remedy where they limit themselves to only talking on the phone about the times they've spent together rather than absent.

Graham and the tutor

Graham was a student at a well-respected art college in London, where he studied Fine Art and specialized in painting. One of Graham's tutors, a head of department, was an unashamed Freemason; unashamed in as much as he was constantly dressed up in the full regalia - rings, medallions, funny symbols on everything - the lot. Graham and the rest of the college thought it was an odd way of going about things for a member of a supposedly secret society.

The tutor's presence would, of course, spark plenty of conversation about freemasonry and the surrounding rumours amongst the students. Graham's friend Adam had lived in a pub that his parents ran. He used to talk about how 'buffalo lodge' meetings up in the function room were regularly held. Adam was never allowed in of course – being a bit too young, but him and his friends would sneak a peak through the crack in the door or just sit and listen to what was going on. It just seemed like a drinking club really, they were always steaming and running about.

Other students talked about how freemasons never had to pay parking tickets or worry about speeding fines because all the police were ‘masons too, and that that secret handshake stuff really worked if you were in bother with the authorities. Naturally, most of the talk was conjecture or stirring, a bit of bravado to seem a bit more edgy - the way art students are.

Anyway, Graham was a really engaged student and quite serious about his practice and this led to him developing a pretty close relationship with said ‘mason tutor. The tutor liked his painting, would invite him out for drinks to continue the interesting bits of the group crits in a more informal environment and even bought a bit of his preparatory work. It wasn’t too long until the rest of the students started to see what was going on and began asking questions.

No one ever got the full story out of Graham of course, it was always characteristically hush-hush, but it was at least made clear that Graham *had* been invited in to the ‘masons by the tutor. Now, Graham really wasn’t convinced by the idea but went along with it as, despite what he’d heard elsewhere, it was a slow and gradual process of initiation – not something that happens overnight. Over the course

of Graham's developing relationship with his tutor he predictably achieved his usual high grades at assessment and continued to be a favoured student. He was put forward for various prizes and offered opportunities to show his work outside the art school.

His ever-growing successes continued up until Graham found himself in the intimidating scenario of his 'final initiation'. At that point he promptly bottled it and withdrew completely saying he wanted nothing to do with freemasonry anymore. He never really told anyone why, but the consequences were clear enough: all his work for the year was failed by the assessing board forcing him to transfer to an alternative college to complete his art education.

Mary and her work colleagues

Mary sings in the Horsforth Ladies Barber Harmony Choir. They are a thirty-eight strong group of women with a membership spanning a range of ages and backgrounds. They perform unaccompanied and almost always without amplification. Mary loves the power and volume of the united voices, and imagines it must be a similar feeling to group worship or going to support a football team, neither of which, as an atheist bored to tears by sport, she has ever experienced.

The choir has existed for nearly seven years now, and in that time has performed all over the UK and Europe. Their appearances range from local galas to indoor concerts and competitions with other female voice choirs. Their prolific touring schedule has garnered Horsforth Ladies Barber Harmony Choir quite a reputation. Most recently Mary and the rest of the choir had a trip all around Germany, from Koln to Munich to Berlin and came back with a gold medal for their performances in competition.

At work people in Mary's office are always astounded at where she gets to travel. It irks her somewhat though that when asked about the places

she has visited she can rarely recall anything other than the food in the hotel they stayed in, or the postcards that she has picked up. That's the trouble with such a busy performance schedule - you might as well be anywhere. She worries that the souvenirs and memories she keeps reveal little more than the TV images everyone is already familiar with. Generously though Mary embellishes her stories of their trips abroad with subtle fictional details so as not to disappoint her colleagues keen to hear about the Horsforth Ladies Barber Harmony Choir tour exploits.

www.festivalofpastimes.org