

The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work

A de Botton

December 29-30, 2010

This book is ostensibly about work, but in fact it is about consumption. What underpins our consumer society? We are delighted by its fruits but we tend to ignore and look away from the large structure which supports it, and in which most of us are actually attached through our work. The overriding principle of modern capitalistic society is consumption. We are not only encouraged to consume, we are admonished almost ordered to do so, because if not the great recycling of which the economy consists, will come to a screeching halt. de Botton is not a critic of the globalized economy, he is but an observer. He is both fascinated and disgusted by the phenomenon. As a writer he can afford to take a detached outsiders point of view, as a bestselling author he is very much part and parcel of it. One can of course have moral qualms about consumption, but as de Botton remarks, it is exactly those societies which encourage frivolous consumerism which find the resources to engage in much more meaningful activity, such as funding medical research, building hospitals, supporting the arts. This is of course the great argument for providing an apology for capitalism. In spite of its obvious excesses, it provides a framework in which initiative can flourish. Or so we are constantly being told.

de Botton was born in 1969. It means that unlike us born some twenty years earlier he has never really been part of what we would call authentic life. The glittery surface of things, be they malls, superhighways, plush airports, fancy glass covered buildings came with the 70's, and part of our youths, but of the childhood for his likes. It is sobering to realize that he had never encountered work-horses in the streets, obsolete shops plying their trade. A time when the car did not yet rule, when people walked and bicycled, not because it was cool, but because there was no alternative, not even in Europe. There was this post-war economic boom, the fruits of which fully expanded in the 70's. I always envied the childhoods of my parents and grandparents. They seemed so idyllic, and I resented being born in a modern world. de Botton is too young even to have this resentment, the modern world which I saw coming about, he took for granted.

Now there is a hidden world. A world devoted not only to the production but also as importantly to the transportation and distribution of the our objects of (ephemeral) desire. How come it is so hidden? We have been primed only to look at certain things in our environment. When we visit a city, we look for its churches, art-museums, and its various architectural wonders and monuments. If we go to the countryside we seek out supposedly unsullied nature or quaint villages. In a way this is also part of our consumer society, suitably packaged and promoted. But what do we really consume, and how is it produced and how does it get to our doorsteps? We eat, we drive cars, we fly onto distant holiday destinations, we surround ourselves with various indispensable electronic gadgets such as cellular phones, laptops, we watch TV and listen to our sound systems. Some of us even spend an inordinate amount of time reading books. The author follows the trajectory of a tuna, how it is hooked in the Indian Ocean, clubbed to death, gutted, refrigerated,

transported to England, ending up via a supermarket onto the plate of a spoiled young boy who really does not like fish. To distribute food you need warehouses bigger than cathedrals, fleets of lorries, driven by thousands of drivers, people working in warehouses. This is all ungainly and hidden away by freeways, not something you encounter on sight-seeing tours. On the other hand it is intricate and involve most of the ingenuity that human minds produce. The work involved is specialized to the point of being dehumanized. No one has really the large picture, everyone is the proverbial cog in a much larger machinery of which they only have the vaguest of conceptions. In former times people made most of their tools, their lives were really marked by toil, not consumption of ready-made wares. One would think that in spite of the material poverty it was more meaningful. After all the individual had a relation to the material world around him, he understood it at least through being intimate with it. Modern consumer life because of its emphasis on comfort is alienating. Things become black boxes which connect with each other in predisposed ways, but which have no real meaningful relation to each other.

Can work in a consumer society be meaningful? Is it not too specialized and fragmentary for that to happen? So much effort, so much ingenuity to serve the most trivial of ends, such as a new biscuit. How much work is not put into its design and marketing, and for what purpose? To compete with other equally insipid snacks on a marginal market? It is indeed depressing how much work and ingenuity has no further purpose than to cater to the most trivial of needs.

And work itself if fragmentary? Even that of science, de Botton intimates, going down to French Guyana to watch the launching of a satellite, is now a quilt of isolated specialties. No more opportunities for a Galilee to emerge. This is true to a large extent, even if what he is commenting upon is not so much science as engineering. Big science is really becoming an industrial enterprise in which the scientist is a mere cog in a much larger system. In short being a scientist no longer means being an intellectual, specialization having been carried so far.

Is there any kind of work that stands apart from this globalized network? In a sense the artist de Botton reports on, who spends years painting a single oak throughout different seasons. The total immersion in work for its own sake, following a tradition of craft going back to the old masters. To work not for status money and recognition, but truly only for the demanding pleasure of itself. True an artist is also dependent upon having his paintings sold, and we follow him to an exhibition, where some of the fruits of his labour meet with some appreciative customers willing to dish out money. But surely he is an anomaly, whose work is marginal and could be replaced by some automatic process. Yet, throughout this depressing book, he provides at least to one reader the only ray of hope.

There may be others. Walking along power-lines following the pylons which hold them aloft. Why do those not belong to the aesthetic treasures? Simply because we have been taught that they are not beautiful, indispensably useful as they are. There is after all a certain aesthetic sensibility to be developed, searching out new objects of beauty. Art should be neutral, anything of human manufacture, even the most un presupposing, should be potential feed to its mills. Being an artist simply means taking a totally different point of view, to exalt the means which makes consumerism possible, without contributing to them. A kind of 'Verfremdung'.

What is the saddest part of modernization? The author briefly touches upon that subject. May it not be the conquest of nature? Nature which used to overwhelm us and at whose mercy we lived our lives, now has become the junior partner. Nature can be hurt by our activities, we are forced to be careful. Global warming is a case in point. What is it all about? Not so much warming or cooling or climate change, as the growing realization that we are its cause, that climate is subjected to our whims. On the other hand if global warming is unleashed in earnest, it will be a power we may not at all be able to subjugate. Maybe nature will have its eventual revenge after all.

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