Work Sucks: How the Movie "Office Space" Proves Radicalism Lives in the Mainstream

Thursday, August 02, 2012
By John Kane (http://truth-out.org) | Film Review

Introduction

Few films in recent decades have so successfully spoken to the day-to-day realities of service sector employment as 1999's "Office Space." Written and directed by Mike Judge, the fictional film is extraordinarily witty and remarkably popular. Though a comedy, it subtly confronts its viewers with a number of questions which thinkers within radical and leftist political circles have pondered for quite some time: Why are jobs often so dissatisfying? Why do many of us constantly seek out ways of escaping? Can anything be done about it?

Why a "Radical" Analysis, and Why "Office Space"?

Obviously, in seeking to do a radical analysis of anything, it is imperative that the reader have some understanding of what one means when employing the term "radical." As political scientist Stephen R. Shalom explains, "the term 'radical' means relating to the root, or fundamental." More specifically, in the pursuit of changing society so as to improve people's lives, a radical is "someone who wants fundamental change - not just a few cosmetic adjustments...."[1] Therefore, the word "radical" is used here to convey the specific type of lens through which this paper will analyze "Office Space." Traditionally, this lens is associated with the political left, which effectively means that its subjects are studied, first and foremost, in the context of the socioeconomic system we call capitalism. This system - as opposed to specific governments, employers, individuals, policies, etcetera - is the root with which radicals are chiefly concerned and seek to change, to one extent or another (and at one speed or another), in order to improve people's social, political and economic lives.

Before proceeding further, a quick disclosure is probably in order for those who may be new to radical modes of analysis. Very often, radical literature incorporates elements of Marxism - concepts developed by the 19th-century philosopher and political-economist Karl Marx. This is important to disclose because it is difficult to think of a political figure whose name alone can generate more discomfort (save, perhaps, for Hitler or Stalin) than Karl Marx. As Mary Gabriel, a recent biographer of Marx and his family, explains, the "Marxist" label is generally only used as
"toxic sludge" against political opponents, often without any real understanding of what such a term connotes.[2] Yet we should be very careful not to banish all of Marx's work from political discussion simply because of the heinous atrocities committed (to one extent or another) by those purporting to be Marxists, in countries he never set foot in, many decades after his death. Because the overwhelming majority of his time was spent critiquing capitalism - not designing a communist system to replace it - fans of "Office Space" might find that he, and those who have since followed in his tradition, actually had diverse and interesting things to say about the nature of our working lives.

So why, then, would "Office Space" merit a radical analysis? As hinted at by the film's pithy tagline, "Work Sucks," one of the basic premises of my analysis is that "Office Space" cleverly raises many questions that radical thinkers have long discussed in great detail (thereby rendering the film politically important). And given its mainstream popularity, the film provides us a unique opportunity to discuss aspects of radical political theory in ways that a far greater number of people relate to than those already present within activist and intellectual circles.

The Plot and Main Characters

The basic, surface-level plot of "Office Space" is relatively straightforward: the mild-mannered protagonist, Peter Gibbons, despises his job at the computer software firm Initech. The first 15 minutes brilliantly illuminate the setting and tone of the film, and are thus extremely important. The viewer is shown every detail of Peter's work-life, from the alarm clock shrieking, to driving in agonizingly slow traffic, to the daily electric zap he receives upon opening the door to his thoroughly sterilized, cubicle-filled workroom. The very first camera shot inside of the room is clearly intended to impress upon the viewer the dreariness of Peter's station in life - we are confronted with an endless, impersonal sea of people, all working quietly in tiny cubicles, amid the electronic clamor of innumerable machines and illumined by stale fluorescent lighting. It happens to be a Monday, but the viewer instinctively senses that what Peter has just experienced is remarkably unexceptional.

After observing his daily routine and watching him get hassled by several bosses over a mundane company regulation, Peter becomes a sympathetic, if not deeply relatable, character to the viewer. But after a botched "occupational hypnotherapy" session, in which Peter is left suspended in a hypnotized state, his outlook and behavior completely change. He disregards the alarm clock, hangs up on his girlfriend, ignores calls from his job, all while remaining completely unfazed and unapologetic. During a meeting with the "efficiency consultants" - a callous duo referred to collectively as "The Bobs" - Peter is told that his office comrades, Michael and Samir, are soon going to be laid off, and his outlook takes another dramatic turn. He hatches a plot with Michael and Samir to install a virus in Initech's computer mainframe that will deposit money into an account every day. When the three meet to discuss the plan, we can see how much Peter has changed since the start of the film: he finally feels confident, autonomous and empowered (albeit for unethical reasons).
We soon learn that the virus was programmed incorrectly. Fully aware that this will be quickly discovered by Initech, Peter decides to take full responsibility for the plot. He writes a letter of apology and returns the money under the cover of night, but, fortunately for him, the building burns down (at the hand of his comically strange co-worker, Milton) the following morning. Peter goes on to take a job with a construction company.

**The Film and Political Theory**

So how should we interpret the film? In what we could call the fatalistic interpretation, Peter's actions, and the film itself, would not be in favor of anything so much as *against* something: the realities and drudgeries of life itself. Peter would be akin to the child who cries and acts out in anger when a favorite pet dies. He feels, in the depths of his being, that the situation is unfair, indecent and wrong, but is failing to accept what is ultimately inevitable. While that may make him sympathetic to us, it would not make him brave.

Alternatively, a conservative interpretation would stress that Peter's initial situation merits no sympathy from the viewer - for, after all, he freely *chooses* to work at Initech - and his diatribes about what work *should be like* amount to little more than foolish naivete. In other words, Peter has *chosen* his station in life and, though he is free to complain about his job all he pleases, he has little grounds for doing so. If there is anyone or anything to blame, this interpretation would suggest, it is Peter himself.

This essay, on the contrary, argues something different. Part of Office Space's wonderful appeal is that it is not explicitly political or ideological. Admittedly, though, this results in mixed messages and, consequently, several reasonable - but markedly different - possible ways of interpreting the film. In contrast to the aforementioned interpretations, I argue that Peter's situation is not a mere reaction to some fatalistic "human condition," nor is it completely of his own making. "Office Space" is popular, in large part, precisely because Peter represents a kind of hero. But to answer *why* he is perceived that way, we must first see that Peter's dissatisfaction ultimately springs from disempowerment and a deep sense of *what should be* but, at this moment in history, is not. One way to see this scenario is by observing "Office Space" alongside elements of radical political theory.

The dominant ideologies in American political discourse provide us with few tools (if any) to analyze "Office Space" as a political film. Conservatives and libertarians would likely subscribe to the second interpretation above and would dwell on Peter's so-called "personal responsibility" to do that which is in his self-interest. But even liberalism, for all its merits, regularly falls short of meaningfully connecting with the daily life of any working person. For example, liberals calling themselves "progressive" may advocate for "full employment" as part of macroeconomic policymaking, but they are largely silent on the issue of what that employment might actually entail, whether or not it is empowering for each worker, meaningful, etcetera. A job is thus viewed simply as that which provides the "recipient" with a means of securing an income and having something to do with his or her time and energy. Any inquiry into the nature of this potential employment - as experienced by the individual worker on a daily basis - is deemed by the liberal to
fall well outside of pragmatic policy concerns, perhaps because the very principles of workplace democracy and worker self-management are themselves regarded as hopelessly utopian. Out of both political expediency and a paternalistic attitude toward the competence of working people, therefore, the rallying cry is restricted to "Jobs!" rather than "Empowering Jobs!"

But what do workplace democracy and worker self-management have to do with "Office Space"? Much of Peter's own misery seems to arise from his being disempowered by Initech. But by choosing solidarity over an upper-management job - as when he devises the scheme with Michael and Samir after being informed that they will be fired - he hints that power *for himself* was not his only aim. The film suggests that Peter's true gripe seems to be with a system in which a small group of people is able to exert a disproportionate amount of control over the respective fates of a far larger group of people - a system in which the daily debasement of human potential and dignity becomes not only acceptable, but perhaps even profitable, a system in which stock prices, standardization, routine and efficiency seem to have take precedence over human beings (as when Peter reveals that laying off Michael and Samir will increase Initech's stock price).

Early on, Peter senses that this situation is unfair, but he - as many of us often do - frequently chooses to escape from these feelings rather than confront them. If there is one dominant theme throughout "Office Space," it is that of escape. It occurs with multiple characters and in myriad ways throughout the film. For example, Peter tries to escape from reality by going to the hypnotherapist and asking to be made "to think he has been fishing all day" upon coming home from work; co-worker Tom Smykowski is severely injured in a car accident after trying to kill himself - the ultimate form of escape; the entire scheme of uploading a computer virus was not only an attack against Initech, but also a means of permanently escaping from the company and all other jobs where one could be "fired for no reason," as Peter puts it. Even Milton escapes to a tropical island for what we can only assume is an extended vacation from work.

**Alienation, the Division of Labor, and Hostility**

But why is there such a drive toward escapism? What is it about their jobs and lives that compels our characters toward the pursuit of escape? Out of all the concepts within the radical political tradition, it would be difficult to find one more appropriate for Office Space than the concept of alienation. The theory of alienation, as radical political scientist Bertell Ollman explains, "is the intellectual construct in which [Karl] Marx displays the devastating effect of capitalist production on human beings, on their physical and mental states and on the social processes of which they are a part."[3] The effect is "devastating," Marx argued, in no small part because the jobs that most of us perform do not satisfy any of our inherent needs as human beings. Rather, our labor only serves as a *means* toward satisfying an *external* need - that is, making money to survive. The "alien" character of work becomes abundantly clear, Marx writes, "in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labor is shunned like the plague."[4] Therefore, when Peter tells his next-door neighbor, Lawrence, that if money were not an issue, "I would relax, I would sit on my ass, all day, I would do nothing," he is doing much more than expressing his dissatisfaction with Initech; he is confirming Marx's suspicions about how human beings react toward a life of alienated labor.
Alienation is so crushing, radicals argue, precisely because it exists on numerous levels: as if by some invisible force outside of human control, we are compelled to do work that is not enriching or meaningful, and is therefore alien (remember Peter's nightmare wherein the judge deems he has lived a "trite and meaningless life"); the very things we make or work on - like Peter's TPS reports - have essentially no real meaning for us and are therefore alien; the people who have an interest in getting us to do this unpleasant work, like Lumbergh, quickly become antagonists, and therefore alien to us; and, as a result of all these daily processes, our potentialities and aspirations as human beings are frequently abandoned - as when Peter wishes to do nothing - and are thereby rendered alien to us. It is precisely due to this last "alienation from our species" that Marx argued working people will eventually only feel free when satisfying what he called our "animal functions," such as eating, drinking and procreating. It is thus no accident that when Lawrence is asked by Peter what he would do if he had a million dollars - in other words, what he would truly want to do with his life were money not an issue - his response is a sexual fantasy.

Thus, radicals would generally agree with the famous "Office Space" tagline, "Work Sucks," but with one small, yet crucial alteration: "Alienated Work Sucks." But what is it about the nature of modern work that makes it so alienating? Radicals often point to the highly evolved division of labor - that is, the breaking down of work into simple, repetitive tasks that each individual becomes responsible for, while much of the thinking about and overseeing of work is carried out by a "coordinator class." However, as the renowned psychoanalyst and critical theorist Erich Fromm argued, this intense division of labor also "leads to an organization of work where the individual loses his individuality, where he becomes an expendable cog in the machine." This process occurs regularly under capitalism, Fromm argued, precisely because the worker is viewed as "part of the equipment hired by [capitalists], and his role and function are determined by this quality of being a piece of equipment."

If Peter's wish to do nothing is indeed a key message of "Office Space," then we must again yield to Fromm, who, writing in 1955, argued that, "The alienated and profoundly unsatisfactory character of work results in two reactions: one, the ideal of complete laziness; the other, a deep-seated, though often unconscious hostility toward work and everything and everybody connected with it." In addition to his point about laziness, Fromm's point regarding hostility is also apparent throughout "Office Space." Whether it is Peter's contempt for the receptionist seated in the cubicle across from him, Michael's contempt for the woman who hands out the employee mail, Joanna's contempt for the eccentric waiter, or Peter, Michael, and Samir's mutual contempt for the office printer, it must be considered that their hostility does not merely spring from differences in personality or problems with the functioning of a particular machine. Rather, it is the sheer undesirability of their work situation that creates a setting in which it becomes remarkably easy to grow hostile toward "everything and everybody connected with it."

Because the worker "becomes an appendage of the machine" who must learn "only the most simple, most monotonous, most easily acquired knack," all while "placed under the command of a perfect hierarchy of officers and sergeants" (such as Lumbergh, Dom, The Bobs, etcetera), the irrepressible feeling that one's needs as a human being are being relentlessly subordinated to
the company's need to make money can, over time, lead to hostility and even violence. To this point, we must marvel at some of Marx's and Friedrich Engels' observations in "The Communist Manifesto." As if foreseeing "Office Space" by 150 years, the authors noted that many workers will at first destroy the "instruments of production" rather than the system of production which forces the great majority of them to "sell themselves piecemeal."[12] Thus, when the authors write of these disgruntled workers that "they smash to pieces machinery,"[13] we quickly recall the epic printer scene, where Peter, Michael and Samir destroy the temperamental printer in the middle of a barren field; and when Marx and Engels write "they set factories ablaze,"[14] we cannot help but think of Milton nervously fleeing the scene as the Initech building is reduced to ashes.

Conclusions

"Office Space" reminds us that much radical sentiment exists in the mainstream, but is rarely identified as such. This example should lead us to consider the many arguments for worker ownership, worker self-management and workplace democracy. The general tendency of such arguments is that if alienation is to ever be successfully eliminated, what is necessary (though not necessarily sufficient by itself) [15] is a true democratization of decision-making authority in the workplace.

Such a democratization is also necessary if the "worker versus coordinator" effect is to be eliminated (or at least severely minimized).[16] Hierarchical organization of authority often leads to a situation of mutual mistrust between the Peters and the Lumberghs of the world. In contrast, within Spain's massive Mondragón cooperative community, asymmetries in power and information are thus negated by a conscious arrangement which most of us value quite dearly: democracy.

But simply fantasizing about such a situation will, of course, not bring it into existence. For that, nothing but good old-fashioned action will do.[17] Peters of the world, unite!

A longer version of this analysis (http://www.zcommunications.org/work-sucks-a-radical-analysis-of-office-space-by-john-kane) previously appeared at ZCommunications.

Endnotes


5. Ollman, 137-153.

6. The criteria for what constitutes a "coordinator" are not precise, but, as the originators of the term describe, "... the coordinator wants to preserve a relative monopoly of conceptual skills and expertise giving him or her an interest in preventing the widespread intellectual advance of workers, as well as a paternal, elitist attitude toward them." Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel, "Socialism Today and Tomorrow" (MA: South End Press, 1981), 32-33, 38.


11. Ibid.

12. Ibid, 227-228.

13. Ibid, 228.

14. Ibid.

15. The degree to which instituting workplace democracy can, by itself, resolve the core defects of capitalism is the source of considerable debate among radicals themselves. For overviews of this debate and various perspectives on it, see, for example, "Against the Market" by David McNally, "Market Socialism: The Debate Among Socialists," edited by Bertell Ollman;, "Remaking Scarcity" (specifically Chapters 8 and 9) by Costas Panayotakis; and, "Against the Market Economy: Advice to Venezuelan Friends" (http://monthlyreview.org/2008/01/01/against-the-market-economy-advice-to-venezuelan-friends)" by Robin Hahnel. (Accessed on 06/12/12)
The lopsided power imbalance between those who coordinate the work and those who do the work quickly creates two distinct, opposing forces: one either gives orders, or one takes them. And, once this dynamic is set in motion, a kind of spiritual impulse exists whereby it feels good to disobey and defy the orders (especially if one does so without getting caught). Thus Peter at one point, for example, fillets a fish at his desk and throws the entrails onto the TPS report cover sheets that he was disciplined for not using at the start of the film.

In addition to the various sources cited in this paper, the following texts might prove useful for readers somewhat new to radical arguments: Phil Gasper's concise article "Another World is Possible"; Gar Alperovitz, "America Beyond Capitalism"; Michael A. Lebowitz's "Build It Now: Socialism for the 21st Century"; Michael Albert's "Parecon: Life After Capitalism"; Richard D. Wolff's "Democracy at Work" (forthcoming); Erich Fromm's "Marx's Concept of Man"; Mary Gabriel's "Love and Capital: Karl and Jenny Marx and the Birth of a Revolution"; and, Robert Heilbroner's "Marxism: For and Against."

Copyright, Truthout. May not be reprinted without permission.