COVID Offices and the Religion of Remote Work

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Masks can prove liberating. The hidden face affords security. Obnoxious authority breathes better and with greater assurance, hiding in comfort. Behind the material, confidence finds a home. While tens of millions of jobs have been lost to the novel coronavirus globally, security services, surveillance officers and pen pushers are thriving, policing admissions to facilities, churning through health and safety declarations, and generally making a nuisance of themselves.

Consider the state of Victoria in Australia. The pandemic lockdown measures have softened but have left a thick film of bureaucracy. For the overly eager employee wishing to come into work to retrieve necessary materials (the definition of what is necessary varies), the task is irritating, even taxing. First, temperature check. Second, checking in via smart phone with a health declaration, a step discriminatory to those who have no interest in having such devices. Third, clearance with security to ensure the activation of relevant cards, and the lending of necessary keys. Even through masks, those lining up exude weariness, feeling saggy after months in epidemiological confinement.

With the card activated and ready to access the necessary buildings, it is time to make way to the office, a space neglected since March. Books, sulking at not having been consulted. Detritus of memories on the wall: posters and pictures of travel to places now inaccessible for reasons of cost or the pandemic. Towers of paperwork left unattended, rendered irrelevant by digitalisation. White board, uncleaned. A sense of woe grips: the days for having such a space of monkish calm and serene bliss are numbered.

During the pandemic, employers have been chorusing about the benefits of making people work from home. This has very much to do with them, though other virtues are also celebrated: the conveniences of work and home living; avoiding long, draining commutes; spending more time with family. We are doing it for you.

This has meant the invasion of the employee's home, and often not a voluntary one. Urban managerialism, already identified in the 1970s by the English sociologist Ray Pahl, has been hyper charged by a reallocation of resources, the imposition of stresses upon the toilers. The nature of parasitic capitalism, as Andy Merrifield puts it, has come to the fore with aggression. "World cities," [he reasons](#), "are giant arenas where the most rabid activity is the activity of rabidly extorting land rent, of making land pay anyway it can; of dispatching all non-parasitic activities to some other part of town (as Engels recognized long ago), so as to help this rental maximisation." The almost operatic [description](#) of Karl Marx in the first volume of *Das Kapital* comes to mind: "Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more and more it sucks."

And sucking it does, making sure that employees feed the beast by shouldering more

expenses while all the time being told they are fulfilling their civic obligations and minding their good health. The fact that doing this also means reducing the ongoing costs of the business or entity, ensuring greater rental maximisation, is seen as ancillary to the main show.

Prior to the pandemic, the literature on attitudes to remote work was already sounding like an urban manager's small book of maxims and clichés. Sophia Bernazzani of the video conferencing company Owl Labs, writing in December last year, announced how "new survey data revealed that remote work is a major benefit for employees. In fact, 34% of US workers would take a pay cut of up to 5% in order to work remotely. And those who do work remotely say they're happy in their jobs 29% more than on-site workers."

With COVID-19 yet to make its telling presence, *Forbes* was already diving into reasons why a remote workforce was an exhilarating boon for business. As contributor Amar Hussain reasoned, "Although there are challenges that come with hiring and organizing a remote workforce, the reality is working with a remote team might end up being one of the best decisions you could make for your business." More work is accomplished by such remote teams (time otherwise wasted on commuting, for instance, can be used); a "larger talent pool" can be drawn from, given the absence of geographical constraints; rental costs will be spared, meaning that US companies would be saving $10,000 per employee per year. Finally, a health dividend (because they care), would accrue. "Remote work removes the need to commute and the associated negative effects."

Urban planning academic Richard Shearmur sees past the glossy narrative of saving costs, tilting the focus away from proselytisers of the religion of remote work. "Whatever the personal and productivity impacts of remote work, the savings of US$10,000 per year are the employer's. In effect, this represents an offloading of costs onto employees – a new type of enclosure." With this comes loneliness, *reduced* productivity and various inefficiencies.

Shearmur also sees a historical parallel of expropriation. "In 16th-century Britain, powerful landowners expropriated common land from the communities, often for the purpose of running lucrative sheep farms. Today, businesses like Shopify appear to be expropriating their employee's private living space." They do so by making employees purchase more work equipment for the home (ergonomic chairs, desks and so forth), placing the emphasis on them to maintain such equipment and the premises that house them.

Such businesses are also casting an Orwellian eye over employees in their home environment. Expropriation, in a fashion, is not enough; it must come with the monitoring gaze. Productivity targets must be maintained. Elizabeth Lyons of the University of San Diego explains what that entails. "The things employers are really looking for is what websites are employees on, are these productive or unproductive websites, what apps are they using, how much time they are spending on their different tasks."

In an online survey of 1,800 people in October conducted by Prospect, a UK trade union representing engineers, scientists and civil servants, two-thirds of workers expressed discomfort at the idea of programmes being used to check the frequency of their typing. Up to 80% were also unsettled by the use of cameras recording them as they sat at their home computer, with 76% uncomfortable with the idea of wearing devices noting their location.

Some employees have been encouraged to believe in the narcotic of efficiency and

productivity. Take Candice, a "digital marketer" behind podcasts aiding students undertaking English proficiency tests. Interviewed for ABC Radio National in Australia, she is sympathetic to her employer who "has no idea of what I'm doing all day long." Except that he does. But never mind that: home surveillance technology "keeps me on track … I can see exactly how much time I've spent doing work". Good for the unassuming Candice and co-religionists of remote work; bad for many of us.

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