

This is an extract from the book *A Worker in a Worker's State*, written by Miklós Haraszti in 1972 when he was a young employee at the Red Star Tractor Factory and suppressed by the Hungarian government as a threat to socialism. Throughout history, workers have stolen from their workplaces under capitalism, socialism, and communism alike. Haraszti suggests that this stealing is actually the most creative and enterprising activity that takes place in the factory, implying the possibility of a world in which all labor would be equally creative and free. His text also provides a window into the lives of workers in the Eastern Bloc, revealing the void at the heart of the supposed workers' utopia. So long as there are managers, workers will rob their workplaces—not just for personal gain, but above all to keep alive that which is best in themselves.

At a time when young people in the West who did not experience the horrors of state socialism are spreading nostalgia for it while fascists gain legitimacy in Eastern Europe by presenting themselves as its foes, it's important to remember that state socialism never gave workers the freedom or abundance it promised—and that its true opponents are not the nationalists who would inflict still worse horrors, but anarchists and other ordinary working people who resist all forms of imposed authority. Likewise, Haraszti's text is prescient in anticipating how artisanal craftsmanship would be further commodified in the post-industrial economy, offering the illusion of free activity as yet another facet of the market. Instead of peddling nostalgia for state control of industry, factory work, or any other specter of the 20th century—or seeking to monetize our autonomous activity after the fashion of the 21st century—let's take immediate action against capitalism, socialism, and work itself.

*Yes, we even stole from work
under socialism.*



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Epilogue

At a factory in the Soviet Union, inventory control had determined that one of the workers was stealing from the People's State. They heightened security and monitored him carefully. Every evening, as the man left work with his wheelbarrow, the security guard would search him fastidiously—packages, boxes, bags, pockets, everything—but to no avail. Although the guard never found a thing, he continued to search the worker at the end of each shift—year after year after year. Finally, decades later, the man was due to retire. As he pushed his wheelbarrow out for the last time, the guard searched it, then said in despair, “Look, it doesn't matter anymore, but satisfy my curiosity. We know you are stealing something. Yet every day I search your wheelbarrow and find nothing. How can this be?” “It's easy,” shrugged the worker. “I'm stealing wheelbarrows.”

In Search of the Great Homer

*A **homer** is an object made for his own purpose or pleasure by a worker using his factory's machines and materials. It is not made for sale as an additional source of income. The word does not appear in most dictionaries, but appears to have been the most widely used equivalent in England and North America.*

“Homers? Is there any chance of homers?” is often asked by those thinking of leaving this factory, when they're tipped off about another place. Many factors must be taken into account when you want to change your job. Although for most workers homers are not vital, they'll make them if they have the chance, and they'll try to create the opportunity if it doesn't exist already. Some will pay a high price to obtain a position that allows them to make homers.

The government journals portray workers who make homers as thieves. Similarly, the factory bosses “fight” against homers. Warnings and sanctions rain down on the heads of those who misappropriate materials, use machines for their own purposes, or tap the factory's supply of electricity. If the factory guard finds a homer in our pockets or on our bodies, he has caught a thief.

But even if the journals don't acknowledge it, both workers and bosses know very well that this is just words. The real damage to the factory is the time lost in making an object—time which cannot be utilized by the factory. “If the foreman knows you're making homers, he'll send one of us to fetch some glue and he'll stick you to your machines for the rest of the day,” said my neighbor, joking with someone who was borrowing a tool from him to make a homer.

The secret of this passion for homers is not a simple one. It can't be reduced to the minimal value of the knick-knacks which the workers actually make and, especially on piece-rates, how long they take bears no relation to the value of the time lost.

Workers on hourly wages turn to homers when they have given to the factory what the factory has demanded, or when they have a free moment. If hourly workers make homers they don't risk anything—except being found out. Not only will they then be punished, the discovery will also offer an excellent opportunity to demand increased production from them.

Workers on conveyor belts, or on fully automatic machines, completely delivered from the pressures of time, are only likely to make homers in their dreams. Technological development has given these workers a moral superiority, which at least forces the government satirists to look for a new

theme in their attacks.

But the piece-rate worker manages his time himself, and each minute that passes without an increase in the number of pieces represents a financial loss for him. With the constant pressure of piece-rates, the factory does all it can to preach the morality of labor. According to the rate-fixers' estimates, the piece-rate workers should themselves renounce their passion for theft. In fact, management has to admit that nothing—neither prohibitions, nor punishments, nor public humiliation by the security guards—will persuade them to give it up.

Perhaps it is more than an empty play on words to say that we “loot” [that is, cut corners in violation of regulations] in order to have time to steal.

Making homers is a real addiction; those who go in for it know that they do themselves more harm than good. The bosses and the rate-fixers view the persistent refusal of piece-rate workers to give up this habit in terms of the basest instincts. “How does a person like that bring up his children? We gave him sound advice and even delivered a sharp rap across his knuckles, but nothing will stop him from pilfering,” the foreman grumbles, talking about a homer addict. Yet the passion for “looting” does not upset the bosses. Not because they force us to do it, but because “looting” doesn't cost anything except the strength, nerves, wellbeing, thoughts and life of the worker—even when he thinks that he is stealing something from the factory.

Why, then, are piece-rate workers so fond of making homers? The usefulness of homers cannot be the real motive, because the worker's life is so dependent on the workshop, the machine, his materials, and his eight-hour shifts that there is no chance whatever of his making anything which he really needs. It would be a dubious triumph for “do-it-yourself”—given the gigantic level of infringements that would be involved—if the conditions of work were such that they permitted workers to make everything they needed for setting up house in the form of homers. Then, certainly, homers would be worthwhile, since every worker could do repairs, and make small gadgets cheaply and with little effort.

Some of my colleagues still harbor a nostalgia for the days of the domestic artisan, but they rarely talk about their feelings, except when they are embarrassed or are making an excuse if someone catches them out.

“Peasants, too, give what they produce to the State, but they don't buy their vegetables in a market. Here, there are all the tools you could want, and stacks of discarded materials—but if I want to repair my faucet, I'm supposed to call the plumber.” This sort of talk is really a rationalization; it doesn't bear much relation to the real motives for making a homer.

Perhaps the mechanics and fitters, who are paid by the hour, really do have

rivalry with cooperation, to make that we want, to plan and execute the plans together, to create in a way that was pleasurable in itself; to be freed from the duress of production and its inspectors—all these are announced by the message of the homer, of the few minutes that resurrect our energy and capacities. The Great Homer would not carry the risk of our frittering away strength senselessly; on the contrary, it would be the only way to discover what is even precluded by the homer of wage-earners: *the real utility of our exertions*. If we could direct our lives towards the Great Homer, we would gladly take on a few hours of mechanized labor a day, so long as it was needed. Otherwise, if everything remains as it does today, we face a terrible destiny: that of never knowing what we have lost.

Connoisseurs of folklore may look on homers as a native, decorative art. As yet, they aren't able to see further than that. But they will, and the day will come when homers are no longer forbidden but are commercialized and administered. People who work on automatic machines will be able to buy homers in the shops after seeing them in magazines or on television. Then, no one will suspect that homers were originally more than a “do-it-yourself” hobby or a mere pastime; that they once shone through factory controls, the necessity of making a living, and the pressures of wages, as a surrogate for something which by then perhaps will be even more impossible to name than it is today.

The tiny gaps that the factory allows us become natural islands where, like free men, we can mine hidden riches, gather fruits, and pick up treasures at our feet. We transform what we find with a disinterested pleasure free from the compulsion to make a living. It brings us an intense joy, enough to let us forget the constant race: the joy of autonomous, uncontrolled activity.

from a dying industry: if homers are a negation, then they are only a nostalgia for the past.” This might be said if you didn’t grasp the importance of homers for workers on piece-rates. In fact, they don’t know the old handicrafts any more and they detest the private customers for whom they often do black market labor after factory hours.

Workers would gladly renounce the artisan character of homers, but they have no other way to assert themselves over *mechanized* labor. Similarly, they would gladly produce things which made sense, but the production of senseless homers is their only chance to free themselves, for a few minutes, from the “good sense” of the factory. They would gladly manufacture, often collectively, things which were useful for the community; but they can only make what they want to make on their own, or at most with a few others.

So these two steps towards the senseless—producing *useless* things and *renouncing payment*—in fact turn out to be two steps in the direction of freedom, even though they are swiftly blocked by the wall of wage labor. In fact, homers are a vain attempt to defect from the cosmos of piece-ratios.

Suppose that all of our work could be governed by the pleasures of homers, then it would follow that in every homer is the kernel of a completely *different* sense: that of work carried out for pleasure. The industrial psychologist, the expert in managerial methods, the social technician, and all the growing number of specialists who are replacing functionaries once breathless with the heroism of labor cannot comprehend the hopelessness of their task if they are unable to understand the pleasures of homers. Their task is to dry out the oases while filling the desert with mirages. Were it not that these experts in production are also dispensers of our livelihood, in command of discipline and achievement, we would enter the age of the Great Homer. This alienated sense, imposed from outside by wages (and its denial, the consolations of forbidden irrationality), would be replaced by the ecstasy of true needs. Precisely what is senseless about homers from the point of view of the factory announces the affirmation of work motivated by a single incentive, stronger than all others: the conviction that our labor, our life, and our consciousness can be governed by our own goals. The Great Homer would be realized through machines, but our experts would subordinate them to two requirements: that we use them to make things of real utility, and that we are independent of the machines themselves. This would mean the withering of production controls. We would only produce what united homer-workers needed and what allowed us to remain workers united in the manufacture of homers. *And we would produce a thousand times more efficiently than today.*

To take the whole world into account, to combine our strength, to replace

the means—thanks to homers—to set up their families, since they have at their fingertips, in the workshop, all the tools and machines necessary for household repairs large and small. But I am chained to my machine even if, at the most once a week, I find after an interminable number of runs that I have won a little time for myself. It is impossible for the piece-rate worker to flit across the workshop like a butterfly and to fiddle around with other machines. The foreman would see him at once, and fix him up with more work. Besides, the others are also riveted to their machines, and in any case our machines are too specialized, too large, too powerful, and too complicated: they themselves dictate what we can make with them.

And so in fact homers are seldom useful things. Bizarrely enough, when they are, it is generally not for some outside use, but for something needed within the factory. In theory, there are special workers to manufacture the base plates and braces for mounting pieces, but in fact we must make them ourselves. It is an unwritten rule that when feasible we make everything our jobs require with our own machines. Such operations have real utility, but are also infuriating. They are hardly paid but they are necessary to get through faster, or even to complete a job.

Even around such necessary preparatory work, the mysterious aura of homers begins to appear, to the extent that everyone calls these pieces “homers” even though in fact they entitle us to a supplementary payment. No one would think of telling his neighbor how he’d run through a series, and no one would be interested if he did. But everyone can talk with gusto about these preparatory “homers,” and find an interested audience. Without doubt, the reason is that we plan this work ourselves, and can complete it as we think best.

Our machines rarely give an opportunity for other useful kinds of homers. But that doesn’t do away with homers, it only changes them. For piece-workers, homers are ends in themselves, like all true passions. Here the passion is for nothing other than work, work as an end in itself. The diverse forms of homer have only one thing in common: they have to be of a size that can be surreptitiously smuggled out of the factory. Some have not kept to this rule; and finished objects lie gathering dust in their locker, or their tool boxes, or beside their machines, until the worker changes his factory, when they try to get them out, or, if this is hopeless, give them away. For us, the potential of milling machines, lathes, and borers stimulates and at the same time limits our imaginations. The raw material is chiefly metal. The objects that can be made are key-holders, bases for flower-pots, ashtrays, pencil boxes, rulers and set squares, little boxes to bring salt to the factory for the morning break, bath mats (made out of rolls of white polystyrene),

counters in stainless steel to teach children simple arithmetic (a marvelous present), pendants made from broken milling teeth, wheels for roulette-type games, dice, magnetized soap holders, television aerials (assembled at home), locks and bolts, coat-holders for the changing-room cupboard, knives, daggers, knuckle-dusters, and so on.

In place of the order, “You make *that*,” comes a question: “What can I make?” But if this work is an end in itself, it is not thereby without a purpose. It is the antithesis of our meaningless “real” work: the possibilities are limited, but the worker who makes a homer uses his head and keeps his eyes open. He scans the raw materials around him, weighs up the unexploited capacities of his machines and the other auxiliary machines, like the small disc-cutter in the corner of the section or the grinding-machine, as he examines the hand tools at his disposal. Then he decides. He decides on what he will accomplish and works to realize that chosen object and not for some other purpose. If he uses the product itself, then before all else he will relish the pleasure of having accomplished it, and of knowing when, how, and with what he made it, and that he had originated its existence.

This humble little homer, made secretly and only through great sacrifices, with no ulterior motive, is the only form possible of free and creative work—it is both the germ and the model: this is the secret of the passion.

The tiny gaps that the factory allows us become natural islands where, like free men, we can mine hidden riches, gather fruits, and pick up treasures at our feet. We transform what we find with a disinterested pleasure free from the compulsion to make a living. It brings us an intense joy, enough to let us forget the constant race: the joy of autonomous, uncontrolled activity, the joy of labor without rate-fixers, inspectors, and foremen.

A complex organization forces me to maintain a minimum level of quality in my daily work. In making homers, quality, which itself arises as I have envisaged it, is the aim itself, the profit, and the pleasure. It is so natural that the question is no longer “What are you making?” but “How are you making it?”

The joy of this unity between conception and execution stands in extreme contrast to our daily work. “Where is the blueprint?” an inspector asked as usual when he came over to make a check. *M—* loves to repeat the brazen response (fortunately it did not get him into trouble) which aimed to rub in that for once he and the inspector had nothing to say to each other: “It is here, in my head.” The inspector had to puzzle over this for a while before it clicked. *M—* was making a homer. In outward appearance, nothing had changed. The same movements, which otherwise served only to increase production for the factory, were transformed by what he was doing into an

activity of an entirely different kind.

By making homers we win back power over the machine and our freedom from the machine; skill is subordinated to a sense of beauty. However insignificant the object, its form of creation is artistic. This is all the more so because (mainly to avoid the reproach of theft) homers are rarely made with expensive, showy, or semi-finished materials. They are created out of junk, from useless scraps of iron, from leftovers, and this ensures that their beauty comes first and foremost from the labor itself.

Many do not care if their noble end-product clearly reveals its humble origins; but others hold fervently to the need for a perfect finish. Were it not that homers have to be made in a few snatched minutes, and that often we can’t get back to them from one week to the next, if making homers were not such a fleeting activity, then one could almost claim that there were two schools: the first “Functionalist,” the second “Secessionist” [a pre-Soviet Hungarian art movement celebrating excessive decoration]. There are also passing fashions in homers. And just as homers are a model of nonexistent joys, so they are the model for all protest movements.

Making homers is the only work in the factory that stands apart from our incessant competition against each other. In fact it demands cooperation, voluntary cooperation—not just to smuggle them out but also to create them. Sometimes my neighbor asks me to do the necessary milling for his homer, and in return makes a support for me on his lathe. On these occasions we wait patiently until the other “has the time.” Among piece-rate workers altruism is rare. Even in making homers, aid without a return is inconceivable. But it is not a matter of like for like: no one calculates how much his help is worth, or the time spent on it. Sometimes one can even come across selflessness *without* any expectations of recompense—which could never happen in “real” work. Most friendships begin with the making of a joint homer.

These *different* joys are obviously marred by the knowledge that they are only the joys of an oasis in a desert of piece-rate work. Slowly, the factory returns to itself, the computer dries out the oasis, the pressures of production continue unchanged. Despite this, everyone is cheerful during these few precious minutes. This is manifestly obvious to all but the bosses—who don’t need to worry about the constant bad temper of piece-rate workers except insofar as it relates to production; and who don’t display the least understanding of this loophole to happiness, not even as a matter of tactics. A foreman’s anger is a sure indication of the happiness that the worker sows with a homer.

I am convinced that homers carry a message. “Artisanal tinkering, survivals