

# Radical Worker: Autonomous Labour as Reality-Maintaining Practice

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## Abstract

This paper develops the theoretical foundations of *Radical Worker* (first published 2019, new edition 2025), arguing that self-determined work is not merely a political right but a structural requirement for preventing societies from collapsing into simulation. Autonomous labour is defined here as work that arises from internal resonance rather than external command, organised around long-term responsibility to reality rather than short-term deliverables.

Building on the books *Speeds Arbeit / Speed's Work* and *Radical Worker*, the paper distinguishes three dimensions of labour: output-production, reality-maintenance, and simulation. It argues that only self-determined work can perform reality-maintaining labour in complex societies, because only autonomous workers have the structural freedom to correct institutions, preserve diversity, and generate new forms of meaning that are not pre-formatted by market or algorithmic expectations.

By contrast, wage labour under contemporary capitalism is increasingly organised as simulation-management: the production and maintenance of appearances that satisfy metrics, dashboards and bureaucratic expectations without necessarily improving social or ecological reality. Automation and AI intensify this tendency by rewarding behaviours that imitate machine logic and punishing forms of work that cannot be simulated.

Through a combination of theoretical analysis and long-term field research, the paper shows that self-determined workers are structurally targeted by labour markets, welfare bureaucracies and algorithmic governance precisely when their work increases reality-contact. The conclusion is that autonomous labour is not a luxury, hobby, or exception, but civilizational infrastructure. Societies that suppress self-determined work will progressively lose the capacity for correction, democratic reflexivity and ecological survival.

## 1. Introduction — Why *Radical Worker* is a distinct field

*Radical Worker* is written from the position of a long-term unemployed, neurodivergent artist and researcher who has refused to subordinate his work to wage labour while simultaneously working continuously, extensively and publicly. This position is not merely biographical. It is a methodological and theoretical vantage point from which the labour regime of contemporary capitalism becomes legible in a different way.

In *Speeds Arbeit / Speed's Work*, labour was reconceptualised as relational agency: embodied interaction that generates social and ecological reality through resonance rather than through monetisable output. That work mapped the ontology of labour and described in detail how capitalist institutions punish relational work because it destabilises the value regime that supports profit extraction.

*Radical Worker* takes the next step. It does not ask primarily what labour is, but who is allowed to perform it and on what terms. Its central claim is that self-determined work is the only form of labour capable of maintaining reality in complex societies. When labour is reduced to externally

commanded output, societies drift into simulation: they maintain appearances of productivity while losing contact with the conditions that make life possible.

The present paper extracts and systematises the theoretical core of *Radical Worker* and distinguishes it clearly from *Labour as Relational Agency*. Where the latter focuses on the ontology of labour under capitalism, *Radical Worker* focuses on autonomy as a structural dimension of work. Autonomy here does not mean individual lifestyle choice. It means the ability of workers to set their own objects, rhythms and forms in resonance with reality, even when this contradicts institutional command or market demand.

The core question posed in this paper is therefore not whether self-determined work is desirable, fair or personally fulfilling, but whether societies can survive without it. The answer developed in the following sections is negative. Without autonomous labour, complex societies lose their capacity for self-correction and gradually replace reality with internally consistent but externally destructive simulations.

## **2. Conceptual foundations — Two books, two frames**

The argument of *Radical Worker* is grounded in two book-length works that operate at different levels of abstraction but are structurally linked.

*Speeds Arbeit* (German) and *Speed's Work* (English) (ISBN 3819249281 and 3819277358) develop a general theory of labour as relational agency. They describe work as a multi-layered interaction between bodies, environments and structures in which resonance and difference, not output, are the primary dimensions of value. This framework establishes why non-market work such as care, activism and artistic research are not peripheral but central to the maintenance of social reality.

*Radical Worker: Vom Recht auf selbstbestimmte Arbeit* and *Radical Worker: The Fight for Self-Determined Work* (ISBN 3839104238 and 381926826X) focus on the political, legal and institutional conditions of autonomous labour. They analyse how welfare systems, job centres, cultural funding regimes and corporate structures systematically prevent self-determined work from being recognised as labour, even when it demonstrably generates social value.

Together, these two book pairs form a dual frame. *Speeds Arbeit* / *Speed's Work* provides the ontological account: what labour is when it is not reduced to wage output. *Radical Worker* provides the political-material account: what happens to workers who insist on performing such labour outside wage formats and how institutions respond when confronted with autonomous work that exposes their contradictions.

The present paper sits at the intersection of these two works. It takes the relational concept of labour from *Speeds Arbeit* and combines it with the empirical and strategic insights of *Radical Worker*. The outcome is a theory of autonomous labour as reality-maintaining practice, and an analysis of why such work is not only systematically repressed but structurally indispensable for any society that wishes not to collapse into its own simulations.

## **3. The core thesis — Autonomous labour generates reality**

To understand autonomous labour as reality-maintaining practice, it is necessary to distinguish three kinds of work that often appear mixed in everyday life but are analytically separable: output labour, reality labour and simulation labour.

Output labour is work that is defined by measurable deliverables. Its success criteria are externalised as numbers, products or transactions. It is the dominant form of labour in capitalist economies, where wages are justified by a quantifiable outcome that can be sold or counted.

Reality labour is work that maintains or deepens contact between a society and the conditions of its own existence. It includes investigative journalism, critical research, radical art, community

organising, long-term care, ecological repair, and many forms of embodied, relational practice that create feedback between systems and the worlds they inhabit. Reality labour is often slow, conflictual and resistant to metricisation because its effects are distributed over time and space.

Simulation labour is work that maintains the appearance of functioning systems without necessarily engaging their reality. It includes the production of reports no one reads, metrics that proxy but do not track real outcomes, public relations campaigns, performative diversity measures, and bureaucratic routines whose primary function is to reproduce institutional legitimacy. Simulation labour is not automatically malicious. It often arises when institutions lose the ability or willingness to measure their own impact and instead optimise for indicators that can be easily produced.

The central thesis of *Radical Worker* is that only self-determined work can systematically perform reality labour. Output labour, when fully captured by external command, tends to either ignore reality (as long as targets are met) or treat it as noise. Simulation labour actively replaces reality with indicators and narratives. Autonomous labour, by contrast, is structurally oriented toward reality because its criterion of success is not external validation but internal coherence between experience, world and action.

Self-determined workers decide what matters based on resonance with reality: a felt mismatch between institutional narratives and lived conditions, an ethical discomfort with harm that is being normalised, or an intellectual tension between official models and observed behaviour. They then organise their work around resolving or illuminating this mismatch, even when doing so conflicts with the expectations of employers, funders or bureaucracies. In doing so, they generate feedback that institutions cannot create for themselves without sacrificing their own legitimacy.

If reality labour is structurally tied to autonomy, then suppressing self-determined work does not simply harm individual freedom. It removes a society's capacity to generate reality-contact. That is the core claim of this paper.

## **4. Structural violence against autonomous workers**

If self-determined labour is structurally required for reality maintenance, why is it so aggressively suppressed? The answer lies in the architecture of contemporary labour regimes, which combine market extraction, bureaucratic control and algorithmic optimisation.

Labour markets reward workers who align their behaviour with external demand. Success depends on the ability to deliver outputs that can be priced, monitored and compared. This framework treats autonomy as a risk factor: self-directed workers might choose objects or methods that do not align with profit. As a result, autonomy is tolerated only within tightly prescribed spaces such as elite research, curated art markets or strategically useful innovation units. Even there it is continually pressure-tested against economic performance.

Welfare systems, particularly those operating under workfare or activation regimes, intensify this pressure. They redefine the right to material survival as conditional on compliance with labour market norms. In this configuration, the unemployed person who works autonomously on social reality is treated as deviant, while the person who performs meaningless simulation labour for a wage is recognised as responsible. The function of such systems is not to support contribution but to enforce conformity.

Algorithmic governance adds a further layer. Digital platforms, AI-based decision systems and metric-driven management models reward behaviours that fit predictive patterns and penalise those that do not. Autonomous labour, especially when it confronts institutional narratives, appears as noise or anomaly. It triggers risk flags, compliance audits or reputational countermeasures. The system responds not to the content of the work but to its refusal to be optimised.

From the perspective of *Radical Worker*, this configuration can be summarised as follows: contemporary institutions are structurally aligned with simulation labour and structurally allergic to reality labour. They can process standardised outputs and controllable narratives. They cannot process workers who take reality as their main reference point rather than the institutional script.

For that reason, autonomous workers are commonly pathologised, criminalised, or marginalised even when they demonstrably increase social intelligence.

The structural violence against self-determined workers is therefore not accidental. It is the predictable consequence of a system that has bound its survival to the maintenance of appearances rather than to the maintenance of reality.

## **5. Field evidence — Autonomous work inside hostile systems**

The theoretical claims of *Radical Worker* are grounded in long-term field research conducted through Artistic Research and autonomously organised social experimentation. Over more than a decade, the author engaged with job centres, social courts, cultural institutions, educational systems, municipal administrations and corporate environments while continuously producing independent work in the fields of art, theory and activism.

This research was not observational in the conventional sense. It did not attempt to neutrally document existing conditions from a distance. Instead, it operated by enacting autonomous labour inside systems that demanded compliance. Letters were written, projects proposed, investigations pursued, collaborations initiated and refusal articulated, always from the position of self-determined work that insisted on being recognised as labour.

The patterns that emerged are consistent. As long as the author behaved in ways that could be interpreted as passive, failed or compliant, institutions remained administratively tolerant. Sanctions, diagnoses and legal threats appeared primarily when autonomous work began to increase reality-contact: when corruption was documented, when policy contradictions were made visible, when the violence of welfare structures was publicly analysed, or when artistic work created pressure for institutional accountability.

These reactions formed a dataset. Different institutions, staffed by different individuals at different times, used strikingly similar strategies:

First, delegitimisation: declaring that the work being done was not work at all but personal obsession, hobby, pathology, or private opinion. Second, economic coercion: threatening or implementing benefit cuts, blocking access to funding, or using financial pressure to force compliance with wage labour demands. Third, pathologisation: framing autonomous labour as a symptom of mental illness, personality disorder or social incompetence, often backed by psychiatric instruments ill-suited for neurodivergent cognition. Fourth, legal and bureaucratic retaliation: initiating procedures, filings and proceedings aimed less at resolving issues than at exhausting the worker's energy and time.

From the standpoint of *Radical Worker*, these are not isolated injustices but expressions of a general mechanism. They show how systems react when confronted with reality labour that they cannot direct, measure or own. The more autonomous work exposes structural contradictions, the more aggressively institutions attempt to suppress it.

The field evidence therefore supports the central claim: in practice, contemporary labour regimes treat the reality-maintaining functions of autonomous labour as a threat to order rather than as a resource for survival.

## **6. Automation and the collapse of reality contact**

Automation and AI are widely discussed as threats to employment, but *Radical Worker* argues that the deeper threat lies elsewhere. Automation destabilises not work in general, but specifically reality labour. It increases the spread of simulation and intensifies pressure on autonomous workers.

The first mechanism is substitution of output. AI systems can generate texts, images, forecasts and decisions that mimic human output patterns in many domains. This leads institutions to treat any labour that produces comparable outputs as replaceable. Workers are then evaluated by how

closely they align with machine performance: speed, consistency, metric performance. The unique, situated, reality-attentive aspects of human work become secondary or even obstructive.

The second mechanism is optimisation of simulation. When institutions rely on algorithmic indicators as proxies for reality, they increasingly treat indicators as reality. Decision systems are calibrated to historically available data, which already encode structural biases and blind spots. Autonomous labour that attempts to update or correct those blind spots appears as an outlier that cannot be easily incorporated into the models. Instead of adjusting to new reality information, systems double down on the patterns that their algorithms can already process.

The third mechanism is discipline through precarity. As automation increases, official narratives often insist that workers must re-skill, adapt and become more flexible. In practice, this demand translates into further subsumption of autonomy under market norms. The worker who insists on self-determined work is told that they are irresponsible, unrealistic or ungrateful. At the same time, the simulations produced by AI and platform economies are presented as evidence that reality is being managed efficiently.

Under these conditions, autonomous labour becomes the last defence against full-scale simulation drift. It is often only self-determined workers, including many neurodivergent and marginalised individuals, who continue to insist on the difference between a system that looks like it works and a system that actually maintains the conditions of life. They raise alarms about ecological collapse, democratic erosion and social fragmentation at precisely the moment when institutions celebrate their own optimisation.

Radical Worker therefore proposes a reversal of the usual story about automation. AI does not make autonomous workers obsolete. It makes them structurally indispensable and politically vulnerable at the same time. Without them, there is no organised reality labour left. With them, there is continuous conflict with systems oriented toward simulation.

## 7. Predictions and falsifiability

A theory that claims civilizational necessity for a specific form of labour must be testable. Radical Worker therefore formulates a set of predictions that can, in principle, be falsified.

Prediction 1: The higher the degree of autonomy in a worker's practice, the less likely that practice is to be formally recognised and remunerated within wage labour markets, even when its social value is demonstrable.

Prediction 2: The more a self-determined worker increases reality-contact within an institution, the higher the probability of institutional backlash in the form of delegitimisation, economic coercion, pathologisation or legal retaliation.

Prediction 3: As automation and AI saturate a sector, the share of labour classified and rewarded as simulation labour will increase relative to reality labour. Indicators and narratives will come to dominate over corrective feedback from autonomous workers.

Prediction 4: Societies that systematically suppress autonomous labour will show decreasing capacity for democratic self-correction, ecological adaptation and crisis response, even if headline productivity indicators remain stable or increase.

Prediction 5: Conversely, societies that create structural conditions for self-determined work (for example through unconditional basic income, protected time for independent research, or strong support for autonomous art and activism) will show greater resilience under systemic stress, measurable through lower burnout, higher trust and more effective response to complex crises.

The theory would be falsified if we observed labour markets that reward autonomy proportionally to its reality-maintaining contribution, institutions that respond to autonomous critique with structural reform rather than repression, and high-automation societies that sustain ecological and democratic stability while systematically discouraging self-determined work. At present, available empirical evidence points in the opposite direction.

## 8. Conclusion — Autonomy as civilizational infrastructure

The argument developed in this paper can be summarised in three steps.

First, labour is not reducible to the production of marketable output. There exists a class of work that maintains and deepens reality-contact in complex societies. This reality labour is structurally tied to autonomy because it requires the freedom to follow resonance with the world rather than institutional scripts.

Second, contemporary labour regimes built on market extraction, welfare conditionality and algorithmic optimisation are structurally hostile to such work. They reward simulation labour and punish reality labour. Autonomous workers who insist on orienting their practice toward reality rather than metrics become targets of delegitimation, coercion and pathologisation.

Third, automation and AI intensify this configuration. They expand the domain of simulation, make output cheap and ubiquitous, and increase pressures on workers to behave like machines. In this environment, self-determined work becomes both more necessary and more endangered. It is necessary because it is the only systematic source of reality-maintaining feedback left. It is endangered because its very existence contradicts the logic of simulation-based governance.

The conclusion of *Radical Worker* is therefore stark. Self-determined work is not a niche lifestyle, not a romantic ideal, and not a temporary deviation from normal employment. It is civilizational infrastructure. Without autonomous labour, societies cannot maintain the complexity, diversity and reflexivity on which their survival depends. They will continue to optimise themselves into blindness, until external reality imposes corrections in the form of ecological collapse, social breakdown or authoritarian consolidation.

Recognising this does not by itself change institutional behaviour. But it does change the terms of the debate. When self-determined workers demand rights, protections or resources, they are not asking for special treatment. They are asking societies to protect their own reality-maintaining organs. A Universal Care Income, strong protections for independent research and art, and legal recognition of autonomous labour are therefore not luxuries. They are investments in the capacity of a society to remain in contact with the world it inhabits.

If labour is the way a society interacts with reality, then suppressing autonomous labour is equivalent to shutting down its own senses. *Radical Worker* argues that we are already far along that path. Whether we can turn away from it will depend, among other things, on whether autonomous workers are recognised not as problems to be solved, but as the workers on whom reality itself depends.

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