

S H A D O W
W O R K

the unpaid, unseen jobs
that fill your day

C R A I G L A M B E R T

C O U N T E R P O I N T
B E R K E L E Y

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introduction

LIFE HAS BECOME busier. Somehow there seems to be less time in the day, although days remain indisputably twenty-four hours long. In truth, *time* isn't vanishing, only *free* time is. How can this be? We are living in the most prosperous era in human history, and prosperity supposedly brings leisure. Yet, quietly, subtly, even furtively, new tasks have infiltrated our days, nibbling off bits of free time like the sea eroding sand from the beach. We find ourselves doing a stack of jobs we never volunteered for, chores that showed up in our lives below the scan of awareness. They are the incoming tidal wave of *shadow work*.

Shadow work includes all the unpaid tasks we do on behalf of businesses and organizations. Most of us do not recognize it or realize how much of it we are doing, even as we pump our own gas, scan and bag our own groceries, execute our own stock trades, and assemble our Ikea furniture. Scores of shadow tasks have infiltrated our daily routines, settling in as habits as we drive our kids to school or make our lunch at the salad bar. We are not slaves in ancient Greece or peasants in medieval Europe, but nonetheless we

are working for nothing. Shadow work has introduced a new element to the modern lifestyle: middle-class serfdom.

Shadow work is not a marginal nuisance snipping spare moments away from the edges of life. It is a fire-breathing dragon, operating 24/7 throughout the industrialized world. This very moment, millions of people are performing shadow work: It's as common as traffic signals, Facebook, or weight-loss advice. Those ubiquitous computers smuggle in tons of shadow work, leaving us to delete spam, book travel, and manage dozens of usernames and passwords. Gift cards, which give *you* the job of choosing and buying a gift for yourself, come wrapped in shadow work. Punching through endless phone menus and waiting through recorded announcements—with the inevitable “Please listen carefully, as our menu has changed,” which begs for the reply, “No, your menu hasn't changed in two years, and I'm *not* going to ‘listen carefully’ to this robot voice”—constitute shadow work, as does filling out your tax return.

Recycling? A sound practice, certainly, but also more shadow work. As with recycling, many of us in some cases willingly *choose* shadow work, but most of the time, it can feel like a raft of tasks that corporations and organizations once handled but are now pushing back onto the consumer.

Volunteering for charitable or nonprofit organizations like the Sierra Club or Disabled American Veterans isn't shadow work, but a *gift*. Volunteers do unpaid work on behalf of an organization; they contribute their time to the cause just as others may donate money. Shadow work can be many things, but it is always a *transaction* of some sort, not a gift freely bestowed. Though volunteers

may derive personal satisfaction from what they do, as with all real gifts, there is no quid pro quo: The transactional element is absent.

This book is a field guide to shadow work: what it is, where it came from, how it affects your life and our world—and how to deal with it. The book offers lenses that, like binoculars, will help you spot shadow work in the wild. Shadow work has many results—some useful, some troubling, others simply disruptive or annoying. Quite often, it seems like an imposition—a corporation helping itself to your free time. Yet shadow work can also enable you to control the pace and execution of some jobs, whether you are pumping gas at the filling station or booking a trip to Prague at Kayak.com. “I love booking my own travel,” says Charles, a public relations executive in Washington, D.C. “I look directly at the menu of flights available and choose exactly what I want. That’s so empowering. When our firm used a big travel agency, they always got it wrong.” Shadow work may save you time, when you scan and bag your own groceries at the supermarket, for example, or save you money, such as when you sidestep a large brokerage fee by selling your own stocks online. Some shadow work serves a social good: Recycling conserves natural resources and means less trash dumped into landfills.

Yet, unquestionably, it gives us more to do. Minor tasks like returning our supermarket shopping carts to a holding pen or bus-ing our own Starbucks tables have become routine. “Why am I doing this?” asked Daniel, a philosophy professor in western Massachusetts, wheeling his empty shopping cart to the collec-tion area. “What happened to those teenagers who used to collect these things? I kind of liked watching them push about twenty

carts, all nested together, across the parking lot.” The routines also embrace major time hogs like chauffeuring our kids to school as unpaid school-bus drivers, or completing extensive medical histories (for the umpteenth time) when applying for health or life insurance. Shadow work is steadily lengthening the to-do lists of people whose days are already crammed. It ushers in a paradoxical twenty-first-century era in which individuals gain more autonomy while surrendering more control of their lives.

I ADAPTED THIS term from the 1981 book *Shadow Work* by Austrian philosopher and social critic Ivan Illich. For Illich, shadow work included all the unpaid labor done in a wage-based economy, such as housework. In a *subsistence* economy, work directly answers the needs of life: gathering food, growing crops, building shelters, tending fires. But once money and wages come into play, we encounter a whole range of tasks that do not address our basic needs. Instead, such jobs enable us to earn money to *buy* necessities and, if possible, luxuries.

That is *paid* work, not our subject here. This book will identify and describe the *unpaid* jobs (like commuting) that an industrial economy spins off for its citizens. Such jobs go unnoticed because they take place in the wings of the theater while we are absorbed in the onstage drama of our lives. They exist in the shadows. Yet they are every bit as real as anything in the spotlight.

They also expand the realm of our work, which is already large. Let’s face it: Though love may be our highest value, the thing we spend most of our time on is *work*. Excepting sleep, humans

devote more of their lifetimes to work than any other activity. No one spends forty, fifty, or sixty hours per week eating, exercising, having sex, or even surfing the web—at least, no sane person does. “I spend more time with the people I work with than I do with my family,” says Andrew, who manages two health clubs in suburban Michigan. “In a way, they are a second family.”

Work is the main event. It is central to our economy and our society, and it makes family life possible. It underpins our finances and our sense of purpose in life. Given work’s overriding importance, it is imperative to recognize the profound, far-reaching transformation that shadow work is having, and the way it is redefining our very notion of work. We will track down shadow work in its natural habitats, which are the familiar environments of daily life: the home and family, the office, shopping, restaurants, travel, and the digital world of computers and the Internet.

SHADOW WORK HAS upended a number of fundamental, long-established patterns. The traditional marketplace, for example, brought together producers and consumers: Producers delivered goods and services and sold them to consumers for cash. Shadow work is rewriting this agreement. Now the customer not only pays for her purchases but also joins the seller’s team to help produce them. In the bulk-food section of a Whole Foods supermarket, for example, she handles the packaging: scooping her cherry-almond granola into a plastic bag, closing it with a twist-tie, then labeling it with an SKU (stock keeping unit) number to identify her package for the cashier.

Shadow work is erasing the distinction between work and leisure. Recently, some organizational analysts have argued that the women's-magazine staple of "work/life balance" is already obsolete, as there is no longer any meaningful distinction between "work" and "life." Smartphones trill and vibrate with calls or texts from the office at virtually any time, adding hours to the work-day. "I was playing tennis with my son at my club around eight o'clock at night, when my boss texted me, asking me to elaborate on something in a report I'd written," says Ron, a financial analyst in a Chicago suburb. "That was nothing unusual. It didn't bother me, though maybe it should have." The standard of living in modern industrialized countries easily surpasses that of any historical society. Yet, despite our unprecedented wealth, pure leisure time is, incredibly, becoming scarce, partly because shadow work often shows up uninvited, a party pooper at the cookout.

There are social and psychological effects that ripple through a society suffused with shadow work. People are becoming isolated from each other as shadow work has them flying solo on tasks that once included human contact and cooperation. When we book our European vacation on Expedia.com, we no longer banter with our travel agent about where she has been in Alsace or on the Amalfi Coast, or where she suggests going in Andalusia. "My travel agent, Nina, used to book me into these little country inns, places where she knew the owners personally," recalls Sheila, a Toronto anesthesiologist. "She'd tell me their names and ask me to say hello. Nina's retired now, and that kind of thing just doesn't happen anymore." When we scan our own groceries at the supermarket,

we don't get to ask the cashier about the job offer she has after graduation. The relentless march of robotic technology not only thins out human contact but can also sideline the illiterate, the elderly, the poor, and those lacking the dexterity to deal with high technology.

The technological and corporate worlds have adopted a farm word, *silo*, for units isolated from each other. Shadow work is a force that can make people more self-sufficient, while at the same time sealing them off in silos. Doing something with a robot feels quite different from doing it with a fellow human, and the siloing of individuals via shadow work is having a significant and cumulative impact on the texture of community life.

THIS BOOK WILL shine a fresh light on your activities. It will identify instances of shadow work in your everyday routine and flag others you may not yet have noticed. Such recognitions put you in a position of *choice*—at least, when there is a choice.

Take commuting. Commuting—the job of *getting to the job*—is an unpaid task done to serve the employer. It has become so woven into American life that we scarcely recognize it for what it is. Yet commuting is very expensive, time-consuming shadow work. The commuter must either brave crowded public transportation, or own, insure, maintain, and fuel a car—and drive it—just to make the round-trip from home to workplace. In 2005, ABC News reported that the average American commuter travels sixteen miles, one-way, to work. At current federal auto mileage reimbursement rates of 55 cents per mile, that thirty-two-mile

round-trip costs \$17.60 daily, or \$88 per week and \$4,400 per year. The average daily commute takes fifty-two minutes both ways, or about 217 hours per year—more than *five forty-hour weeks* of unpaid travel time. Jobs that allow employees to work from home save them thousands of dollars annually and also free up untold hours now spent on the road—time you might devote to, well, productive work.

Given these costs, some workers might try to telecommute at least a day or two per week. Others set up a flexible work schedule that shifts their commute away from rush hour traffic, saving fuel and time. Cutting back on the shadow work of commuting can enhance quality of life.

Very few commute by air, but business travelers fill the airports, and shadow work is making incursions into flying. For example, consider how the terrorist attacks of 9/11 immediately triggered greatly increased security at U.S. airports. In the fall of 2001, the United States established what amounts to a second Department of Defense, the Department of Homeland Security, which includes the Transportation Security Administration (TSA). This bureaucracy handles security screening at transportation sites, including airports. Such screening lengthens travel time significantly and also hands passengers a dose of shadow work as they pass through all the hoops of security screening. These have come to include not only x-ray inspection of luggage and carry-ons but a requirement to remove shoes, jackets, and belts for security purposes, to pull out laptop computers, and to submit to metal-detector scans and even strip-searches.

Recently, the TSA launched a program called TSA Precheck to expedite this process for “low-risk travelers,” such as U.S. citizens and military members with “clean” records. Such VIPs are allowed to walk through security in a precheck line while wearing their jackets, belts, and shoes. (Membership has its privileges. No stripping!) The kicker is that to qualify for TSA Precheck on *every* flight (some lucky ones now get selected by chance), a traveler must pay a nonrefundable \$85 application fee, make an appointment to appear in person at a TSA location to be fingerprinted, and then be cleared to receive a known traveler number (KTN). The KTN is valid for five years. Precheck has not yet existed for five years, but does anyone think the government will renew KTNs at no charge?

Understandably, after 9/11, passengers worldwide were willing to cooperate with screening to increase their safety. Before those attacks, the convenience of boarding an airplane while wearing a jacket, belt, and shoes was available to everyone, with no \$85 fee for the privilege. Changing norms added shadow work—or a fee to *avoid* shadow work—to travelers’ routines.

Sometimes it is shadow work or nothing. In other situations you might discover an alternative—even one with a price. (After all, it’s only money.) Perhaps a friendly chat with the skycap at the airport, rounded off with a generous tip, will make for a more enjoyable flight than checking your own bag at a kiosk. Maybe you’ll delegate that 1040 form to a tax preparer. Or put your daughter on a school bus to ride with her peers instead of chauffeuring her to school. On the other hand, you might *choose* shadow work by selling your own house—saving the broker’s commission and

learning something about the real estate market. Shadow work can both add new tasks and open up possibilities.

FOUR MAJOR FORCES underlie the flood of shadow work. The first is *technology and robotics*. Internet travel websites, for example, enable shadow-working consumers to do the job of travel agents by booking their own flights. Secondly, the vast expansion of publicly available information has brought about the *democratization of expertise*. The average person can now retrieve knowledge once monopolized by experts—and thus do shadow work such as downloading a legal template from the Internet to write a contract without a lawyer. Third, the skyrocketing value of data has given rise to an *information dragnet*: institutions constantly trawling to collect data in whatever way possible. The dragnet foists on consumers a whole array of shadow tasks that involve both supplying personal information and managing the reams of data that the information economy pushes into their computers and smartphones. Fourth, constantly evolving social norms affect behavior. An emergent norm like parental overengagement in children's lives can fertilize an entire meadow of shadow work with previously nonexistent tasks.

IT IS QUIXOTIC to oppose the winds of change. We cannot outlaw shadow work. No government regulation will hold back a social current that the economy continues to reward. Yet shadow work is simply an evolutionary development, and like all evolutionary trends, it has many potential pathways. Becoming *aware*

of shadow work—what it is, what it looks like, where to find it, and what its consequences are—is the first step toward mastering it. Once we grasp the phenomenon, we may be able to steer it in productive and desirable directions.

Despite its disruptive effects, we must avoid seeing shadow work simply as a *problem*. “Problem solving” is an intellectual trap that confines our thinking to the parameters of the perceived “problem.” Instead, we should consider the advent of shadow work as an *opportunity*. As robots and consumers absorb jobs, they also liberate the rest of the workforce for creative tasks not so easily mechanized or delegated—for precious jobs, in other words, that require thinking humans.

My intention here in one respect resembles Sigmund Freud’s goal for psychoanalysis: *to make the unconscious conscious*. This book offers a new way to view the familiar facts of daily life. Like a telescope, binoculars, or a magnifying glass, it may reveal surprising aspects of things that have been right in front of your eyes. The narrative will explore the rewards, bonanzas, and pitfalls that stud the little-known road of shadow work. We have no choice about traveling that road; my aim, in this book, is to at least provide its travelers with a map.

one: middle-class serfdom

If he had been a great and wise philosopher, like the writer of this book, he would now have comprehended that Work consists of whatever a body is obliged to do and that Play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do. . . . There are wealthy gentlemen in England who drive four-horse passenger-coaches twenty or thirty miles on a daily line, in the summer, because the privilege costs them considerable money; but if they were offered wages for the service, that would turn it into work and then they would resign.

—MARK TWAIN, *THE ADVENTURES OF TOM SAWYER*

IN HIS 1876 novel *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Mark Twain created a character who ranks among the pioneers of shadow work. In the book's most famous episode, Tom Sawyer's guardian, Aunt Polly, commands the young boy to spend Saturday whitewashing "Thirty yards of board fence nine feet high." To make matters even worse, Saturday dawns as a beautiful summer day, "bright and fresh, and brimming with life. There was a song in every heart, and if the heart was young the music issued at the lips." Wanting nothing more than to play with his friends, Tom

turns glumly to the whitewashing job—until inspiration strikes. His friend Ben Rogers happens by, announces that he is going swimming, and taunts Tom: “But of course you’d druther *work*—wouldn’t you?”

Tom asks Ben what he calls work and astonishes Ben by admitting that he likes whitewashing: “Does a boy get a chance to whitewash a fence every day?” “That put things in a new light,” writes Twain, and Ben stops nibbling his apple. Tom continues whitewashing, but with the demeanor of an artist: “Tom swept his brush daintily back and forth—stepped back to note the effect—added a touch here and there—criticized the effect again,” with Ben getting more and more absorbed. Before long, Ben is whitewashing instead of Tom, and even hands over his apple for the privilege.

For the rest of the day, Tom carries out “the slaughter of more innocents” as he convinces an endless succession of boys that the chance to whitewash is so desirable that they must pay for it. By mid-afternoon, the job is not only done but “Tom was literally rolling in wealth,” having collected a kite, twelve marbles, a tin soldier, six firecrackers, and a kitten with one eye, among other coveted possessions. “If he hadn’t run out of whitewash,” writes Twain, “he would have bankrupted every boy in the village.”

Tom Sawyer achieved his amazing success simply by redefining *work*. He convinced the boys that whitewashing was a fun project with an artistic aspect, not a monotonous chore. Work became *play*, and so the boys, who instinctively loved play, eagerly embraced whitewashing that Saturday.

To redefine something changes how we perceive it. The concept of *shadow work* can redefine many things we do. These are tasks we may never have categorized as *work*—even though many people have been paid for doing them. Over the last twenty years or so, the phenomenon of shadow work has grown up around us rapidly. To understand its significance, we can use a touchstone that indicates how we lived before its arrival.

LIFE BEFORE SHADOW WORK

The Sunoco station where Dad and I went to fill up our family's car on Saturday mornings sat atop a small rise on the highway in Denville, New Jersey. The coverall-clad gent who pumped the gas, Ralph, was in his late sixties. His smile shone out from a well-lined face. Engine grease had become part of his fingers. You could look at Ralph and tell he was a *good* mechanic.

He was mostly retired from hands-on auto repair, though Ralph advised the younger men and would still crank a ratchet wrench on occasion. He pumped gas with casual skill. He'd raise the hood of our 1949 Plymouth, pull the dipstick and check the oil, and then clean the windshield and rear window with a squeegee. When I was seven, in 1955, gasoline cost 29 cents per gallon, and Dad paid in cash, of course. I loved the smell of gasoline. That scent is a sweet memory, an aroma that modern vapor-recovery systems removed from the gas-station experience.

Today, I do Ralph's job. I pump the gas, pull the dipstick, check the oil. I squeegee the windows. Never mind that I have a Ph.D. and work as a writer. Unlike Ralph, though, I don't get paid by the

gas station. I fill the tank of my *own* car on an amateur basis. It's not like I have a choice. Where I live, in Massachusetts, gas pump attendants have pretty much disappeared.

WELL, LOTS OF things have changed since the 1950s. Various jobs have gone extinct, bequeathing chores like gas pumping to the rest of us. Let's briefly revisit American society in the mid-twentieth century to benchmark how our world of work has evolved since then.

In 1955, most mothers, like mine, stayed at home, kept house, cooked meals, and cared for the children. This was the “women's work” that wives and mothers had traditionally done. They never earned wages for doing housework, of course, unless they were doing it in someone *else's* house. But “women's work” always anchored family life, and since the Industrial Revolution, it has enabled men to work for money *away* from the homestead. Though housework went unpaid, the institutions of marriage, family, and even the economy could not have survived without it. The most important work we do may not be for cash. Housework is the original and most fundamental form of shadow work.

By and large, 1950s fathers earned the family's income. They *went* to work. There were hardly any home offices, except when dentists or doctors added them to their houses. Nobody telecommuted: People commuted with cars and trains, not fiber-optic cables. In offices, “support staff”—secretaries, typists, office managers, messengers, janitors—helped the rest of the staff produce by taking care of routine tasks. In today's home office, those jobs

are all your own, and support staff have thinned out in downtown offices, too.

To shop in the 1950s, you went to something called a *store*. It would have been redundant to call it a “bricks-and-mortar” store because there was no other kind. Yes, there were mail-order catalogs, but online commerce was not even a dream. Door-to-door salespeople like the Avon lady, the Fuller Brush man, or the *Encyclopedia Britannica* sales force were the face of home shopping—that and Tupperware parties. Salespeople who visited your home, like the ones in stores, were thoroughly trained and brimmed with knowledge about their merchandise. They could answer any question you had; it was their job to provide the “research” you now do for yourself when you shop online or even in big-box stores, where finding a salesperson can be like spotting a scarlet tanager in a city park. At the supermarket, the cashier would “ring you up” (the mechanical cash register actually made a *ka-ching!* sound) and take your money. You did not tip the cashier for accepting your payment. Self-service checkouts did not exist.

All that stuff we brought home from stores produced tons of trash. We threw it all out. The trash got dumped in landfills choked with the refuse of a consumer society. There was no recycling.

In the 1950s, we didn’t eat out much. For all but the well-to-do, going to a restaurant was a special experience. The few fast-food chains in operation were local or regional, not national. When you did eat out, you rarely served yourself anything. In restaurants, waiters and waitresses brought your food to the

table—including salads, as there were no salad bars. At the end of the meal, you just paid, got up, and walked away. Busboys cleaned up your table.

Lacking Internet commerce, you had to go to the local drug-store or newsstand to buy embarrassing items like condoms, diaphragms, Preparation H, pulp-fiction paperbacks, or raunchy magazines. At-home pregnancy tests did not yet give women the privilege of being the first, and perhaps only, person to know the state of their fertility. Living in a small town deepened the privacy issue, because the people behind the counter probably knew you and your family, and maybe even understood exactly why you were buying this particular incriminating item.

IN THOSE DAYS, people did their banking by going *inside* the bank building. You made your deposit or bought your savings bond from a teller at a window, waiting in line for your turn if the bank was busy, as there were no ATMs. The teller could cash a check for you and, unlike an ATM, could give you bills other than just \$20 bills, or even a roll of dimes for phone calls. (Public phones were available in phone booths, before cell phones privatized the telephonic experience and made it ubiquitous.) The Dover Trust, where my father was president, also offered flourishes unavailable at ATMs; during the holidays, for example, a retired local music teacher played Christmas carols on a small organ in the bank's lobby.

Today, many customers never enter a bank: They bank online at their computers. They are their own tellers, bookkeepers, and