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Upkeep: The Erasure and Rediscovery of Maintenance.

I. Maintenance Lost

From Ben Franklin to Donald Trump, a long line of thought in the Western liberal tradition—and particularly its American incarnation—celebrates the independent work of creative individuals while simultaneously obscuring from view all the work behind such work—the acts, materials and infrastructures by which such independence is maintained.

As an example, consider Mark Twain's 1866 *Life on the Mississippi River*, in which he lauds the work of river-boat piloting, writing "I loved the profession far better than any I have followed since, and I took a measureless pride in it" (96). Twain, in typical American fashion, celebrates both work and independence, calling the pilot "the only unfettered and entirely independent being that lived in the earth.... His movements were entirely free" (96). Using language of monarchy and slavery which already undercuts claims of independence, the pilot is "a king without a keeper, an absolute monarch.... All men... are slaves to other men & circumstances—save, alone, the pilot" (Horowitz 104). Though Twain limits the feeling to nineteenth-century river-boat captains, this sense of freedom describes something familiar, though not necessarily familiar to work. Anyone who has sped along an open road, wandered a city's pavements, or maybe even clicked freely

through the open spaces of the net has had a sense of it. His use of the word “independent”—a familiar American credo, to be sure—underscores this universality.

As anyone interested in maintenance will immediately point out, this feeling of independence—delivered via steam-powered river-boat—is *kept up* by a host of people, activities and materials not present in the wheel-house. From men shoveling coal under the boiler, to the extraction of that coal, the production of that boiler, the carving of that wheel, people and materials surround the pilot, disappearing backwards in time and outwards in space into the supply chain. To name but one ingredient, the shafts and cylinders producing the pilot’s sense of unfettered freedom require lubrication—a material often sourced, as a famous text written fifteen years earlier explains ad nauseam, from the depths of the Pacific Ocean. In *Moby Dick*, (notably narrated from a crewman, rather than a captain) Melville reminds readers of this hidden dependence, of the work needed to bring oil to the gears of the developing nation. Looking at the two texts together shows how much work *keeps up* the technology delivering Twain’s sense of independence.

The work that delivers oil provides not only lubrication, but illumination, a point which reveals the extent to which independence in the broadest sense is maintained by the work of others. “For God’s sake,” Melville writes, “be economical with your lamps and candles! not a gallon you burn but at least one drop of man’s blood was spilled for it” (226). This warning still goes unheeded: whale oil currently supplies neither light nor lube, but blood is certainly still spilled for oil. And, more to the point about erasure of maintenance, the idea that experiences of

independence actually *depend* has a heretical ring, as witnessed by the reaction to Obama's 2012 statement that "If you've been successful, you didn't get there on your own.... Somebody invested in roads and bridges... you didn't build that, somebody else made that happen." And it's not just success in business which is dependent; important for a culture so focused on entertainment, Melville reminds us about the work needed "in order to light the gay bridals and other merrymakings of men" (391). He reminds us, that is, that the products, experiences and emotions of independence, of life in a free economy, rest on infrastructural systems in which much toil occurs. In short, the technological and national progress represented by Twain's early steam-driven vehicle and the personal freedoms represented by Melville's bridal party are produced and maintained—are kept up—by human hands.

Twain's simultaneous celebration of independence and erasure of the maintainive work behind it is but one example in the long history of liberal ideology. Consider the twentieth-century case for top-down economics. Ultimately arguing for the "importance of the private owner of substantial property" and "a tolerance for the existence of a group of idle rich," F.A. Hayek—a neoliberal theorist who received a Presidential Medal of Freedom from George Bush Sr.—laid groundwork in his 1960 *The Constitution of Liberty* for what has become system-wide erasure of maintainive work (190,193). Separating workers into two camps—the employed and the independents—Hayek ascribes "relative security and absence of risk and responsibility" to the employed (186). Such plodding simple folk just can't easily "see that their freedom depends on others being able to make decisions" for them

(185). These others are, of course, the engaged, far-seeing independents for whom work “is a question of shaping and reshaping a plan of life, of finding solutions for ever new problems” (188). Enter the figure of the innovator, the man with—like Twain’s pilot—his hand on the wheel.

Beyond dismissing the work on which independence depends, Hayek relocates productivity and creativity—“shaping,” as he puts it—to the top. This move has become hegemonic. Consider a spring 2016 issue of *The Economist’s* new magazine *1843*. Amidst articles and ads promising the ease or excitement of new consumer products and services, Ryan Avant’s “Why Do We Work So Hard?” claims “top professionals are the master craftsmen of the age, shaping high-quality, bespoke products from beginning to end. We design, fashion, smooth and improve, filing the rough edges and polishing the words, the numbers, the code or whatever is our chosen material” (94). Though he’s attempting to celebrate work, Avant’s “We” refers only to “top professionals,” and, following Hayek as he does, comes with a denigration of maintainive work—the familiar idea that “those lower down the ladder worked fewer and fewer hours” and that their work “demands less commitment” (92, 94). Such dismissal of hard work’s role in maintaining the positions of those at the top is a necessary component of any ideology which makes independent activity the source of economic enfranchisement, and which uses it to explain unequal positions of wealth.

But Avant’s language of hands-on “shaping” (borrowed from Hayek) reveals something else: the appeal of work he’s positing is not fundamentally rooted in being a “top professional.” He writes that “it is a cognitive and emotional relief to

immerse oneself in something all-consuming while other difficulties float by” (94). Such immersion—and, after it, the ability to “sit back and admire our work”—is not limited to life-shaping, product-creating, top-professional jobs (94). In fact, the appealing components of these jobs—the writing of code, for example—are “immersive” precisely because they are repetitive and task-oriented, because they are part of a larger whole, the process of which delivers perpetuation of engaging activity. Such immersiveness has less to do with being free of “other men & circumstances” as Twain puts it, but with being bound to them through the tasks which make up work—with the engaging quality of (again from Twain) “the minutia of the science of piloting” (96). How-to books on everything from knitting to deal-making underscore this interest in the minutia of work.

II. Maintenance Found

Against the long mythology around independent creative work—a line which has brought us the figure of the self-made man, the captain of industry, and more recently the innovator—a similarly long counter-narrative celebrates what I’ve been calling maintainive work—the work of *upkeep*. This very concept, which conflates tasks of daily reproduction with the work of technological and cultural production, I borrow from none other than Adam Smith, the ostensible father of free market capitalism. Surprisingly, Smith actually makes maintenance a major component of his version of trickle-down economics. “Power and riches,” he writes, are “enormous and operose machines... consisting of springs most nice and delicate, which must be *kept in order* with the most anxious attention” (156, emphasis

added). Imagining an economic system as a feudal estate, centered around a “proud and unfeeling landlord” living in his palace, surrounded by workers, Smith writes that “those who prepare... and fit up the palace.... Who provide and *keep up* all the baubles and trinkets... thus derive from his luxury and caprice... [a] share of the necessities of life” (158, emphasis added). All the activities allowing “power and riches” to be “kept in order,” drive the redistributive mechanism, which “keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind” (157). Notably, the production of luxury items comes not top down, as the neoliberals reimagine it, but from the bottom up (157). Smith’s formula, worth criticizing for its ultimate promotion of excess and selfishness should yet be celebrated for showing the how the hands of workers keep the system going.

Skipping ahead a few centuries, that the current of figurehead of self-generated independence—the innovator—comes from Hayek and the other Chicago school theorists is telling, for they are writing in the achieved-dream trenches of the mid-twentieth century, amid the promises of technology and automation to release individuals from mundane, repetitive work. At this very moment, however, texts celebrating daily and social maintenance pop up in droves. Though they go about it in extremely different ways, a focus on upkeep appears in works as disparate as *Invisible Man* (which criticizes the marginalization of racialized custodial work), *The Bride’s Primer* (which teaches young women methods by which “home making...[can be] a joy and never a burden”), and *Death of a Salesman* (which show the corruption of a family-oriented do-it-yourselfer by the ideology of being “number one man”) (Sherman 2; Miller 111). Each posits the importance of maintainive work. While

many of these counter-narratives come from the racialized and/or gendered people who generally perform the work of up-keep across time and space, many, like *Salesman*, come from the white, male, middle class subjects with, seemingly, the most to gain from the fantasy of a maintenance-free world. Such texts, set as they are against this technological fantasy, are particularly useful for reconsidering the ideology of innovation.

As *Salesman* and many other texts show, this concept has many problems: growth for its own sake, the idolization of novelty, the ‘creative destruction’ of existing methods and systems. Innovation—forever linking ‘new’ with ‘better’—invalidates qualitative judgment. Even as innovation promises a better future, people’s ability to shape that future becomes contained in the values of consumer capitalism—values such as easier, faster, less boring, more comfortable, less obtrusive. As the literary, historical, cultural record shows, these values tend to detach people from nature, self and society rather than provide (or only provide) freedom from drudgery. Moreover, this record suggests such values tend not to motive human activity. As such, *innovation* entails the enclosure of human agency and attention, an enclosure I believe *maintenance* holds the potential of mitigating, and perhaps reversing.

By forcing attention on the real condition of the material surrounding us, the performance of maintenance, and the re-conceptualization of economic activity as maintenance, hold the potential to put within the hands of people and the grasp of communities the real human value—or lack thereof—of the technological and infrastructural systems we live within.

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