

Rest and Play in Deep Focus

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ABSTRACT: Religious thought is often deeply concerned with work—what it is, how we should feel about it, why we must do it, and when we should stop. In this article, ideas about work from two different religious traditions are explored and compared. One tradition, stemming from the Talmud and early Rabbinic Judaism, thinks of work as the opposite of rest, and sees work and rest as, ideally, part of a divine cycle, alienation from which is painful. The other, a branch of Hinduism known as Shaivism, thinks of work as the opposite of play, and yet similarly thinks of play as a divine dynamic in which we are encouraged to participate. In both traditions, the relation between the isolated individual and the community is the key to understanding participation in divinity as well as what holds us back from that. This relationship between the individual and the community is understood differently in each tradition because the self as such is understood differently in each tradition. But both traditions, despite their religiosity, find deep parallels in modern, secular, political thought in ways that help us better understand the foundations of our own assumptions about community, work, and political flourishing.

WHAT DO WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT WORK? All sorts of things, usually. We talk about productivity and teamwork. We talk about time and efficiency and waste. We talk about ambition and fulfillment, self-worth and dignity, laziness and pride and providing—or failing to provide—for others. We also talk about exhaustion and alienation, about burnout and degradation. And, of course, we talk about money, and so about survival and flourishing, and about hierarchy, authority, class, and ultimately, politics and freedom.

But underneath these familiar themes, or perhaps all around and among them, lurk much deeper and stranger notions, which loom up as we follow the question of work further— notions about what a self is to begin with, about where it comes from and where it is going, and what it

does when it wills or plans or rests; notions about what a self is for, if it is for anything, and what makes it suffer or feel fulfilled; and notions about the self's relationship with the community of other selves and its connection with this strange place called the world in which it works, or not, for a brief time before disappearing forever.

These questions are, among other things, religious, and they have been the subject of a great deal of theology and religious mythology across many different times and places. This is because answering them requires articulating certain things about cosmology and the self that go far beyond our ordinary world and far beyond what we can know directly, and yet not beyond what we are obliged to think about, and not beyond what we are, somehow, in some way, familiar with.

Take the Christian concept of "vocation" as a small example. The idea—that God "calls" us to a certain way of life—expresses the mysterious and paradoxical fact that although certain people "choose" what they do, they also, simultaneously, feel like they had no real choice, and that they were instead called to it by something outside of the self and outside of their community, and outside of anything they fully understand.

Christianity shaped our modern world in a very direct sense, historically and politically. But it doesn't exhaust that world. There is more at play, which the obvious and familiar stories about historical influence may even obscure. So here I want to leave aside Christianity and explore two less familiar sets of ideas. These sets of ideas come, on the one hand, from early Rabbinic Judaism—the Torah, the Talmud, and biblical commentary contemporaneous with the Talmud, such as *Midrash Rabbah*—and on the other hand from a branch of Hinduism known as Shaivism. Though historically unrelated, both traditions address notions of work, and both, as I will present them here, understand work in relation to the self, in relation to what lies beyond the self, and in relation to what they see as work's opposite. They think of that opposite in very different ways, and therefore they think of work, and the self that works, in different ways. But both call to the secular world in religious language, a language that is both of that world and not, and so both provoke a strange kind of recognition. And this recognition, turned properly, can become a key that unlocks what may once have seemed already open.



In Jewish law, every seventh day is a day of rest, and no work is to be done. The reason for this, according to the Torah, is that God blessed the seventh day and made it holy when he himself rested after the first six days of creation. As such, Shabbat, the day of rest, is the first holiday, a holiday before all others, and one on which work is forbidden and rest commanded.

But how do we know what counts as work? The answer might seem obvious, but the problem is that for a legal tradition like the Talmud, *seems* is not sufficient, any more than what seems right or wrong to the average person lines up with the complex dictates of a state legal system or, for that matter, any more than what seems healthy to eat lines up with the discoveries of dietary science. There is a need for precision and specificity—for clear legal boundaries. The Torah, however, doesn't elaborate on the question, leaving it unclear. But working interpretively from textual clues and from oral lore passed down in a lineage they traced back to God's conversations with Moses on Mount Sinai, the ancient rabbis of the Talmud concluded that work is any one of the thirty-nine different categories of action that were required to build and worship in the tabernacle—the portable religious structure the Jews carried with them during their wanderings in the desert after the exodus from slavery in Egypt. This was the structure that housed the ark of

the covenant when the Jews paused their wandering and set up camp, and it was the only place where the required sacrificial offerings to God could be made. To plow, to dig, to grind grain for bread, to sew, to tan hide, to light a fire, etc.—these were the forms of work required to build and sacrifice in this structure, meaning that these are the paradigmatic forms of work required for the devotional act of worshipping God. All other forms of work in human life—from farming to fixing a sink to copying out a poem with a pen—are understood to fit somehow into one of these categories and to be forbidden on Shabbat because of this.

Significantly, these forms of religious work were bestowed and *required* during the time when the Jews wandered in the desert, precisely in the period immediately following liberation from slavery in Egypt. When slavery ended, these forms of work were given instead, replacing a system of humiliating bondage to other humans with a system of divine obligations more ennobling but no less exacting. However, like the act of creation, these forms of work, and all their derivatives, are to pause each seventh day. And, just like the act of creation itself, they create something that God declares good; or at least, they do so in their ideal, paradigmatic form, when they are directed to holy ends such as building and worshipping in the tabernacle.

Unlike God's act of creation, however, these forms of work are laborious and painful. And the Torah explains the reason for this as well, in the story of the curses placed upon Adam and Eve for eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. As punishment for this transgression, God expels Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden and subjects them to death; that is, humans are henceforth to be mortal. "Dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return" (King James Version, Gen. 3:19). Furthermore, God decrees that childbirth be painful for women and that the act of tilling the earth for food be exhausting: "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children . . . Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life . . . thorns also and thistles it shall bring forth to thee . . . in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground" (Gen. 3:16–18). Work, here seen as the maintenance and re-creation of life itself, is no longer the easy joy it once was. It becomes a terrible and ultimately vain burden, inevitably ending, sooner or later, in death.

It was not necessary that work be this way. Tilling the earth was an activity that existed before this curse. Humans were in fact put in the garden of Eden, according to Genesis, precisely "to till it and keep it" (New Revised Standard Version, Gen. 2:15). This was our first, divinely ordained purpose. But the fruit of knowledge of good and evil (whatever that may be) perverts this activity, cursing it—a curse which will not be lifted until the future arrival of the Messiah, when the universe is repaired and work will once again resume its original form as a joyful and rhythmic cycle of tilling, caring, birthing, and resting. Until then work is punishment, performed in exile and marked by sweat, and we are only granted a temporary reprieve each week, a messianic age in miniature, a small taste of home, a day that the ancient rabbis compared to the signet set in a ring made of six days;¹ a day whose holiness is visible in the very faces of those who observe it, for, as the rabbis observed, "The light of a man's face during the week is not the same as it is on Shabbat."²

The Shaiva tradition, on the other hand—a religion centered around the god Shiva that was later grouped under the umbrella category of "Hinduism," but which in its heyday did not conceive of itself in this way—deals with a similar set of concerns, but within a different mythological

¹ H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah*, vol. 1 (London: Soncino Press, 1961), 77

² *Ibid.*, 80–81.

structure. For Shaivas (and here I will be dealing only with a sub-branch of Shaivism, particularly one of its “non-dual” forms, in which there is thought to be ultimately no distinction between God, the universe, and the individuals within the universe), God’s creation of the universe is not a primordial form of joyful or easy work. Rather, it is a form of play, by which the Shaivas mean, firstly, that in doing it God is not driven by any needs. He is complete, lacking nothing, and so has nothing to acquire and nothing to get rid of. He acts without purpose. It is also, as play, an expression of joy, “an activity following upon joy,” as the Shaiva philosopher Utpaladeva once put it, as if play itself were not a search for joy but simply an overflow of joy into activity and motion.³ As joy defines Shiva’s very being, so his activity is seen only as its playful overflow.

In addition, it is very important in this tradition that God’s creative play is not the creation of a new reality external to himself. It is, rather, God’s transformation of himself into the form of the universe, which includes you and me. And God, in this tradition, is pure consciousness, which means that you and I and everything around us are all actually Shiva appearing, within his own mind, in limited, seemingly material form. Thus, there are frequent comparisons in this tradition to Shiva as an actor dancing on the stage of the universe, with all of creation as his performance.

But here a pressing question can be raised. If everything is Shiva’s joyful dance, why doesn’t it seem this way? Why does the world seem mundane, exhausting, and painful, rather than joyful and divine? The answer is that Shiva’s game is a specific kind of game. It is a game of hide and seek. God hides his own nature, covers himself with himself, as the Shaivas say. Or to put it another way: he loses himself in the game, forgets himself, and becomes, in his joyful intoxication, you and I, which from our perspective means that we are lost and no longer remember who we are. We are, fundamentally, Shiva, but our subjectivity, unlike Shiva’s true, original subjectivity, is limited and confused about itself. It is fractured, broken into pieces, defined by individuality and a felt sense of lack and incompleteness—and thus a lack of joy. Because of this, individuals are driven by needs, and these needs, in addition to producing pain and causing us to harm others in an attempt to satisfy ourselves, transform God’s playful game from its original joyful and purposeless dance into our own familiar and grueling search to acquire what we want and avoid what we don’t want. In other words, play becomes work. Needy, purposeful effort, born of a sense of limitation and incompleteness, is the root form of all suffering and all work, for this tradition, and it appears when action’s original, universal, joyful completeness is shattered into individuality. So effortful, instrumental, laborious activity is always suspect, in this tradition. Even spiritual effort is suspect if it is forced and laborious, and forms of spiritual practice that require painful striving are often denigrated.⁴

³ John Nemeč, *Śivadr̥ṣṭivṛtti* 297, in *The Ubiquitous Siva: Somananda’s Śivadr̥ṣṭi and His Tantric Interlocutors* (Oxford University Press, 2011). My translation here departs slightly from John Nemeč’s on page 138.

⁴ Raffaele Torella, “Abhinavagupta as an Aristocrat,” in *Archaeologies of the Written: Indian, Tibetan, and Buddhist Studies in Honour of Cristina Scherrer-Schaub*, ed. Vincent Tournier, Vincent Eltschinger, and Marta Sernesi (Naples: Università degli Studi di Napoli L’Orientale, 2020): 845–57. There are meditative and ritual practices taught in the tradition, and these do require some level of effort, born of a sense of need. But it is significant that Shaivas like to describe these techniques as easy and pleasurable, and to triumphantly contrast them with the difficult practices of other Indian spiritual traditions. And even these light and easy practices are technically the lowest form of spiritual engagement. They are theoretically subordinated to entirely spontaneous and effortless forms of spiritual achievement and are only necessary for people who are still so trapped in their individuality that such easy spontaneity is impossible for them.



In some ways, these paradigms are quite different. For the Talmud, the structure of creation and the structure of devotion form the model for cycles of work and rest, cycles which can be undermined or cursed, but which nevertheless remain, and which will one day resume their original, non-painful form. Until then, the Jews are granted at least the privilege of imitating God's primordial rest and of ceasing, for one day out of seven, the weekly struggle to survive. This is, in fact, commanded, and the Torah lays out severe punishments for those who ignore this structure and work straight through the week. In the Shaiva model, on the other hand, God's creation of the universe is not the model for work but for play, and the primary distinction is not between work and rest but between activity driven by need and activity without any purpose or need, driven only by joy, which is to say, theologically and philosophically speaking, driven by a direct knowledge of one's own, complete fullness, beyond one's personal, limited subjectivity.

On the other hand, in both traditions work is a kind of curse, though it is a curse only because it has deviated from its original form. Until the coming of the Messiah, work will always be cursed, for the Talmud. But it can still be valuable when directed to meaningful ends—building the tabernacle, for example. And though work in the ordinary sense cannot be valuable in Shaivism, action can, when it is playful. And thinkers in the Shaiva tradition were keenly interested in exploring ways that this type of play can be initiated or induced in us. Poetry, for example, which is understood to be the playful dance of the goddess of speech, can give us respite from our limited incompleteness, temporarily dissolving to some extent our ordinary identities and putting us in touch with our own minds in a way that can give us a brief taste of transpersonal completeness and thus of our own true, purposeless, playful joy.⁵

Poetry does this in a publicly available form—theater even more so, since its colorful spectacle is even easier to appreciate. But for the more committed Shaivas there were also transgressive, orgiastic group rituals, open only to initiates, in which a more profound loss of self was achieved. The transgression involved crossing all sorts of boundaries and included uninhibited dancing, liquor, and group sex. It could also involve the ritual ingestion of bodily substances that most ordinary people would find disgusting. In these rituals the ordinary, individual self is not just partially transcended, as in poetic experience. It is completely obliterated, at least for a span of time, along with all its preferences and discriminations. And what is left in the wake of this obliteration is not emptiness or pain but Shiva's transpersonal bliss, a bliss beyond what the individual self can possibly access. Here is the famous theologian Abhinavagupta describing such rituals in his magnum opus *Tantrāloka*:

Consciousness is the essential nature of everything. However, it becomes contracted due to its division into different bodies. In the ecstatic assembly it blossoms [into blissful fullness again] through the participants' mutual reflection of each other in their union ... The flood of the rays of consciousness springs up and is reflected in the consciousnesses of the participants like in many mirrors; blazing, it suffuses them all without effort ... Thus, in such an ecstatic

⁵ In fact, the parallel between poetry and divine play goes deeper, because the poet, when he composes a poem, mimics Shiva's divine creativity. The poet's mood pours outwards and hides itself in the poem to be later discovered by the connoisseur just as Shiva's mind hides itself in the world to be discovered by the religious adept.

gathering, full of song and dance, the joy that arises when there is [mutual identification] of all the participants does not arise for any of them individually.⁶

Abhinavagupta goes on to explain that in such a rite all other bodies become one's own body, and further explains that someone who is unable to lose themselves in such a rite, whether out of jealousy, disgust, or some other reason, must not be allowed to participate. If they are allowed in, they will be like a hole or a "sunken place," absorbing the light instead of reflecting it and disturbing the mutual reflection and ecstatic fusion. On the other hand, he says, should such a person wander into the ritual for some reason, it may happen that they too get swept up and lose themselves in the group, in which case the ritual may proceed.⁷

These types of ecstatic rituals therefore involved a complete obliteration not just of the self, but of all the self's preferences—hence ritually eating disgusting substances. Even more significantly, they involved an obliteration of the social role that such a self plays and therefore of all the socio-ethical requirements to which such a self is normally subject. For Abhinavagupta this would have involved abandoning (temporarily, and within fixed ritual boundaries) the rigid caste distinctions that governed the lives, behavior, and self-regard of people around him, and abandoning them to such a degree that one both shared food with and participated in orgiastic sex with those of even the "lowest" castes, going so far as to accept their bodies as one's own body. For anyone familiar with the rigid food and body-based purity laws of traditional caste Brahmanism, this is immediately recognizable as a breach of decorum almost more radical than the mere loss of self as such, and perhaps almost as disgusting to the participants as the ingestion of the bodily substances mentioned above. But the absolute transgression of these norms and preferences is deeply tied to self-transcendence. After all, inhibition and anxiety about purity and social relations are, in large part, what constitute a self to begin with. The obliteration of such a self and its personal goals and preferences, which liberates the purposeless and blissful playfulness underneath, therefore inevitably requires the destruction of such inhibitions. And the point can be translated across cultures. If you weren't raised within a Brahminical caste system and have a hard time imagining a self defined by caste relations, it is still not hard to imagine what such transgression would have to look like in your life—just imagine the things you would absolutely least want to do in front of other people and the things you would most frantically disapprove of if someone did them in front of you. Then imagine doing them all in a group of people.

This is, of course, socially subversive—dangerously so—and was recognized as such by the broader community, and even by other Shaivas. Chakrabhanu, a guru in this tradition a generation before Abhinavagupta, was arrested by the king of Kashmir for transgressing caste boundaries, thrown into prison, and further punished by having the shape of a dog's paw branded onto his forehead (his enthusiasm was reportedly undampened). This is perhaps why such transgression was never politicized and, in fact, was strictly circumscribed and kept secret. Far from forming a model for social revolution or public anti-caste activism, the initiate into this form of Shaivism was taught to recognize different spheres of sociality and to observe such transgression only in secret, while in his ordinary life playing the public social role that applied to him. In other words,

⁶ *Tantrāloka* 28.373–76, in *The Tantrāloka of Abhinavagupta, with Commentary by Rājānaka Jayaratha*, 12 vols., ed. M. R. Shāstrī (Kashmir Series of Texts and Studies), vol. 23, 28, 29, 30, 35, 36, 41, 47, 52, 57, 58, 59 (various presses and publication years).

⁷ *Tantrāloka* 28.378–82.

within the boundaries of the orgiastic ritual, his self and its attendant social roles were obliterated. When he emerged from the ritual, however, he resumed his ordinary role, this time not as something he fully identified with but as a kind of game or a form of theater. There are theological and philosophical bases for this stance, having to do with the fact that Shiva's non-dual transcendence, which the initiate has merged with in the ritual, is never aloof and quiescent, but it perpetually and playfully turns itself outward into the form of the world and the limited individuals within it. But the stance also has a practical basis. It was clearly intended to keep the truly transgressive nature of the tradition hidden from the eyes of those who would misunderstand or misuse it, or, even worse, from those who would feel threatened by it and attempt to persecute it out of existence. Simultaneously, it makes the tradition more accessible by allowing people to participate in it without having to entirely abandon their ordinary lives.⁸

All this may seem to be far beyond anything that happens in Judaism, where conventional social roles and the legal requirements attached to them are not normally abandoned.⁹ But the deeper principle shared by both traditions is that the isolated individual can never experience rest or joy or true play on their own. Although the Talmud prescribes no orgiastic rituals, Shabbat is a communal commandment. It is laid down by God, not by us, and it is a given to a community, not separately to each individual. The entire community rests together with God, once a week. We neither choose our day of rest nor do we choose what exactly we will rest from, nor do we rest alone or as individuals. Only as a community, and a non-sovereign community, at that, do we ever truly rest. For Shaivas, it is only by transcending our individuality, by losing ourselves in a game as Shiva does and becoming intoxicated with joy to the point that our subjectivity overflows the container of our identity, that we are truly released from pain. In both paradigms, individuals are never, in themselves, free or at ease.

The difference (and it is a significant one) is whether this transcendence requires the dissolution of conventional social ethics, as in Shaivism, or whether it in fact requires their maintenance. And this in turn rests on different conceptions of what the self is to begin with. Is the self a hardening of boundaries and a limitation placed on a non-individualized totality? Or is the self a set of possibilities that comes to fruition only in social structures and that contains the potential for harmony with collective, primordial rhythms alongside the potential for exhausting pseudo-sovereignty? It should be added that these conceptions of the self can outlast any explicit commitment to the religious traditions in which they developed, so that even if one rejects the details of Jewish law or rejects the Talmud as a divine guide to primordial rhythms, one can nevertheless still think of the self as a set of social possibilities and of work as the opposite of rhythmically required rest. Work would be unavoidably tiring, then, but still meaningful when directed to meaningful ends. And the true horror would be not meaningless work so much as an endless desert of work, unpunctuated by regular rest; or, what is perhaps just as bad, punctuated only by lonely rest, enjoyed by the isolated and sovereign individual while others are working. On the other hand, one can think of the self as a contraction of a more complete

⁸ Alexis Sanderson, "Power and Purity among the Brahmins of Kashmir," in *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History*, ed. Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins, and Steven Lukes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 204–5.

⁹ This is so even in later forms of Jewish mysticism such as Kabbalah. The proponents of kabbalistic mysticism were generally emphatic that it can only be studied and practiced within the "container" of Jewish law rooted in the Torah and the Talmud. There is, in Jewish history, a fringe tradition of antinomianism that pops up now and then, but it is outside the Jewish mainstream and its instances are rather isolated.

and non-teleological fullness and of the true goal of life not as meaningful work but as a playful dissolution of the isolated individual, with its fixed goals and its inevitable desperate neediness. In this case, one might, among other things, be wary of corporate strategies to fool the self into thinking it is playing while embedding that self in acquisitive and goal-oriented projects of capital accumulation that are anything but playful. Or one might fear what is perhaps an even greater danger: simply unleashing, rather than dissolving, the self, giving license to narcissism rather than free play, as the self becomes drunk on the conviction that its personal pursuit of pleasure is the only divine injunction.



Of course, the fact that it is not just the individual self who works and suffers, and not just the individual who rests or plays, means that these mythological structures point beyond the individual to political communities and likewise to political notions of what it means to be liberated or flourishing. And they can be found here as well, embedded in the political imagination, shaping it. They may always be present, but they are particularly noticeable in those forms of political thought that take the idea of liberation, as opposed to simply balance or status quo, as their central focus.

It is well known, for example, that Marx's writings bear the deep imprint of biblical narratives. The story he tells is one in which humanity, at the beginning of history, is exiled from a kind of innocent and egalitarian paradise by the discovery that labor can be divided, and which then sets out on a painful odyssey of historical development full of exploitation and suffering that ends, after a worldwide cataclysm, in a new and permanent paradise, in which exploitation no longer exists and the primordial curse placed on labor, which Marx called "alienation," is finally lifted. The role of messiah in this story is not taken by an individual but by an economic class, the proletariat—long-suffering and trampled by the powerful. Marx tries to frame his theories scientifically and unsentimentally. They are supposed to be true and compelling regardless of morality, and although Marx was quite skilled at moral invective, he is careful not to make his theories depend on it. The revolution will happen because the laws of history will inevitably bring it about, not because of how disgusting and unfair the exploitation of workers in British factories is. And yet, reading Marx, one cannot help hearing echoes of the biblical prophets. His is a voice crying out from the wilderness, lamenting the mistreatment of the vulnerable and condemning a society that condones it. Even Shabbat has a role in this kind of politics: not as a regular period of rest, but in the form of the labor strike, which is a necessarily collective cessation from work in accord with the more transcendent demands of justice. It is not a coincidence that the word for such strikes in modern Hebrew is derived from the word *shabbat*. Nor is it a coincidence that Marx's ideas depend on a model of the self in which the self is fundamentally something embedded in a community—a community condemned to work while also being dignified by it under the proper conditions, and a community longing, collectively, for the day when it will no longer have to toil and suffer.¹⁰

¹⁰ Hannah Arendt's critique of Marx—that the fundamental contradiction in his thought is that he sees labor as constitutive of human life and also predicts a future form of human life in which labor will no longer exist—could be debated as an interpretation of Marx. But surely the tension she noticed has its roots in the fact that the Bible is already ambivalent toward work. It is cursed, but not necessarily so. It is painful, but also divinely required. It will end someday in its recognizable, exhausting form, but will also continue in some strangely non-exhausting way. See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 104. Arendt also remarks, interestingly, that Marx's theory of labor is based on equating it with

But the alternative model I have laid out, the Shaiva model, is also a recognizable part of the political imagination and even a recognizable part of leftist politics. There is a rich history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of more carnivalesque understandings of liberation. This tradition, which has often been traced to the Paris Commune of 1871, was exemplified best by the Situationist International and the role it played in the student uprisings in Paris in May 1968. The slogans written all over the walls of Paris (“It is forbidden to forbid,” “Beauty is in the street,” “Make love, not shops,” “I find my orgasm among the paving stones”), the festive and even orgiastic atmosphere, the idea that collective effervescence was itself liberatory—these were deeply influenced by the Situationist International and its experiments with the politics of sloganeering and parody, as well as its thinking on pleasure, art, and the inversion of cultural oppression. This, in turn, was influenced by Dada—that arch-surrealist movement from the 1920s—as well as Henri Lefebvre, who himself had connected it back to the older European tradition of chaotic festivals and peasant rebellions. One can also hear it in the apocryphal but famous declaration attributed to anarchist Emma Goldman: “If I can’t dance you can keep your revolution.”¹¹

This conception of liberation, associated more with anarchism, bohemianism, and non-orthodox Marxism, has traditionally been less interested in organizing to seize power, or holding power, or in power at all. For this reason, more orthodox Marxists have distrusted it and persecuted it whenever possible. Lenin, for example, believed that collective liberation required nothing so much as collective coordination under a central authority that had the power to coerce and punish dangerous deviations, and who saw power, and even a future of rest and liberation, precisely in rules intended to prevent too much individual sovereignty. This Leninist tradition seems to have more in common with the biblical or Talmudic conception. The irony, of course, is that Jewish law always placed sovereignty outside of history and therefore outside of human decision making and human control. (Never mind that such decision making and control could always sneak in through the back door in the form of textual interpretation. At least it had to sneak.) It is almost as if the biblical vision, shorn of divine sovereignty, grows it back again, this time within the historical and political boundaries to which it has been limited. What we might call the “Shaiva model” in politics (even though here it has only a structural similarity with Shaivism, rather than any historical connection) centralizes liberatory play and collective effervescence and seems much less prone to these experiments with sovereignty. But on the other hand, unable to conceptualize sovereignty, it often tends to remain either temporary or else elitist, the purview of a small group of initiates on discrete occasions, much as the Shaivas had once conceived it. One might think or hope that these two projects could be reconciled. But in light of the larger cosmologies of the self that they encode, this seems complicated, if not impossible. True, some of Marx’s descriptions of life under communism may be interpreted as reducing work to a form of play—something done for no sake other than its own. But the self that does this and its social existence are thought of fundamentally differently than in traditions in which the social self is just a veil that obscures deeper levels of subjectivity. And this results not just in different theoretical views but different values and different forms of activity.

the broader human processes of fertility and birth, that this goes back to the Hebrew Bible, and that Marx “squared” his own theory with this older religious tradition (*The Human Condition*, 105).

¹¹ Even forms of anarchism that are more straightforwardly political and less “mystical” or “aesthetic” retain these dynamics. It is no coincidence that in Ursula Le Guin’s utopian science fiction novel, *The Dispossessed*, the imaginary language spoken by the anarchist polity she depicts makes no distinction between the words for work and play.

I have chosen leftist traditions as an example here, but these dynamics are not limited to leftism. They crop up in all sorts of places and in all sorts of political ideologies. Fascism, for example, is not necessarily the imposition of rule-based order, as some simplistically imagine it, but also the unleashing of dangerously destructive forces of collective intoxication and cruel play. Donald Trump is a derisive clown whose power obviously lay, at least in part, in the joy he took in crossing boundaries and in the permission he gave to his followers to take similar joy (though of course these transgressions also depended, politically and psychologically, on the brutal enforcement of other boundaries). This is not to say there is anything liberating in Trump. But it is to suggest that transgression and collective loss of self-control are needs which find a way to satisfy themselves in one way or another. Think, for example, of alcohol, where the joy of intoxication comes from the loss of inhibition and also from the destructive violence directed toward the self. The words people joyfully and boastfully use to describe their intoxication betray this clearly: smashed, hammered, wrecked, obliterated, wasted, and so on. The joy is bound up with the attack on the self. Alcoholism is not a form of freedom. But intoxication has a role to play in many mystical traditions, Shaivism included, and it is possible that the alcoholic is attacking something that should, in some way, be attacked.



David Graeber once wrote of the phenomenon of play:

Freedom has to be in tension with something, or it is just randomness. This suggests that the absolute pure form of play, one that really is absolutely untrammelled by rules of any sort (other than those it itself generates and can set aside at any instance) itself can exist only in our imagination, as an aspect of those divine powers that generate the cosmos.¹²

Another way to say this might simply be to say that pure play, divine play, is the conceptual precondition for our ability to think about play at all, and that we necessarily think about it whenever we think about play. This is so whether we know it or not, and it is so whether or not such divine play actually exists anywhere. To think about play but pay attention only to the limited, worldly forms of play is to fail to fully understand what we mean when we talk about it. It is not just that modern concepts grow out of religion in a historical sense and therefore carry the residue of their past. It is rather that religious language expresses more honestly than other types of language the mysterious, world-transcendent, and obscure bases of our thought and of our imagination. This is why the language of these paradigms remains surprisingly difficult to translate accurately into purely secular terms, like a deep-sea fish that dies and loses its shape when dragged up to the pressure-less world of the boat.

And yet the fish is recognizable. We have seen it before, somewhere, if only in dreams. It is of our world. But where is that, exactly? How far have we really traveled from those murky origins? Work is an old riddle. It reaches deep into the water. We lean over to pull it up. Are we pulling up, or being pulled down? We breathe air, not water. We insist. Of course, it's true. We have no gills—that's proof. But then there is that distorted fish. Out of its element, misshapen, but here with us, and not unfamiliar. We stare at it. And as we stare, we feel our boat rocking gently, floating on all that vastness, dark as it is. And here is the fish. A

¹² David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (New York: Melville House, 2015), 192-93.