

Renyi Hong, **Passionate Work: Endurance After the Good Life**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022, 246 pp., \$25.95 (paperback).

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The rising discontent of the American worker with the conditions, terms, and content of their labor has become increasingly visible in recent years. The turmoil of the COVID pandemic provided a new vocabulary for expressing workers' dissatisfaction with current regimes of labor: In 2021 the "great resignation" saw workers simply abandoning the workplace in unheard of numbers, this was followed by the phenomenon of "quiet quitting," where workers stood their posts but in, at best, a desultory fashion, doing their jobs but refusing to go above or beyond what was required. The place of work in employees' lives was diminished, occupying less of an individual's psychic, if not physical, attention. And, of course, worker discontent has been expressed through more traditional means as well: Beginning perhaps with the "red wave" or "teacher spring" or "teacher insurgency" (Casey, 2020) that saw K12 workers in traditionally "right-to-work" states strike for better pay and working conditions, militancy has increased among labor unions, especially those seeking to form them. The unionization efforts of Starbucks baristas, warehouse workers with Amazon, drivers with Uber, higher education workers in the University of California system, and now undergraduate resident assistants at places like Barnard all testify to a massive reevaluation of what work is for us and, perhaps more important, what it ought to be. We are fortunate, therefore, to have Renyi Hong's **Passionate Work: Endurance After the Good Life** to guide us through the thickets of this new world of work.



At the heart of this dramatic reassessment of the role that work and labor should play in the lives of those compelled to perform it are not just such "bread and butter" matters as compensation and benefits, though with stagnating wages and growing income inequality creating political and cultural division across the United States, these are almost certainly at issue. Instead, what seems to be at stake in so many of these struggles is a profound sense of betrayal that even the nonpecuniary rewards that work promised to provide—an identity, a sense of purpose, the ability to "do what you love" or pursue your "passion"—are not only inadequate in themselves, but in Hong's words are:

Increasingly mobilized as a shield, a means of attenuating the psychic strain of economic uncertainty and income scarcity. This changes the relationship between passion and exploitation: if exploitation is commonly seen as a *cause* of passionate work, then passionate work is now made a *reaction* to exploitation, a panacea for the marginal subject at risk of falling out of the “normal” system of economic personhood. (pp. 5–6; emphasis in original)

In short, while a massive global pandemic may have added fuel to the fire, popular dissatisfaction with the conditions, and perhaps especially the meaning of work, has been smoldering for some time and the present conflagration(s) have been long in the making.

In four densely argued and data rich chapters, Hong argues that “connecting passionate work to the good life is my way of beginning a conversation about a political impasse: attachment to work is at once necessary for survival and problematic for flourishing” (p. 18). Hong’s work provides a historical and theoretical account of the conflicts that roil our contemporary world(s) of work. It provides a template for grappling with the conundrum of labor that is summed up in popular books such as Miya Tokumitsu’s (2015) *Do What You Love and Other Lies About Success and Happiness*. Each bears witness to the central dilemma: If passion for work is spur to an exploitation that it then fails to ameliorate, even psychically, what are we workers to do to hold body and soul together in a world that demands of us that we do *something*?

Following an introduction where he lays out the lineaments of his argument and a working definition of passion and passionate work, Hong goes on to describe how the concept of passion was mobilized in management discourse to replace Taylorist drudgery. Passion, he describes, came to:

replace traditional objects of demand with psychic desire and cultivated an optimistic possibility in work. Rather than seeing work as a site of struggle and toil, it positioned work as a pathway into the good life, a sphere able to grant happiness. (p. 39)

And while passion was presented as preferable to the monotony of the Fordist factory and its managerial other—William Whyte’s *Organization Man* (pp. 39–40) or perhaps Sloan Wilson’s (2002) *Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*—it also patronizingly suggested that worker discontent was not a matter of inadequate wages, benefits, and control over the terms and conditions of work, but instead a dearth of psychic investment or emotional attachment to the pleasures argued to be inherent in work itself. Needless to say, this discourse, as Hong subtly demonstrates, posed managerial interventions to identify and/or construct a laboring subject desirous of such pleasures (which could always be assured to align neatly with organizational goals).

In the second chapter, Hong turns our attention to sites where the “anomie” (p. 32) of employment meets its doppelganger only to discover it is animated by the same force. In a set of textual interventions that seek to diagnose and treat the problem of unemployment, Hong finds a discourse that reinforces a notion of passion as a constitutive absence in the lives of the unemployed. In other words, Hong demonstrates that beginning with the Marienthal studies and continuing into such career-change manuals as *What Color Is Your Parachute?* (p. 71), a consensus emerged that the problems of the unemployed had less to do with a lack of resources with which to obtain the necessities of life and more to do with the lack

of meaning that paid work purportedly offers to workers. In an almost willful disregard for the very real material deprivations that unemployment can create, the discourse of passion provides a panacea to combat the “real” lack in the lives of the unemployed: pervasive “apathy” that somehow, in a particularly perverse form of victim blaming, renders them unfit for participation in the paid workforce.

Having established a range of the discourses of passion (from employment to unemployment), the next two chapters turn our attention to more novel contemporary practices such as gamification and coworking. The former invokes passion as a means of “soft control—their ability to nudge consumers, workers, and citizens toward voluntary behaviors desired by companies and governments” (p. 90). Through a variety of thoroughly analyzed examples, Hong sees such practices as less a stick to goad the recalcitrant and more a carrot to make the mundane or the tedious somehow more rewarding. Similarly, the experience of “coworking,” perhaps most vividly embodied in companies like “WeWork,” is analyzed as an effort to “further the ideological vision of work as a route to the good life” (p. 131). The impassioned subject in this context is neither employed nor unemployed but instead that most emblematic figure of late capitalist production: the freelancer or, more accurately, contingent worker. While contingents are perhaps less in need of passion as either goad or salve, they are more in need of an affective structure, both psychic and material, that produces an “attunement . . . where bodies are molded to normative capitalist rhythms” (p. 154).

*Passionate Work* concludes with a reflection that is illustrative of the problems of contemporary work. After thoroughly analyzing the problems of passion in the workplace, we are left with a problem: If we are not to *do what we love*, then what? The inverse, *do what you hate*, hardly seems like a path to the good life. *Do what you find merely tolerable?* There is a certain accuracy here—at some point even the most passionate worker comes to find their labor merely (or perhaps barely) tolerable, though there is an acquiescence that works against any meaningful change that might allow us to fulfill the (false) promises of work. Hong suggests looking to the root of passion in the Latin *passio* “which understands emotions as external rather than internal . . . allowing for permission to renounce one’s desire without feeling that one is denying an authentic part of the self” (pp. 170–171). This is undoubtedly sound advice, though it seems to leave largely intact much of our sense of what work is. Passion, as the very word implies, comes and goes. Perhaps at this juncture what is more important is that work, passionately or authentically engaged in or not, be respected or perhaps more forcefully dignified. Dignity in this sense is exterior carrying respect and, just as important, meeting the material needs of workers. In other words, it is easier to renounce (or embrace) one’s desire for passionate work when respect for that work is demonstrated by making it stable, remunerative, and fair; too many of our present employment practices fail at precisely these tasks.

### References

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