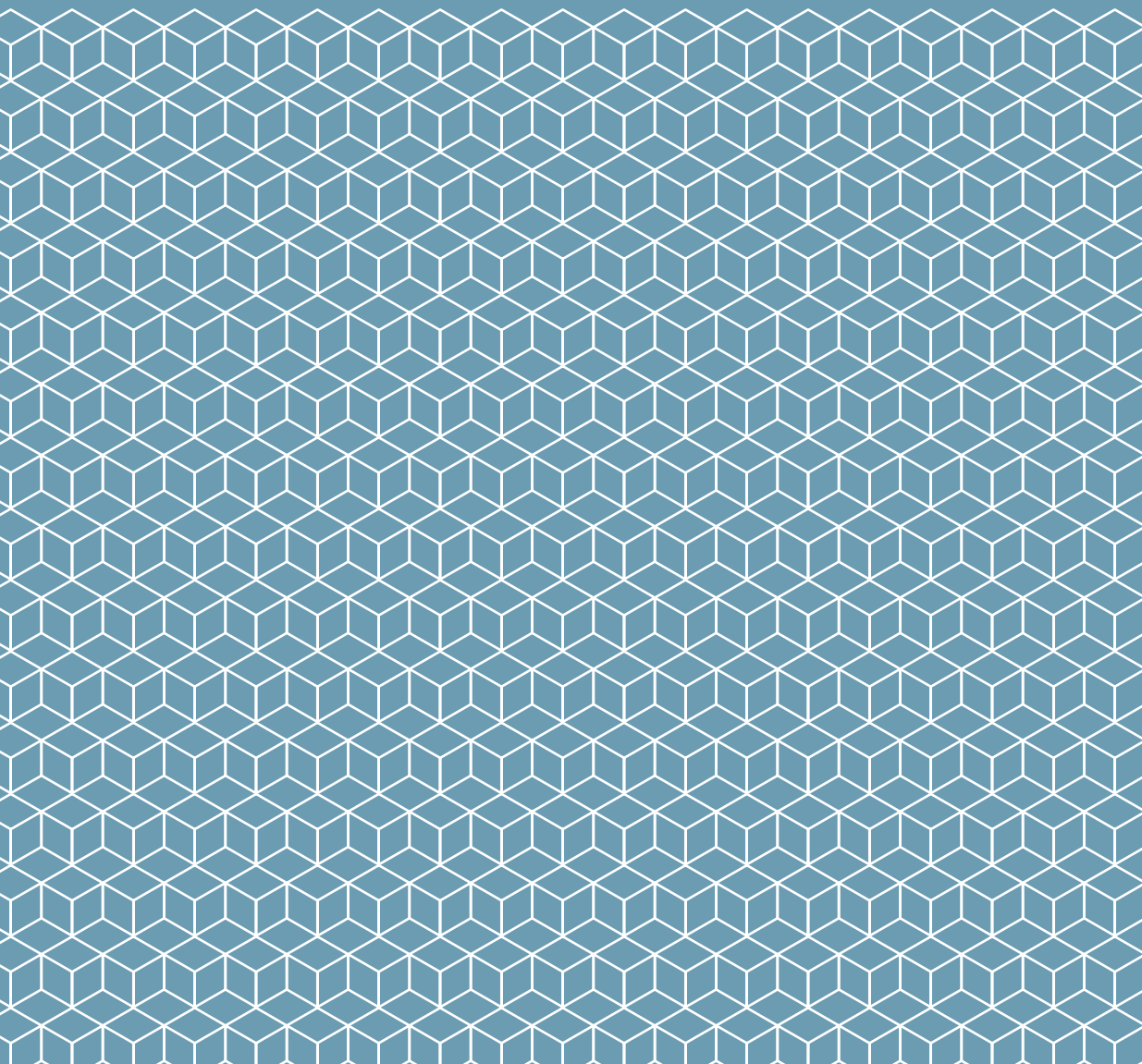


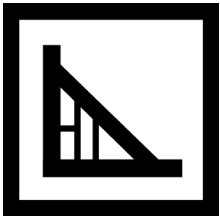
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**In and Out of Work:  
an interview with Jeremy Seabrook**  
By Will Stronge



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## In and Out of Work: an interview with Jeremy Seabrook

Jeremy Seabrook has been described as ‘perhaps Britain’s foremost anatomist of class’.<sup>1</sup> He has been writing for over half a century on British culture and politics: his first book, *The Unprivileged*, was published in 1967 and his next, *Oprhans: a History*, will be published later this year. For seven years he was a columnist with *The Statesman* based in Kolkata, India, writing on the caste system there amongst other topics. His recent book *Cut Out: Living Without Welfare* (2016), is an eloquent and affective reflection upon working class life in the UK’s Midlands. The book’s content is based around a series of interviews carried out in people’s homes about their current lives, about the past and most of all about the experience of poverty in Britain today. Collecting these testimonies meant returning to a region that he had first visited fifty years previously. Much had changed. Autonomy’s Will Stronge met with Jeremy to discuss these topics and today’s world of work in general.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/nov/27/the-song-of-the-shirt-cheap-clothes-across-continents-and-centuries-jeremy-seabrook-review>

*Alongside the railway lines and canals, and in the town centres, there are decaying warehouses, mills and pubs, soot still clinging to their red brick, the wasting lattice of their roofs admitting fugitive sunlight into dank mossy areas that scarcely saw daylight for a century. Ring roads have carved their scrawl into the urban fabric, making islands of town centres; motorways stride across the countryside like concrete centipedes, in the shadow of which silver-painted graffiti shows who now lays claim to these abandoned territories [...] In the city, memory mingles with the present, as people recount their lives to one another: it seems experience is not subjective or private at all, but part of a collective pool of common understanding to be shared rather than hoarded – at the bus-stop, in the pub, on a park bench, even in strictly contemporary establishments like Greggs or Costa Coffee [...] A heavy-faced woman sits down with her Lidl shopping bags on a metal seat in the city centre. It is a warm summer afternoon, and her face is flushed. Warm enough for you? She is her brother’s carer, and tells how she has observed his painful descent into dementia; a story familiar now in a society in which remembering was once crucial to surviving poverty and exploitation. As she spoke, I wondered whether there is some hidden connection between individual forgetting and the erasure of an industrial past which we could not quickly enough put behind us? She sheds a few tears and offers me a strong mint.*

- *Cut Out*, p. 22-4

**WS: *Cut Out* is situated within a particular historical conjuncture, involving the fall of industrial male labour, the changing function of the welfare state and the changing cultural composition of working people in the UK amongst other factors. What are your reflections on our current historical moment?**

JS: I think one of the most important things has been the demolition of the psychic structures of the people in industrial society. That's incredibly important because it echoes an earlier historical period where the psyche of the peasantry was dismantled and reconstructed in the image of the industrial labourer, and I think we have been living through the *undoing* of that whole process. To relate it to E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1962), we are seeing a large scale *unmaking* of that class.

Ironically, much of the labour which was conducted in this country when it was the 'workshop of the world' has been exported, as we know, to other parts of the world. And this has kind of 'liberated' people from labour – and everyone knows what they are being liberated from: when you look at the violence of industrialisation for instance, it is quite obvious what this liberation meant. But what people are being liberated *into*, is something that's less well-defined, and I think that's what we are just coming to terms with now. It was the end of that old exploitative [system of] manual labour – until the 1950s at least two thirds of people in Britain did manual labour. So in fact what you're looking at is a very drastic demolition job, if you like, of the industrial structure – which is there in the broken glass and twisted metal and mangled factories, but it is also there in the psyche of the people.

I think the accompaniment to that is also the internal violence, the internal landscapes of people, the addictions, the drugs, the abuse, the breakdown of relationships and so on. You see a kind of wasted internal landscape which mirrors the external landscapes of the demolished industrial era.

*Just as fraud has been carried out by the 'financial industry' on a grand scale, which makes benefit crime look less than petty, so identity theft has been executed wholesale by those who have for centuries evicted whole populations out of familiar hard-won crafts and occupations, and compelled them to make their accommodation with a changed – and global – employment structure, or to fall and be condemned as failures, losers and no-hopers, outcasts, loonies, albies, druggies, loners, the untouchables of progress. For the sake of clarity, it is important to state that this observation has nothing to do with nostalgia, regret for the past or a romantic view of working-class life. Industrial life was harsh, violent and cruel, repressive of women and children, and exploitative of the heavy male labour on which it depended. But its passing creates ambivalences and contradictions: if its vices are all too often rehearsed, its virtues – of endurance and stoicism, of mutual help and the visibility of one's own fate in the misfortune of others – also deserve to be rescued from the indifference of posterity, for it was out of these qualities that the welfare state was born.*

- *Cut Out*, p. 238.

**WS: You end the book with a powerful statement on identity theft: the traumatic wrenching away of strong worker identities from communities that occurred roughly from the 1980s onwards, and the lack of a substantial replacement. At the same time, you are keen not to adopt a nostalgic approach to industrial labour. You mention, for example, that 'labour was, of course, always a reductive and limiting identity'. There was perhaps an understanding, in this pre-neoliberal phase, that there was life outside of work, even if work anchored their communities. Work was often hard toil, physically damaging, was heavily gendered, and so on. In a time of crisis, there can often be a temptation to return to a pre-neoliberal era as a possible way forward. Perhaps it would be best to tease out what is desirable about that particular historical period, and perhaps what we'd like to leave behind.**

JS: Yes of course that's true. There has been a lot of nostalgia about the old industrial communities and I myself have been criticised for being nostalgic about the past. That's not the point. The point is that the industrial past gave people a cultural context which had sense and meaning for their lives, and I think that any destruction of that which gives meaning to people's lives is deeply damaging to human beings; whether it changes into something better or something worse is neither here nor there. When colonialism damaged ancient cultures throughout the world people grieved and went to die with the consolations of alcohol or drugs and so on, in city slums. In a sense what happened in the colonial experience has also happened to a certain degree at home.

[Industrial labour gave] a kind of meaning that came from *doing* rather than *being* and I think that is something really quite important [to remember]. I don't think when we talk about the politics of identity we always take that on board: that to have a meaningful function in society is a basic human need as well as human right. To therefore say that "you no longer have a social function and therefore your identity becomes who you *are*, or rather who you *happen* to be through no choice of your own," is a very different kind of experience from the identity that comes from the fact that you make ceramics or shoes or cotton goods or whatever. These acts of production gave a kind of coherence to those working class communities, where everyone knew and felt that they were in the same boat, and ultimately the whole labour movement was predicated on that. The crisis within the movement has been the crisis of the dissolution of that and the inability of a political formation to speak to the altered sensibility that has emerged from the ashes of that old industrial structure.

**WS: It is interesting what you've touched on there. Having a social function, we might say, is essential to a sense of self or of community, but that function is not**

**necessarily carried out via waged work. Good work might not translate exactly as a specific job, it might take a different form of activity which does not quite fit with the system of employment.**

JS: Of course, that's true. In fact, we just have to consider the lives of women in the early industrial era. They provided a kind of lattice of protection – a truly human, flesh and blood safety net – against dereliction, loss and suffering. That was a major human function; they humanised what was basically a very cruel and harsh system, and yet they were largely unrecognised and unrewarded for that supreme human purpose.

**WS: One of the recurrent messages from *Cut Out* is that life is full of contingency, and often disaster. Certain traumas – perhaps from early childhood – are in fact invisible to the welfare system's current methods of assessment. You speak of the need for a 'more flexible and merciful' approach to welfare: what do you think that might look like – or which problems do you think such a system would have to address in particular?**

JS: The system is immensely crude and it goes back to the whole idea of labour: "you either work or you don't work" and "there are those who will work and those who won't work". It even goes back to old biblical aphorisms about "in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread", and "he who will not work will not eat"; there are all sorts of scriptural admonitions which are deeply embedded in the culture.

The truth is, the situation is much more fluid than what the current welfare state allows for. The things which make it difficult for people to work, or which make work a burden for them are so numerous and subtle, and they cover the whole range of human weaknesses and frailties which are not *recognised* in the system. It's not that the welfare state originally *didn't* recognise it, but instead of building upon that [original principle], we have simplified and distorted.

What we need is a system which recognises the plight of, for instance, the demotivated, the lost, the bewildered, the unhappy, the bereaved, the luckless and the less intelligent. It's not just "people with disability"; there is a whole multitude of psychological reasons why people find it hard to interact: the frightened, the agoraphobic, the shut in, the timid [and so on]. There are such a range. Why are all of these [people] treated as if they were a kind of "labour"? Labour is a kind of undifferentiated commodity and because it is treated in that way you don't get *any* subtlety when dealing with people.

Instead of being the ill-paid and often not very well-informed functionaries that they [currently] are, the people administering the welfare state ought to be held in the highest regard because they are dealing with the supremely subtle and difficult differences in the human experience. *None* of that shows up in any of the system and I think that that really is one of the great omissions in the welfare state. For instance, I've just done a book about orphans: if you look at the lives of people who have lost their parents in early life, many, many of them find it very difficult to make relationships, their lives become chaotic and difficult [etc.]. Of course, some do supremely well and become very rich and successful. But an awful lot more find it hard to provide the necessary basis of love and affection from which a full human life is possible; and I think none of that can be taken account of in the system that we operate because it is so crude. To some degree, societies are always blunt instruments at best. Some of them value certain characteristics and not others – there is bound to be a certain crudeness in the social creation of the individual human being. But ours seems to have become – especially given the wealth that our country has known – reductive, cruel and gratuitously disregarding of so many human weaknesses.

**WS: Indeed, *Cut Out* paints a stark picture of a hostile environment involving what we might call the 'weaponisation' of the welfare state against those it is meant to serve, and the rebranding of people as 'claimants'. How do you understand the**

**actual functioning of welfare provision today in the UK?**

JS: Yes the word 'claimant' is a completely inappropriate word for human need. It's part of the crude revival of 19th century ideology of course. Some people refer to it as 'neoliberalism' (and that's a useful label) but it really is a profound and exhaustive ideology that goes back a long way to the beginnings of the Poor Law, which said that apart from the widows and orphans and the blind etc., everybody else is to be "set on work".

**WS: There is currently much discussion around the idea of an unconditional, basic income. Instead of seeing such a policy simply as a response to the increased automation of work, there is perhaps a case to be made that providing an unconditional means of subsistence is a progressive response to the thicket of means-testing, behaviour-testing and arbitrary sanctions that the system currently deploys on the one hand, and as a more universal support that can help those who have hidden traumas that are not helped by an invasive welfare system on the other.**

JS: This is an idea that has been tried before. If you look at the Speenhamland experiment, for instance, at around 1795, that was a prototype of a guaranteed, fixed income. The labourers' wages would be made up by the parish according to the number of children and the price of bread. If you look at the history of Speenhamland, it certainly provided a guaranteed income, but it also meant that no matter how little farmers paid their labourers, the wages would be sure to be made up. Wages were kept very low and there was also very little incentive for the labourer to do anything because he/she (mostly he) didn't have to do much to receive his wages. So there are historical examples available, and a study of how Speenhamland worked has a direct relevance on [current debates around] UBI. It's important to recognise the possible dangers of such a policy.



**WS: Certainly, discussions such as these are currently occurring to some extent and the Speenhamland experiment is being talked about from both sides of the debate. Proponents of a basic income policy, for example, note that there is no reason why minimum wages cannot be upheld alongside a basic income and that it would be possible to find means by which exploitative employers can be stopped.**

JS: Absolutely.

**WS: The conditionality of the welfare system is often seen as a stick to beat those who use it over the head, and how we can overcome this conditionality, or how it could serve more progressive ends is really the question we should be asking.**

JS: I think that's right. I think somewhere in the mind of authority lingers the notion that "the people", if left to their own devices, would prefer to do nothing. We can recall George Osborne's image of people going off in the morning to work [while] others, behind their closed curtains, sleep the day off, for example. I think authority imagines that people want nothing more than idleness. Now, while I think there may be a few people like that, that [idleness] is actually a pathological reaction to human existence, because most people want to be up and doing something, to be a part of something, to have their contribution to something recognised. So I think there is something deeply sick about an employment structure that fails to give people any satisfaction other than the money at the end of it. I just wonder how many people in these advanced economies feel that if they didn't go to work, no one would notice their absence. There is a sense of negation, of arbitrariness and a sense of futility in a great deal of labour in our societies.

.....

*Young people have other disadvantages. They have been born into a world which advertises its wealth and promotes the desirability of all it produces so insistently that it seems*

*society has been brought to such a degree of perfection there is no longer any room for improvement. This is a powerful disincentive to question the wisdom of the way things are. All a new generation can do is strive to be part of it; and only when, despite their best efforts, the bare bones of an unreconstructed system began to show through the burnished appearances – indebtedness, the lack of affordable homes or of worthwhile occupations – does it become clear that many of the changes have been superficial, merely the politics of public relations, the surface paint of cowboy decorators.*

- *Cut Out*, p. 73.

**WS: One of the people you talk about in the book, Graham, expresses a common experience of young people as they leave university and enter the contemporary labour market in the UK. Over half of UK graduates today go into non-graduate work – often it is precarious, perhaps involving a zero-hours contract. This overqualification in the face of a polarised job market could perhaps also be called the production of people with 'surplus capacities'. Surplus, that is, to the needs of capital. How do you make sense of the decreasing job prospects of young people today?**

JS: I think one of the things that is deeply fascinating is that if you look at the people who are auditioning for talent shows like Britain's Got Talent or The Voice etc., you're essentially talking about hundreds of thousands of people flocking from former industrial centres who have talents that are essentially unused, and the only way they can think of validating them is by gaining celebrity status. It is an example of what you said, of 'over capacity'. There is a kind of richness and a powerful reservoir [of capacities] that *must* remain unused in the world that we live in.

We're told all the time that we live in the best of all possible worlds, but actually I think it is deeply, deeply repressive. Margaret Thatcher used to talk about "freedom of choice" and

the way she talked about “choice” she made it sound like an adjective and not a noun; in a way this is a very leashed and diminished freedom.

**WS: In a similar vein, you talk in the book of the aesthetics of contemporary capitalism – incessant advertising, the selling of identities via new commodities, etc. – as the “surface paint” that hides serious structural inequalities and disadvantages: the lack of affordable homes, the lack of worthwhile occupations and so on.**

JS: I think the politics of appearances has taken over from the politics of substance; you could say politics is a ‘non-representational art’. That’s obvious in a way. The question is: how do you actually begin to activate the kind discussions around these kinds of issues [of work] at a popular level that will appeal to the average “shopper”.

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*Alison is in her mid-fifties: a woman whose pleasant manner and smart appearance give little indication of the suffering beneath. On the walls of her comfortable flat are pictures of her family – many of them now dead or lost – and photos of her cat, her main companion. Alison feels defeated. She nursed her husband for ten years until he died in 2001. He had no pension. Partly as a result of her bereavement, an older experience of depression has recurred. ‘I can’t work for health reasons. As well as depression, I have a stomach disorder, and psoriasis which, when it comes out, is disfiguring and so painful I cannot bear to have any clothes near it [...] Loneliness is the biggest killer. I have no real communication with anyone. I have one sister much older than I am. She looks after her husband, who has Alzheimer’s. My three brothers are workaholics – all they think about is work and money.’*

*[...] Alison has had counselling, but she didn’t continue with it. She rarely goes out. In the long, lonely hours, she tells over the loss and suffering of her life, which have become,*

*to some degree, her identity. Benefit ‘reforms’ can only add to her unhappiness, which they duly do [...] Even if she had not felt herself persecuted by an unforgiving system, this would probably have made little difference to her underlying feeling about life, and would, of course do nothing to alter her experience of loss. But it might have provided her with modest space for a less cramped existence, and the possibility that she might diminish the pain of being, which scarcely needs gratuitous augmentation from those elected to govern us, which they do by the light of a meagre fading wisdom.*

- *Cut Out*, p. 218.

**WS: Time plays different roles in the lives of those who contributed to your book. Some people seem to inhabit a desperate and frantic time of constant job applications, or of the demanding time of caring for neighbours or family members. At other moments there is the experience of loneliness and despair – a dead time of sorts that is prescribed by a lack of resources and/or troubled family situation. As well as an economic and political construction, can we also construe poverty in terms of time and our control over it?**

JS: I know exactly what you’re referring to: the emptiness of some people’s lives or resourcelessness [sic] of some people, and the immense *resourcefulness* of others, and I think one of the things that has happened is that resources are now seen to be something ‘out there’ that we use, rather than something that emerges from within. The system endeavours to create – and fails – a fairly resourceless [sic] population who become dependent via *market* dependency. Welfare dependency is something that you hear Conservative politicians talk about all the time, but actually market dependency expresses *absolutely* the condition of the great majority of people in these rich countries. You can’t do *anything* that doesn’t exist outside the market. That deeply disables and undermines people’s capacity to do and make things for themselves and one

another.

A lot of people feel ‘empty inside’, ‘gutted’ is a familiar term, and so on. A lot of people have been worked upon – by the ideology, by the system and by a combination of that and their own personal sense of insecurity – to confront this sort of barrenness of their own existence. And in this void, other people will [tend to] make things happen! People often enter into instant relationships – intense and violent – and then they go onto something else... Both the intense loneliness and the intense relatedness are possible reactions to this sense of dependency that is fostered on purchased goods, sensations, relationships and so on. The market is often perceived as this homely image of trestles on cobbled streets, with people “crying their wares” and so on. Actually [the market] bites deeply into the psyche of people and is a profound force for paralysis. It’s a kind of paralysis.

**WS: We’re also talking about labour as a commodity as well, and labour markets. What does that mean? It means that we don’t have immediate access to subsistence and to the social. It means that we have to take our own commodity to the market and that itself is an alienating process – where you have to become a product other than your usual self, a labour-power product.**

JS: Well it’s a ‘human cash crop’ in a sense, isn’t it?

**WS: Yes, and that brings us onto the topic of work’s position within life today. The relationship between identity and work also seems very strong, but in a very different way to the traditional worker communities you discuss in *Cut Out*: today our personalities and desires themselves are essential to our ‘employability’ – forcing us to regularly perform a set of characteristics that employers are looking for. Work and life increasingly blur, even when not in a job! To paraphrase Phoebe Moore: we have become employable, but not necessarily employed, subjects. How did these practices of employability affect the people you spoke to, and how do you**

**see these changes playing out today?**

JS: Because we live in an intensely competitive society, people are clamouring on the outskirts of the Elysian Fields of employment wanting in. If you look particularly at the media or arts industries, or academia, everybody feels they have something to offer but actually so many of us find that we are marginalised, or excluded or unwanted. What do you do with your life with the discarded abilities that don’t find a place in the money economy? I think people do create their own communities of support and acknowledgement etc. but... [reflecting on the self-practice of employability] ...what a vast labour of self-vending it is.

Employability imposes a kind of persona on individuals which is homogenising and reductive. The theory is that they are selling themselves but in practice they are selling an idealised version of that self. There is a written script that you learn; we are all kind of actors in a sense in this ghastly, sordid psycho-drama.

**WS: It is, bizarrely, quite cynical too: we all know it. We all know that employability is a kind of drama or soap opera but at the same time we all have to do it. Employers know it, we know it, but we all play the game regardless.**

JS: Yes. The promise is that you gain subsistence through it, and without subsistence in a market economy what do you do? You perish, you wind up under a duvet in a shop doorway. So in a sense the threat of poverty, which is often equated with an absence of employment in the official definition, means exclusion doesn’t it. So the society itself has to sustain a threat of poverty because otherwise nobody would buy into the all the crap. So that preservation of the poor is a major function of the society itself, and it is in this context that we talk of the casualties or ‘dead souls’ of capitalism.

You could abolish poverty tomorrow if you wanted to. But [the poor] are a carefully conserved species because without them the



need for all the striving and the strain and the misery and the unhappiness would perish and that would never do. [Those in poverty] are systemically vital. We can talk about the “alleviation of poverty” but you must never abolish the poor because it would abolish the [justification for] the need for accumulation. The whole thing is a kind of carefully contrived ritual. In the word ‘deprivation’ there is an actor and a victim; we live in an age of deprivation where something is always being taken away from people.

**WS: And this, presumably, is where competitiveness fits in. We’re always competing to be less scarce than the next person. The late Mark Fisher used the term ‘Red Plenty’ to rethink our current predicament: if we live in a system of enforced scarcity, then what is this system holding back? Well, abundance, which does really exist – it’s there – but which the system is precisely designed to restrict. So we could end poverty – the resources are available – but what we’re told is that there is only scarcity, and that politics is simply the allocation of this scarcity.**

JS: Yes, it’s an illusion of course.

*Jeremy Seabrook’s book Cut Out: Living Without Welfare was published in 2016 by Pluto Press. His forthcoming work, Orphans: A History, will be published in August 2018 by C Hurst & Co Publishers.*

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