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Real Work

Singaporeans, as the data shows [fig. 1], work the longest hours in the world. When I meet someone for the first time, it is almost a courtesy for them to ask what I work *as*, which means: what do I do to afford to live in this place? Statistics will never tell, and I am never asked, instead, what I work *for*, which means: toward what larger purpose are all my efforts directed?

Any artist will tell you creative work is also real work. I would go further: creative work upsets the idea of work itself. The uselessness of artwork is where its value resides. Sure, it can be worth a lot of money, or broadcast radical political ideas, or arouse powerful emotions, and these functions are commendable. But these can also be embodied by, say, gold. Manifestoes. Lovers. A gold statue of a lover holding a manifesto. It seems to me that uselessness is what gives art its artfulness, what makes writing writerly. If work means effort toward a larger purpose, then in creative work I labor ultimately for a new, awesome...nothing.

This is a very freeing and comforting thought. It means that the value of my work does not rest on how many copies of my book I sell, if it leads directly to some kind of social change, if it makes someone cry, although these are not bad things. It means I don't need to take myself too seriously, that I can understand failure as another necessary step in the process of creation. It means that I want my writing to be judged as writing, for better or worse. It means I accept different kinds of art as art, not just the "important" or "high" or "politically correct."

Perhaps this attitude is my reaction against pragmatism, the default, unexamined philosophy of most policymakers back home. Every decision, they claim, is grounded in "what works." The opposition does not argue against this, even though they may disagree with what, precisely, "works." Pragmatism is a legitimate principle of governance. But pragmatism alone cannot give me a complete understanding of what it means to be human. You and I know this: that a portion of our thoughts and feelings and actions are, from a purely pragmatic angle, useless and purposeless, possibly even detrimental to ourselves and those around us. Art reveals this. Artwork confronts moralizing with amorality, logic with paradox, reason with divine foolishness.

It is difficult to express such a position at home, because reasonable people often assume that I don't care about identity, or feelings, or place and culture, or any of the mistaken reasons why artwork is real work. I think you can care about multiple things at once. Or they might think I am against making sense. I'll leave you to decide that. Cyril Wong, another Singaporean poet, perhaps unintentionally expressed it best, in an answer to the question: "What are our poets like?" I will read from the end of his poem:

The poet for whom the poet is but an image
amongst images; who crosses the mountain
of the ego and never looks back;
leaving words behind like the moon still irradiating
that long way ahead into an infinite morning—
this poet doesn't exist.

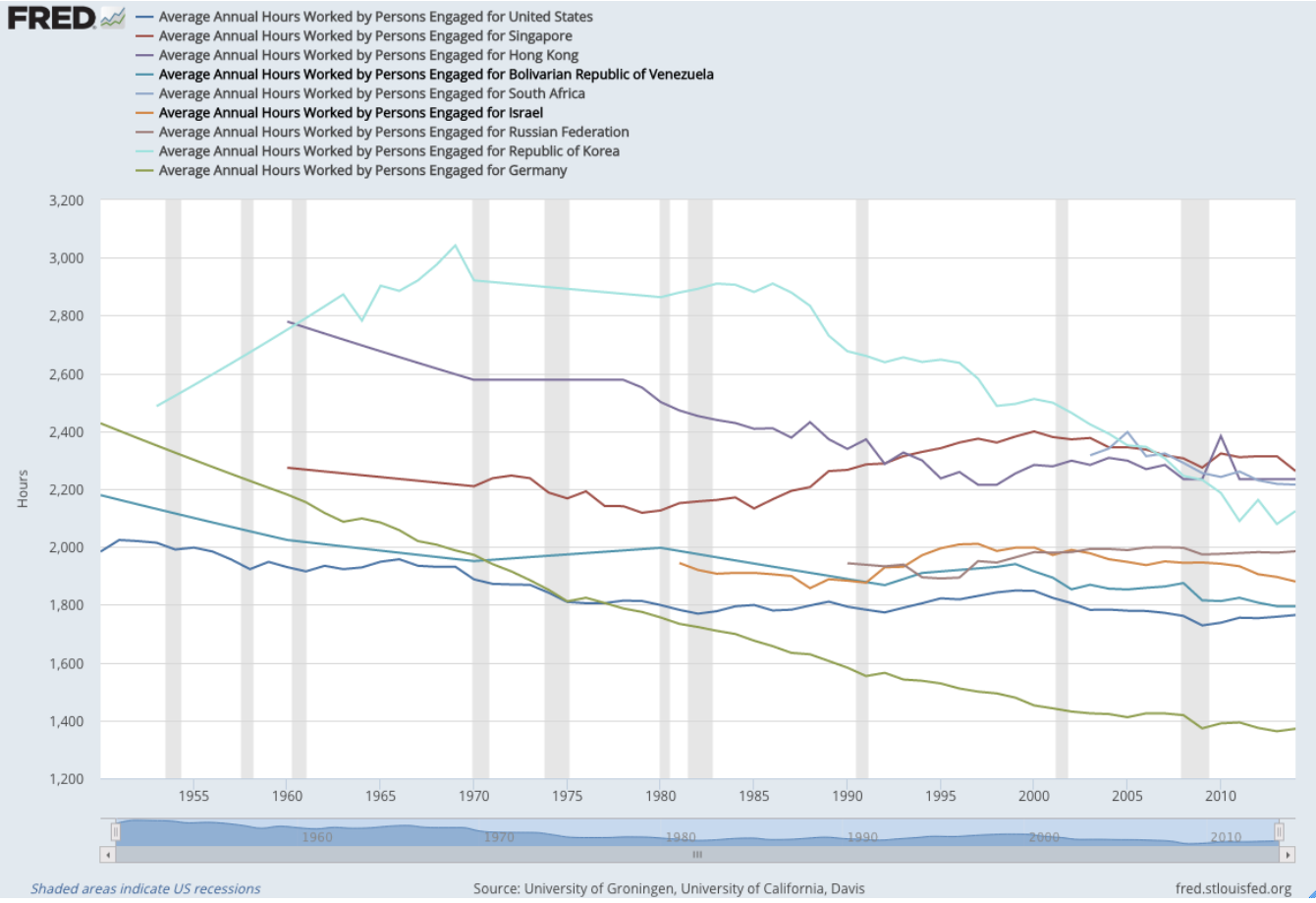


Fig. 1

Iowa City Public Library and the International Writing Program Panel Series, September 23, 2016
 Legodile “Dredd X” Seganabeng (Botswana), Amanah Mustafi (Singapore), Virginia Suk-yin Ng (Hong Kong),
 Courtney Sina Meredith (New Zealand), and Tse Hao Guang (Singapore)
 For electronic texts, please visit <http://iwp.uiowa.edu/archives/iowa-city-public-library-presentations>