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James Livingston Interview

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Bucknell: Occupied
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Jennifer Thomson, interviewer (JT)
James Livingston, interviewee (JL)

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JT: Hello and welcome to Bucknell: Occupied here on 90.5 WVBU Lewisburg. In the studio with me tonight, I have James Livingston, a historian at Rutgers University who is here on campus to talk about his new book project. Which at this point is entitled "F- Work" so welcome to the studio.

JL: Thank you for having me.

JT: So I'm wondering if you can, just talk to listeners about what your new project is.

JL: Well... we can't use the word on radio, can we? And I wish we could, because I cannot think of a better title than the title that I came up with. Because, the book is really about how we have to recover from the disease called work. Why it is that we want to work, why it is that we do go to work, and why it's actually killing us. Why it's deadening our souls. In some ways, I was talking to your colleague John at lunch about it, it's a sequel to a book that came out in 2011 called "Against Thrift" and in that book, I argued that consumer culture was good for the economy, but also for the environment, and for our souls, [LAUGHS] because it takes us away from work, and what I called in that book the principle of productivity. So... yeah. I'll leave it at that as introduction for now.

JT: Why is it that we can't actually say the name of your book project?

JL: You know

[CROSSTALK]

JT: Besides the FCC

JL: That's a really good question, because after all, there's a children's book out, the title which is "Go the F- to Sleep"

JT: Yes.

JL: I would just walk by--I was in a Barnes and Noble on 15th street in New York City, not more than 10 days ago--and as I was walking out, they had those end-capped tables where all the new literature, new books are, and a prominently featured novel was called the "F- Up"

[LAUGHS]

JL: Christopher Lasch remarked in "The Culture of Narcissism" and I'm sure you recall this, published in 1979, that the corseting of the English language amongst--what he called middle class people and middle class intellectuals--was rather remarkable, and he mentioned precisely this--the entry, if you will,

of the F- word into our everyday lexicons. So I... it is kinda funny. For example, everybody who watches Comedy Central, and everybody who used to be addicted to John Stewart.

JT: MmHm.

JL: Every 30 seconds some word was bleeped,

JT: MmHm. MmHm.

JL: and we know what the word was, and we all giggled about it. But yeah, what is the point of pretending that our language isn't... saturated with this word.

JT: MmHm.

JL: and with the sentiments that we attach to it. I asked my students, at the beginning of the semester, right after Martin Luther King Day, I asked them if they'd ever heard of trigger warnings. And three of them had.

JT: MmHm.

JL: Out of approximately 75 students. And I said, 'OK, here's a trigger warning, I'm going to use the F-word a lot.' I have to, it's just part of my approach to things.

JT: MmHm. MmHm.

JL: But also, I've written this book, it's done, it's called The F- Word. And they were not only good-natured about it, they were sorta puzzled by my willingness to warn them.

JT: MmHm. MmHm.

JL: So... I don't know, it's probably an FCC regulation.

JT: Well, for sure, for us

JL: Yeah.

JT: Right now.

JL: Yeah.

JT: But that's what's going on, but I mean even when they've been publishing the name of your talk around campus it's been sanitized for sure.

JL: Yeah. Yeah. And they might end up doing it at North Carolina--the press that's publishing it. It's in production, it should be out in August. You know, they're having something of a tussle there, too.

JT: MmHm. MmHm.

JL: Should we--should we use graffiti after the F- word [LAUGHS] That kinda thing. So that the only places that I'll be able to talk to interviewers -- like yourself -- will probably be on Comedy Central.

JT: Right [LAUGHS]

JL: I wish.

JT: So why... why F- work, why should we do this.

JL: Yeah... Well, there are two, I guess there are two components to the argument. One is that there's not enough work to go around, and what there is of it--

JT: MmHm.

JL: Cannot pay people what is called a living wage.

JT: Right.

JL: That's why I think full employment is a very bad idea. The subtitle of the book is "why full employment is a very bad idea." For example, 25% of adults--not teenagers--25% of adults who are now employed in the United States of America are at or below the poverty line. 40-50% of the people in the labor force who work full-time jobs are eligible for food stamps.

JT: Yeah.

JL: That suggests to me that the labor market has broken down completely. Along with many other markets. Correct? I mean, it's not... I mean it doesn't seem like an accident that the labor market broke down. And you can find Left-wing economists who might say that. Dean Baker, say, or Mike Konczal, or Thomas Burnett. And yet, what they're trying to say, after acknowledging that the labor market is broken down that we can restore it somehow, whether by public spending or private spending. Well that's one side of the argument. There's not enough work to go around, and so why do we want to put ourselves back to work.

JT: MmHm.

JL: By whatever means the Republican Party or the Democratic Party devise. The other part of it, though, is the more important part to me. The economics of the argument seem to be awful self-evident, it's not... it doesn't take a whole lot of serious thinking to realize that we're--I want 'em to say we're --- but I can't [LAUGHS]. So the other part of it is this, the Left is more attached to work than is the Right, which seems to be at least anomalous, and requires explanation that we--I--haven't seen yet.

JT: MmHm.

JL: So what I tried to do is write a history book. Since when is the Left so wedded to the idea that we all should be working.

JT: MmHm. MmHm.

JL: And that somehow there is a transparent or an intelligible or justifiable relationship between effort on the one hand and reward on the other. Work and Income. So what I discovered, I think, is that there's a long tradition. We call it the Protestant ethic, but in fact it was developed most thoroughly, most intelligently by Karl Marx, and Marx said on many occasions that he stood on Hegel's shoulders.

JT: MmHm.

JL: In 1844 he said, for example, Labor takes--excuse me--Hegel takes the stamp out of modern political economy, he grasps Labor as the essence of man. But Hegel himself was standing on the shoulders of Martin Luther--

JT: MmHm. MmHm.

JL: and Tunstall in the preface to The Philosophy of Right. Called Luther the first modern philosopher. What they had in common was the idea that the highest possible morality was embraced by, experienced at work. That if human nature--

JT: MmHm. MmHm.

JL: is to transform the world, and to produce value through work. Why then, of course, we're going to be wedded to this idea, and it's our very nature. My students. My undergraduate and graduate students at Rutgers seem to think that "well yeah, of course, we have to be working, because if we're not working--"

JT: What are we doing?

JL: What are we doing, yeah?

JT: Yeah.

JL: And that, I guess, is the third component of the argument, and that is--if there's not enough work to go around, and what work there is teaches us that you might as well be a gangster,

JT: MmHm.

JL: if you want an adequate income. Why do we still believe that work builds character, punctuality, initiative, discipline, and all that business? Why do we believe this? Shouldn't we try to get over--

JT: MmHm.

JL: is really the question I'm asking. So, yeah, that's why I want to use as strong a word as possible, because I think... I don't want to be melodramatic about it. I do think that our devotion to the idea that work builds character and that work is necessary for our survival of our souls. I think that's a sickness.

JT: MmHm.

JL: I think that's become something we want to try to recover from.

JT: Well I think it's very much, I mean, you're pointing at this even and talking about Hegel standing on the shoulders of Martin Luther, right? But I mean, this is very much about Protestantism

JL: Yup.

JT: For sure.

JL: Sure is. Sure is.

JT: Shot through and through with it.

JL: Yes, absolutely. Yeah... I use the word Protestant ethic loosely in the book, but it is, I mean, it is extraordinarily Protestant. But here's the other thing, too. When I talk to my students about this, they say "well, you know, work is good. Work is..." and they come up with good arguments. And my response is "well, yeah, work was good. Once upon a time, when people said, if ye shall not work, neither shall ye eat."

JT: MmHm.

JL: That was a critique of a many-layered aristocracy that did nothing, that performed no productive labor. It was a way of making concrete, the idea that all men are created equal. It's a very, very important idea. An idea that doesn't come of age until the 18th century regardless of what the early Christians told us about being equal in the sight of God. So yeah, it's a Protestant ethic in that sense is an egalitarian notion, but by this time, it doesn't serve the purpose of equality or egalitarianism, it serves no purpose except to sicken us and kill us. For example. If we live by this principle of productivity--From each according to his abilities, to each according to his production of value--all we're going to do is produce more and more and more.

JT: MmHm.

JL: Well and there again it arrives to the question, well, why are we producing this? Or what are we producing? Why do we have to keep producing? Why is growth so important to us? Well growth is really important to us--in this country anyway--because it's the only means we have ever devised for social stability on the one hand, and political stability on the other.

JT: MmHm. MmHm.

JL: Right? If you don't have growth, you can't accommodate the growth of the population, the growth of the labor force.

JT: Well, supposedly.

[LAUGHS]

JL: I mean, that's exactly right, and if we can't do that, why then people are gonna... we're going to have class conflict. We're gonna have the subdivision of political parties. We're going to have maybe revolution or something like that. So... to say what I say in the title of the book, I think, is to ask why is it that growth functions in this way? Why is it that we are so mindlessly devoted to it? And what if we step

back and ask ourselves. OK, well, maybe we don't have to work so hard. Wouldn't that be a way of getting into this question of why do we need growth, why do we want growth, and what kind of growth do we want if we decide that we have to have it?

JT: So I mean, I can hear, or imagine several sort of lines of critique coming at you. One being a critique of... from people who think growth has to persist. Fine. So there's one thing. And there's another set of arguments which would be like how do we pay for this? But then the third one that I actually want to talk about is people who would come at you and say "why wouldn't this just lead to the growth of a new hierarchy?" or the emergence of a new aristocracy? What would mitigate against that?

JL: I think it's a damn good question, because I really don't know what you're asking. How would it?

JT: So you talked about how... You introduced in your narrative the Protestant ethic as a response to this parasitic aristocratic class.

[CROSSTALK]

JL: Ah. Right, right, right, right.

JT: So what... let's say we all begin this situation of

JL: Right.

JT: Not having to work, being provided for.

JL: OK. Here's the deal in it for me is this--if there's not enough work to go around. If there's not enough good work to build character, then let's decouple income from work. Let's get ourselves a guaranteed annual income for everyone.

JT: MmHm.

JL: Now, does that create an aristocracy? No, I don't think so, because we couldn't peg it at, say, \$50,000. We probably couldn't do that. We probably couldn't afford that. But we could, I think, go in the vicinity of between \$40-50 and that would be easy to afford. Then what? If you want to make more money, fine. You're free to do that. If you want to volunteer your time, that's fine too. I think the [SOUND] way that I was thinking about it [SOUND] [LAUGHS]

JT: Are we getting a call in the studio? Hey.

JL: Sure. I guess we have resumed?

JT: Yes. We have.

JL: So I don't think that would create an aristocracy. I think that what it would do is allow for us to develop talents, skills, purposes, that we cannot because we're so attached to the idea that you can't have an income unless you...

JT: MmHm.

JL: unless you work.

JT: Well and if you do, then you're obviously a parasite.

JL: Well, precisely, right?

JT: Yeah.

JL: That's why we have this animus against consumption or consumerist culture.

JT: MmHm. MmHm.

JL: We think that either your prior production of durable goods, and I mean by durable, I don't just mean material things. If you have not produced durable goods, the justification of your income is absent. Now that's a ridiculous idea, but it's firmly attached to this idea of the Protestant ethic. Now it's ridiculous for two reasons at least.

JT: MmHm. MmHm.

JL: First, the development of what we call a welfare state. I don't like the phrase, but... the development of a welfare state, since approximately the 1930s has taught us to detach income from work. Reward from effort. From 1959 until the present, the fastest growing component of household income or of labor income,

JT: MmHm.

JL: Either way you want to express it, it works. Has been transfer payments from the government. So that by the turn of the 21st century, 20% of all household income comes from a transfer payment. In other words, it's money that comes into the household for which no one in the household has done any work.

JT: MmHm. MmHm.

JL: So we know how to do it.

JT: But those, I mean, most people would treat those as though they aren't physical, they're not seen.

JL: Yes, that's true. And in fact when the New York Times did that series last year about who was receiving those transfer payments,

JT: MmHm.

JL: The people most scandalized by the receipt of it were the people who were benefiting the most. People in Appalachia and people in rural areas where they really needed these so-called welfare payments from government at some level. The other way that we have taught ourselves that there's no intelligible, transparent, or justifiable correlation between effort and reward, between work and income, is to simply look at what has happened on Wall Street for the last,

JT: MmHm.

JL: say, seventy years, but certainly in the last, what--six?

JT: Right.

JL: I mean, these people, what do they do? And look at the incomes that they receive. Everybody knows it's ridiculous, even they know it's ridiculous.

JT: MmHm.

JL: I mean, if you hear them talk to each other, it's like.

JT: That's why they love it, right? They're winning.

JL: Well [DISGRUNTLED SIGH] even there, there's enough guilt, it seems to me, to use as evidence that we all know that this system as it now exists is broken, and it needs something beyond repair. It needs, it seems to me, a replacement. I spent some time in Zuccotti Park during the Occupy days, and it's right down by Wall Street, of course, and brokers and traders would be walking by and laughing about what they saw in the park. But also trading stories about how ludicrous their bonuses were. Yeah. And a couple of my students, believe it or not, are currency traders, and things like that.

JT: Well, I mean... most schools are recruiting grounds. This school you can get a degree in English, and still go on and work for a consulting firm.

[CROSSTALK]

JL: Right, right. Yes. Exactly, yeah.

JT: Yeah. So I mean is this still a solution within the framework of the nation-state? In your book?

JL: That's... I mean, it's a good question in the sense that we have all these arguments about foreign aid, for example.

JT: MmHm.

JL: Transfer payments from rich nations to poor nations.

JT: Right.

JL: Again, I think we can afford that. The accounting problems that we face in detaching income from work, and doing it at a transnational level as well, the accounting problems are just minimal. It doesn't take much thought, and it doesn't take much doing. Now, I'm not saying that there's already a consensus or that there's even a majority opinion.

JT: MmHm.

JL: in favor of such a thing, but we could take two very simple steps and solve all the fiscal problems that might face us if we detach income from work. First, we remove the arbitrary cap on social security contributions.

JT: MmHm.

JL: That's a done deal, then social security is forever solvent. The other is that we raise corporate income taxes.

JT: MmHm.

JL: I don't care what we do with the personal income taxes anymore, I don't think that's an issue. But we must raise corporate income tax rates. The argument against that, of course, is something you've heard a thousand times and we've all heard a thousand times--"well if you raise corporate income taxes, then the incorporated will go overseas." Well, you know what, they already did that.

JT: MmHm.

JL: They're already over there. In the 1970s and the 1980s before we had this thing called globalization, before the fall of the Soviet Union, between 60-70% of the manufactured imports into this country came from corporations owned by Americans who operated offshore.

JT: MmHm. MmHm.

JL: So that makes no sense. If they say "if you raise our taxes, we're going to go overseas," we'll say "fine, we're going to tax your profits no matter where you make them. It doesn't matter if you repatriate them or not, we're going to tax them at the point of origin."

JT: MmHm.

JL: All right, that's one thing. The other argument against raising corporate taxes is that--well, that's a disincentive to investment, and that's a crucial part of my argument in the book. We don't need their investment. We don't need corporate investment to create jobs. We already know that 80% of new jobs are created by small business. Those are really crappy jobs, by the way. I'm not a proponent of small business, because most of those jobs disappear within two years and usually there's no health benefits attached. So, I'm not a proponent of small business, but we know that those are the people who create jobs. Corporate investment does not create jobs. It just doesn't. And so we've gotta get used to that fact, too. That's another way of justifying, it seems to me, my argument about work. Why do we give these people these incentives?

JT: MmHm.

JL: Why do CEOs need all that money? Why do they need these stock options? Why do they need these cuts on their dividends? To hell with that. Anyway, you can see how frustrating this is to me. Raising corporate income taxes is the best way to solve any fiscal problem that you think might reside in this plan.

JT: MmHm.

JL: If that's what you can call it of mine, to detach income from work.

JT: So, I mean, certainly, as you've walked through those two ways that this could happen, these are things that Bernie Sanders is talking about.

JL: Yes.

JT: For sure.

JL: Yes.

JT: So, how would your--but he's still calling for full employment!

JL: I know, I know [LAUGHS] cause he's a man of the left!

JT: Yes, yes.

JL: Yes.

JT: For sure, right? So, I mean, imagining yourself in some weird world talking to Bernie Sanders, what would that conversation actually look like?

JL: I think what I would first do is try to stay interrogative and ask him why full employment seems to him such a good idea. And I think before long we would get to the bottom of it, and that is this idea that work is good for us.

JT: MmHm.

JL: But he knows as well as I do that most of the jobs being created, most of the jobs created since 2000. There's--by the way there's no net gain in new jobs since 2000, it still stands at zero--most of the new jobs created since 2000 have been really crappy jobs that contingent, part-time,

JT: MmHm.

JL: fast food, and so forth. Incomes are going to rise in retail, jobs are going to increase there, but who the hell wants those jobs? Moreover, it's not just the MIT economists, it's the Oxford economists who've proven, demonstrated statistically that between now and 2020, two-thirds of the jobs that we now take for granted--the job classifications of the Labor Department uses--two-thirds of those jobs are gonna disappear. Including the jobs that involve, I quote "non-routine cognitive tasks" like thinking. Two-thirds of those jobs are going to disappear! You know, just like the bank tellers have disappeared, and we use ATMs. Same thing is going to happen, all over, in every sector. So I would try to... I would... as gently as I could, I would nudge Bernie Sanders [LAUGHS] toward the idea that "look why do we want to put people to work? Why do we want full employment if we know the jobs are sssshhhhhitty ones? Does that work can we...?"

JT: I'll bleep it out.

JL: OK. It just... it makes no sense. And if we continue along these lines, thinking that full employment is absolutely the solution, we're gonna kill ourselves, we're gonna hurt ourselves physically, but we're also gonna like deaden our souls. It's time for us to rethink.

JT: So, I mean, when you hear his conversation about this political revolution.

JL: MmHm.

JT: What exactly does that mean, in your interpretation?

JL: I'm an historian, so I can only speak historically about the American party system. I think what he's talking about will take a third party, maybe it'll call itself a Democratic Socialist party, it may be a while. I hope it doesn't call itself a Labor party because we know what that means. [LAUGHS] But I think that's what he has in mind, and I think that is the historical precedent. That the people's party of the 1890s, the Know-Nothings and the Republicans or the Anti-Slavery crowd of the 1830s and 40s. Because that's typically what fractures the two-party systems' dominance and gives people more choices than what they had under the two-party systems. Now, the third parties typically disappear, right? They rise up, they offer these bizarre programs, and sometimes they end up taking over one of the two major parties, the Populist Party did it in 1896. But their program of 1896 was a much watered down version of what they had been saying through the 1890s. But that's my guess.

JT: MmHm.

JL: I'm not a very good prophet, so it would be hard for me to say. But my guess is that a third party's going to have to happen before we get any political progress. Because the two parties as they stand--I think there are enormous differences between the two--but I still think that the choices that the American electorate wants to make are disallowed by

JT: Right.

JL: the two parties as they presently exist. So to break up that consensus, to fracture that ice mass, or whatever it is. I think a third party is a reality.

JT: I mean, I know, obviously a lot of stuff you've written is on the left both presently and historically. When you watch the way his campaign is conducting itself, and there's been so much emphasis put on the fact that it's a "We" campaign versus Hillary's "I" campaign, et cetera, et cetera.

JL: Yeah.

JT: Right? And you know, he's very willing to use this language "political revolution"

JL: Right.

JT: I mean, would you imagine that this is something that he is trying to get off the ground and it will become independent of him? Like how much do you think his

JL: Hm. Yeah.

JT: status as figurehead is actually?

JL: I do think he's actually very important. I tend to think of him as a charismatic figure.

JT: MmHm.

JL: I know that that sounds kinda silly. Because here's this old guy kinda scurrying around. [LAUGHS] But Obama had a database, a virtual online constituency that was put on by MoveOn.org, and other more even more sophisticated types, but as soon as he was elected, he dropped them. That constituency...

JT: Yeah.

JL: became pointless or useless to him, he thought. Now that was in line with a lot of political science thinking that we're all familiar with, and that is that there is an electoral coalition and then there is a governing coalition and there is a huge difference between the two. Well, speaking now as an historian, I would say that that distinction is moot. That if Obama had tried to govern with his electoral coalition in place.

JT: MmHm.

JL: That it never would have occurred to him that this is a center right country. He would've been, I think, more emboldened in dealing with the Republicans in Congress, and saying "well look, I've got this constituency out here" but by de-mobilizing the people that had elected him--and not just the vast black turnout--those younger people. I think that was his fundamental error. I don't think Bernie--I hope I can use his name with enough affection and respect--I don't think Bernie will do that, because—

JT: MmHm.

JL: He can see, as well as the rest of us can, the last 8 years have been a nightmare, in part because Obama governed as if it's a center right country. It's become a center left country. And for good reason. I mean, you know this as well as I do, the Pew Center polls demonstrate to us that a majority of younger people favor socialism over capitalism because they don't have any of those--

JT: Right.

JL: strange Cold War kinda connotations to deal with.

JT: Yeah.

JL: They're just... they think "ah yeah, Socialism, what a great idea." So, how can you say it's a center right country. Not anymore it's not.

JT: Well, I have one last question for you.

JL: Yeah.

JT: So, going back to the argument of your book, right? Were this world to come into existence, what would be the effect on mass incarceration?

JL: Ah. Hm. Well, that's a tough one. But look. In the early 70s, in the late 60s and early 70s, most social scientists thought that the prison system as it stood was defunct, that it would disappear.

JT: Yes.

JL: And then what happened? I mean, what in the world happened in those last 30 years of the 20th century, so that we had the highest proportion of people in prison, and the highest proportion of people in the world--proportionally--on death row? One of the arguments against full employment would be to have a mass release...

JT: MmHm.

JL: of people who were indicted and convicted for these ridiculous offenses. Especially drugs. Well, geez, then we'd have an employment crisis wouldn't we? Oh my goodness.

JT: Yeah.

JL: Well, actually, no, we wouldn't. If we learn that full employment is a bad idea, and if we learn how to detach income from work. And use this guaranteed annual income device, then it doesn't, it doesn't have to appear to us as an impending unemployment crisis. It can appear to us as something else.

JT: MmHm.

JL: As a way of... I don't know... righting a terrible wrong, making amends, getting these people who were convicted of barely a crime out of prison. I mean... and back into lives! If they feel like being productive, fine! You know, there's all kinds of ways of creating jobs, as you know. But let's think first about the damage that work does. Let's think about that for a change.

JT: All right, well it's been a real pleasure talking with you, thank you for coming in.

JL: Thank you.