

How To Handle “What Do You Do (For a Living)?”

François Girard-Meunier, 01/08/2017

- Hey :) (...) What’s your name?
- (shouts heavily) :) François, and you?
- :) I’m (name)...
- :) Sorry? I didn’t hear properly (...)
- ‘(NAME)’ :)
- Ah, (N-A-M-E)! Like (name, the pop culture character or public person)?
- Yeah, like (name, the pop culture character or public person) :) And... what are you doing (*implied*: for a living)?
- Hum... (*that’s complicated*)... what do you mean? :/
- knDMvowijfhgDKJSidsgkjpowefoiukFqwc :)
- ‘I can’t hear you’!
- ejfdojnFEJHEJHOFO :/
- ‘I CAN’T HEARYOU’... :/
- ... :(
- ... ↘

What do you answer to the question ‘What do you do (“for a living”)?’ Most likely the activity which occupies most of your time. A ‘job’. And it probably comes with a form of retribution and a defined schedule.

Every times I have been asked what I was *doing*, I have found myself a bit puzzled by fitting the exercise. But what was I doing? Really? That’s indeed a very interesting question. I mean it. Like in: what the fuck was I doing here, at this very moment? Or, more precisely: what the fuck was I seeking while socially interacting with other minds at that very moment? Did I have any agency? *What was I doing?*

But the customary question has always been formulated with a specific type of answer in mind. Doing... ‘For a living’. So the stuff I do in life. ‘For’ life. That *makes me* live, defining it, like a label. Something simple that would be understood by others, so they can associate my person with a role and a function within society. Something easy. Most likely in economical terms. It is not a ‘difficult’ question if you understand the rules behind it. If you play the role, if you’re *by the book*. “When meeting someone new, we don’t have much time to get into the details before making a judgment whether we’re in front of someone we’d likely want to engage with or not.” That’s right. I get it.

In the gig economy, no one has or expects stability. Flexibility is the prized quality, uncertainty is the condition experienced and anxiety is its byproduct. As flexibility becomes what contemporary capitalism aims for (more flexibility,

more uncertainty, more anxiety), the latter becomes its dominant reactive affect, a thesis developed by the *Institute for Precarious Consciousness*.¹ I never had one occupation, but always a myriad of sometimes related part-time occupations that would, in the end, *make it work*. So, if let's say, I get over my kind-of existential hesitancy that prevents me dealing with the 'what are you doing for a living' convention and its monolithic assumptions, I still wouldn't be able to define *one* activity that fits the question on its own terms and fulfill the task.

Or I give it a try. Some economic occupations I've encountered. (Trained as a...) graphic designer, telemarketer, web developer, language instructor, project manager, technical writer, waiter, editor, proof-reader, lecturer, salesperson, food courier, warehouse clerk, (very-)guest teacher... And I didn't go through the more ambiguous terms used to define my labor-power by some recruitment teams; facilitator (*of what?*), curator (*of my life?*), (*customer service*) hero, (*generic*) expert, and so on.

- I am a (insert occupation), so (insert tasks) is what I'm doing for a living.
- (...) Quite interesting! And how is it working out for you?
- Well I only did it once and made 100€ out of it which I got two months later.
- ... (:/)
- :) ...

There are situations where all I desire is the ability to forget about playing roles. To stop playing the aspiring enthusiastic self-entrepreneur, *passionate* and striving for *change*. But as the differentiation between a 'personal' life and a 'professional' life erodes and becomes irrelevant, playing roles had become a permanent activity. This lack of boundaries, accentuated by digital technologies asking us to deal with our 'online representation', brings to the fore the complex task of self-mediation. I do not aspire to be the constant salesperson of myself. But I want others to think of me as prospectively beneficial to them. Which can't happen with a bit of *work*...

1 See We Are All Very Anxious: Six Theses on Anxiety and Why It is Effectively Preventing Militancy, and One Possible Strategy for Overcoming It. April 4th, 2014. <https://www.weare-planc.org/blog/we-are-all-very-anxious/#f1>