That’s a Good Idea

Here’s a drinking game: every time you hear someone say “there should be an app for that,” take a drink. Not drunk enough yet? Then ask someone, anyone, whether they have an idea for an app. You’re pretty much guaranteed to get a good idea out of them. But that’s not the drinking game. That’s just the set up. The game starts after you have all these good ideas swirling around in your head. Then you sit at the bar and wonder whether you’re going to finally do something with all these good ideas until you get too drunk and morose to go on. That’s the game. I didn’t say it was a good game, but it is pretty popular. You can even play it with friends. If it were an app it’d be number one on Google Play.

Everyone these days is full of good ideas. At my local pub, I’ve seen patrons try to offer the bartender cash if he’ll wear their Fitbits while he works up and down the bar. Not a bad idea. My local cafe, where I keep spare keys for my Airbnb guests, is now turning the key thing into a side business. Another good idea. Well, actually, they’re pretty crap ideas. But they’re good enough to build a business around, probably. At the very least, I can see how these ideas could become a thing. If I don’t do them, and they don’t do them, I’m sure someone else will. Then they’ll have the cash and the cred, and I’ll just have what I have right now – debt and regret.

Not so long ago, a good idea was nothing more than a throw-away thought. That your bartender should wear your Fitbit so your healthcare company thinks you’re exercising – it’s a joke; at best you might get a self-depreciating laugh out of it between pints. But as the nature of fleeting ideas shifts toward the entrepreneurial, so too has our relationship to them. A good idea, now, is more than an idea: it’s an injunction. If the bartender isn’t making as much in tips as he used to, he’d be a fool not to load his wrists with all the bits he can fit. The cafe — ever the precarious institution, now dependent on laptop freelancers even more precarious than they — if they really want to make money, they should sell everything they can. New York cafe Pourt just started touting itself as a coworking space; they may as well do Airbnb keys while they’re at it. Coming up with good ideas used to be something fairly rare, the habit of inventors and entrepreneurs. But their mandate has become ours. To put it in the parlance of Andy Warhol: in the future, everyone will be an entrepreneur for fifteen minutes. Not because it’s cool, but because it’s fucking necessary.

You can ignore the mandate, as most people do. Have a drink and lose the game. Or you can try to win by “learning to code,” styling yourself a startup founder, getting a side hustle going. Either way, you’re playing. Either way, your good ideas are already in the service of business. And you know, cynically but realistically, that if you don’t execute on one of them, someone else will.

In our current moment, it’s enough to cause a twinge of panic. It can even be misread as excitement. The throw-away idea, the notion laughed off in jest, might just be the thing to save your broke ass.

In the early twentieth century, Frederick Taylor’s scientific management techniques had a profound effect on industry and labor and laid the groundwork for the field of workplace management. Of course, since then industry has shifted from goods to knowledge; labor as a category of social concern is at an all time low, especially in the United States; the physical workplace is quickly becoming superfluous. Yet his specter remains.

Tim Hindle, writing for The Economist, describes Taylor as having “lived at a time when industrialisation was being fuelled by massive movements of labour from the land to the factory. His main achievement was to devise a way whereby totally unskilled sharecroppers could, as [management guru Peter] Drucker put it, ‘be converted in 60 to 90 days into first-rate welders and shipbuilders.’” With a rush and a push, the untrained masses abandoned the land that they lived on. In the city, in factories, they were shepherded into productivity by the new masters — Taylorist managers. The economy of machination was itself a well-oiled machine. The managers operated and optimized; the workers were cogs.

The monumental shift taking place in Taylor’s time continues today as well. The drive at the turn of the century to turn the unskilled into specialists in 90 days mirrors the contemporary dev bootcamp: the coding schools that, for a $15,000 fee, train the non-technical masses to become programmers. In just three months, graduates go on to become those most able to profit off the good ideas that we are always-already generating for free.

It’s no coincidence that the granddaddy of coding schools, General Assembly, has itself pivoted from one good idea to the next. The company initially started as a coworking space, but they were quick to realize that startups’ desire for office space was vastly exceeded by ex-office workers’ desire to start startups. Just a few years later, General Assembly founder Brad Hargreaves pivoted yet again and went on to found Common, a co-living company. Common provides temporary housing for the same wantrepreneur population that coding schools serve. In training and housing these people, Hargreaves’ empire is one in which every facet of life is plugged into the tech economy, even in sleep. Common even partnered with mattress startup Casper, ensuring the entrepreneurial dream goes so deep it’s literally embedded.

Do Android developers dream of electric sheep? Perhaps they themselves *are* the electric sheep, producing the raw material the fabric of our economy is based on.

Far from dystopia, the systematic totality of such a vision is part of its appeal, and it picks up where Taylor’s left off. The factories are startups, converting good ideas into code and cash. The untrained masses are all of us, from the wantrepreneurs to the people outside the tech and knowledge economies who can still come up with a damn fine app idea and — who knows — might even cash it in one day. But the managers — Taylor’s scientific managers — those are the ones whose nature has changed. The manager on the production line who surveilled, analyzed and ultimately decided the fate of the lowly worker: is he Hargreaves? Is he some venture capitalist? We work so hard; somebody must be exploiting us. Who is it?

Take another drink. It’s you. The workers and the managers, two opposing entities in Taylor’s time, are one and the same. For fifteen thousand dollars, you, too, can have fifteen minutes to be your own boss and your own worker. Finally, you’ll have a chance to really take advantage of all those good ideas. Finally you’ll have a chance to really take advantage of yourself.

For all of Taylor’s focus on management’s role in converting the average idiot into a productive cog, today, most of our conversion we manage ourselves. We tailor (Taylor?) our behavior and identity around production. Long before labor became pervasive, we were outfitting ourselves in preparation for it. It’s in our “lifestyle,” our habits of mind. It’s such a part of the fabric of life that we only notice it when we find ourselves all dressed up with nowhere to go. Neither of us have a job, but let’s meet after work for a drink anyway. We can sit at the bar, Fitbits idle, not sure which pains us more: our own carpal tunnel, or the fact the bartender still has not even a watch on his wrist.