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The Problem with Work¹

Though women do not complain of the power of husbands, each complains of her own husband, or of the husbands of her friends. It is the same in all other cases of servitude, at least in the commencement of the emancipatory movement. The serfs did not at first complain of the power of their lords, but only of their tyranny.

JOHN STUAR MILL, *THE SUBJECTION OF WOMEN*

One type of work, or one particular job, is contrasted with another type, experienced or imagined, within the present world of work; judgments are rarely made about the world of work as presently organized as against some other way of organizing it.

C. WRIGHT MILLS, *WHITE COLLAR*

Why do we work so long and so hard? The mystery here is not that we are required to work or that we are expected to devote so much time and energy to its pursuit, but rather that there is not more active resistance to this state of affairs. The problems with work today – my focus will be on the United States – have to do with both its quantity and its quality and are not limited to the travails of any one group. Those problems include the low wages in most sectors of the economy; the unemployment, underemployment, and precarious employment suffered by many workers; and the overwork that often characterizes even the most privileged forms of employment – after all, even the best job is a problem when it monopolizes so much of life. To be sure, if we were only resigned to such conditions, there would be no puzzle. What is perplexing is less the acceptance of the present reality that one must work to live than the willingness to live for work. By the same token, it is easy to appreciate why work is held in such high esteem, but considerably less obvious why it seems to be valued more than other pastimes and practices.

That these questions are rarely posed within the field of political theory is also surprising. The lack of interest in representing the daily grind of work routines in various forms of popular culture is perhaps understandable,² as is the tendency among cultural critics to focus on the animation and meaningfulness of commodities rather than the eclipse of laboring activity that Marx identifies as the source of their fetishization (Marx 1976, 164–65). The preference for a level of

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² Indeed, as Michael Denning notes, it is by now “a commonplace to note our reluctance to represent work in our popular stories. A Martian who hijacked the stock of the average video store would reasonably conclude that humans spent far more of their time engaged in sex than in work” (2004, 91–92).

abstraction that tends not to register either the qualitative dimensions or the hierarchical relations of work can also account for its relative neglect in the field of mainstream economics. But the lack of attention to the lived experience and political textures of work within political theory would seem to be another matter.³ Indeed, political theorists tend to be more interested in our lives as citizens and noncitizens, legal subjects and bearers of rights, consumers and spectators, religious devotees and family members, than in our daily lives as workers.⁴ And yet, to take a simple example, the amount of time alone that the average citizen is expected to devote to work – particularly when we include the time spent training, searching, and preparing for work, not to mention recovering from it – would suggest that the experience warrants more consideration. Work is crucial not only to those whose lives are centered around it, but also, in a society that expects people to work for wages, to those who are expelled or excluded from work and marginalized in relation to it. Perhaps more significantly, places of employment and spaces of work would seem to be supremely relevant to the very bread and butter of political science: as sites of decision making, they are structured by relations of power and authority; as hierarchical organizations, they raise issues of consent and obedience; as spaces of exclusion, they pose questions about membership and obligation. Although impersonal forces may compel us into work, once we enter the workplace we inevitably find ourselves enmeshed in the direct and personal relations of rulers and ruled. Indeed, the work site is where we often experience the most immediate, unambiguous, and tangible relations of power that most of us will encounter on a daily basis. As a fully political rather than a simply economic phenomenon, work would thus seem to be an especially rich object of inquiry.

There are at least two reasons for the inattention to work within political theory that bear mentioning. The first of these is what I will call the privatization of work. As the pair of epigraphs above suggest, we seem to have a hard time grasping the power relations of both work and family systematically; we often experience and imagine the employment relation – like the marriage relation – not as a social institution but as a unique relationship. Certainly this can be explained in part by the institution of private property that secures the privacy

³ Whereas work was once a phenomenon worthy of scrutiny, “contemporary political theory,” Russell Muirhead observes, “has had more to say about pluralism, toleration, virtue, equality of opportunity, and rights than it has about the character of work” (2004, 14).

⁴ In a review of sociological work on the intersection of work and identity, Robin Leidner concludes that despite the widespread interest in identity across the social sciences and the humanities, “relatively few contemporary theorists have put work at the center of their analyses of identity in late or post modernity” (2006, 424).

of the employment relation alongside the marriage relation. However, it should also be noted that this mode of privatizing work is not easily maintained: work has long occupied a somewhat vexed position in the private-public economy of liberalism. Thus, even though John Locke could establish the private character of work through both the natural right to property and its integration into the economy of the household, the state's role in defending property rights (and, since Locke's day, increasingly regulating and planning on property's behalf) threatens the status of work as a private relationship, exposing it, by the logic of Locke's scheme, to the purview of properly political power.⁵ Work's place within the private-public division becomes even more troubled with the advent of industrialization; as work becomes identified with waged work and separated from the household, it could more easily seem – by comparison to that exemplary private sphere – relatively public. But there are additional mechanisms that secure what I am calling work's privatization. One is its reification: the fact that at present one must work to “earn a living” is taken as part of the natural order rather than as a social convention. Consequently, as C. Wright Mills observes (in one of the epigraphs above), we tend to focus more on the problems with this or that job, or on their absence, than on work as a requirement, work as a system, work as a way of life. Like the serfs who, as John Stuart Mill claims in the other epigraph, “did not at first complain of the power of their lords, but only of their tyranny” (1988, 84), we are better at attending to the problems with this or that boss than to the system that grants them such power. The effective privatization of work is also a function of the way the labor market individualizes work – never more so than today, with the enormous variety of tasks and schedules that characterize the contemporary employment relation. The workplace, like the household, is typically figured as a private space, the product of a series of individual contracts rather than a social structure, the province of human need and sphere of individual choice rather than a site for the exercise of political power. And because of this tethering of work to the figure of the individual, it is difficult to mount a critique of work that is not received as something wholly different: a criticism of workers. As a result of work's subordination to property rights, its reification, and its individualization, thinking about work as a social system – even with its arguably more tenuous private status – strangely becomes as difficult as it is for many to conceive marriage and the family in structural terms.

The second reason for the marginalization of work within political theory's configuration of the political could be attributed to the decline of work-based

⁵ Workers could thus be represented by the figure of the servant, as in one famous passage from *The Second Treatise on Civil Government*, in which Locke insists that the labor that entitles an individual to private property includes “the turfs my servant has cut” (1986, 20).

activism in the United States. In the absence of a worker's party, and with the fickle and sometimes conflicting class alignments within and between the two major parties, electoral politics has rarely served as an adequate vehicle for work-centered activism. The power of union-based politics has also been curtailed by the sharp decline of union membership in the period since the Second World War. Many activists today seem to assume that, besides party-line voting and institutionalized collective bargaining, our best chance for exerting collective power lies in our purchasing power. Ethical buying and the consumer boycott as ways to effect corporate decision making thus rise to the forefront of the political-economic imaginary. Of course, the logic that informs these models of consumer politics is the same one that enables corporations to make the case that low prices for ever more worthy consumer goods is an adequate trade-off for low wages, outsourcing, union busting, and government make-work programs. To the extent that unionization and consumer organizing continue to represent not only two obviously important means, but often the *only* avenues for imagining a politics of work, we are left with few possibilities for marshaling antiwork activism and inventing postwork alternatives.

What amounts in all these instances to a depoliticization of work is precisely what I want to think through and challenge in this contribution to the political theory of work. The brief chapter summaries at the end of this introduction will outline the book's specific points of focus and lines of argument. But first, I want to concentrate on presenting the project's major theoretical lineages and dominant conceptual frames, not to preview the analyses to come so much as to account for their inspiration and explain the kinds of claims and assumptions they presuppose. In terms of theoretical resources, although Max Weber, Jean Baudrillard, and Friedrich Nietzsche will each have a critical role to play at some point in the analysis, the project draws most heavily, albeit selectively, on the fields of feminist theory and Marxist theory, as this introductory discussion will illustrate. I should note, however, that it is not only political theory's disregard for the politics of work that poses obstacles for this endeavor; as we will see, both feminism's and Marxism's productivist tendencies – their sometimes explicit, sometimes tacit pro-work suppositions and commitments – present problems as well. There are, nonetheless, a number of exceptional cases or even whole sub-traditions within each of these fields that have much to offer antiwork critiques and post-work imaginaries. But rather than organize this introductory discussion around a rehearsal of the project's more specific theoretical debts, I want to structure it instead in relation to a selection of its key concepts. The analysis begins with two concepts that orient the undertaking and give it direction: the work society and the work ethic. It then proceeds to a series of conceptual pairings – including work and labor, work and class, and freedom and equality – through

which I hope to flesh out the text's central themes and further clarify my concerns and intentions. Let me start by articulating some of the reasons why I find the topic of work so theoretically interesting and politically pressing. The concept of the work society is my point of entry into that discussion.

The work society

The shift in perspective that I would like to see more political theorists pursue – from state and government to political economy, from cultural products to the sites and relations of their production, from public spaces and marketplaces to workplaces – is reminiscent of something Marx proposed in an oft-cited passage at the end of part two of the first volume of *Capital*. As a way to describe the buying and selling of that very “peculiar” commodity labor power, Marx presents the story of two free, self-interested individuals, each an owner of property and both equal under the law, who enter into an exchange of equivalents: one consents to give the use of his or her labor power for a limited period of time, and in return, the other agrees to pay the first a specific amount of money. But to see what happens after the employment contract is signed, the analysis must then move to a different location, the site where this special commodity will be “consumed” by putting the seller of it to work. “Let us therefore,” Marx proposes,

in company with the owner of money and the owner of labour-power, leave this noisy sphere, where everything takes place on the surface and in full view of everyone, and follow them into the hidden abode of production, on whose threshold there hangs the notice “No admittance except on business.” Here we shall see, not only how capital produces, but how capital is itself produced. (1976, 279–80)

By altering the focus of the study in this way, Marx promises, “the secret of profit-making” will be exposed (280). By changing the site of the analysis from a market-based exchange to wage-based production, the labor-process itself – that is, the activity of labor and the social relations that shape, direct, and manage it – will be revealed as the locus of capitalist valorization.

So what are the benefits of this vantage point? What do we see when we shift our angle of vision from the market sphere of exchange to the privatized sphere of production? As the language about revealing secrets suggests, part of what Marx seeks to accomplish by descending into this “hidden abode” is to publicize the world of waged work, to expose it as neither natural precursor nor peripheral byproduct of capitalist production, but rather as its central mechanism (the wage) and lifeblood (work). With this shift in perspective, Marxian political economy

recognizes waged labor as central to the capitalist mode of production and claims it as the standpoint from which capitalism's mysteries can be uncovered and its logics laid bare. This recognition of the significance of work remains, I argue, as relevant now as it was when Marx wrote, and it is this observation that my deployment of the category of the work society is intended, in part, to underscore.

Waged work remains today the centerpiece of late capitalist economic systems; it is, of course, the way most people acquire access to the necessities of food, clothing, and shelter. It is not only the primary mechanism by which income is distributed, it is also the basic means by which status is allocated, and by which most people gain access to healthcare and retirement. After the family, waged work is often the most important, if not sole, source of sociality for millions. Raising children with attributes that will secure them forms of employment that can match if not surpass the class standing of their parents is the gold standard of parenting. In addition, "making people capable of working is," as Nona Glazer notes, "the central goal of schooling, a criterion of successful medical and psychiatric treatment, and an ostensible goal of most welfare policies and unemployment compensation programs" (1993, 33). Helping to make people "work ready" and moving them into jobs are central objectives of social work (Macarow 1980, 12), a common rationale for the prison system, and an important inducement to perform military service. Indeed, enforcing work, as the other side of defending property rights, is a key function of the state (Seidman 1991, 315), and a particular preoccupation of the postwelfare, neoliberal state.

But making public the foundational role of work is only part of what Marx achieves with this change in venue. In descending from the sphere of the market – which he satirized as "a very Eden" of equal rights, individual freedom, and social harmony (1976, 280) – into the privatized spaces of work, Marx seeks not only to publicize but also to politicize the world of work. That is to say, the focus on the consumption of labor seeks to expose the social role of work and, at the same time, to pose it as a political problem. Despite Marx's insistence that waged work for those without other options is a system of "forced labor" (1964, 111), it remains for the most part an abstract mode of domination. In general, it is not the police or the threat of violence that force us to work, but rather a social system that ensures that working is the only way that most of us can meet our basic needs. In this way, as Moishe Postone notes, the specific mechanism by which goods and services are distributed in a capitalist society appears to be grounded not in social convention and political power but in human need (1996, 161). The social role of waged work has been so naturalized as to seem necessary and inevitable, something that might be tinkered with but never escaped. Thus Marx seeks both to clarify the economic, social, and political functions of work under capitalism and to problematize the specific ways in which such world-building practices

are corralled into industrial forms and capitalist relations of work. This effort to make work at once public and political is, then, one way to counter the forces that would naturalize, privatize, individualize, ontologize, and also, thereby, depoliticize it.

Work is, thus, not just an economic practice. Indeed, that every individual is required to work, that most are expected to work for wages or be supported by someone who does, is a social convention and disciplinary apparatus rather than an economic necessity. That every individual must not only do some work but more often a lifetime of work, that individuals must not only work but become workers, is not necessary to the production of social wealth. The fact is that this wealth is collectively not individually produced, despite the persistence of an older economic imaginary that links individual production directly to consumption.⁶ Indeed, as Postone observes, “on a deep, systemic level, production is not for the sake of consumption” (1996, 184). The relationship may appear direct and incontrovertible, but it is in fact highly mediated: the goal of neither party in the work relation is consumption; one seeks surplus value, and the other income. The normative expectation of waged work as an individual responsibility has more to do with the socially mediating role of work than its strictly productive function (150). Work is the primary means by which individuals are integrated not only into the economic system, but also into social, political, and familial modes of cooperation. That individuals should work is fundamental to the basic social contract; indeed, working is part of what is supposed to transform subjects into the independent individuals of the liberal imaginary, and for that reason, is treated as a basic obligation of citizenship. (The fact that the economy’s health is dependent on a permanent margin of unemployment is only one of the more notorious problems with this convention.) Dreams of individual accomplishment and desires to contribute to the common good become firmly attached to waged work, where they can be hijacked to rather different ends: to produce neither individual riches nor social wealth, but privately appropriated surplus value. The category of the work society is meant to signify not only the centrality of work, but also its broad field of social relevance (see, for example, Beck 2000).

⁶ Cultural representations of the world of work are not only relatively rare but are also often slow to change. Daniel Rodgers gives the example of the continuing use of a cartoon image of a blacksmith to represent workers in the context of an industrial economy in which very few such figures could be found (1978, 242). In the 1960s, James Boggs made a similar point about the problem of clinging to outdated economic imaginaries when he argued that to tell the postindustrial unemployed “that they must work to earn their living is like telling a man in the big city that he should hunt big game for the meat on his table” (1963, 52).

Gender at work

Another way to get at the extra-economic role of work that the concept of the work society is intended to evoke is through a further consideration of work's subjectification function, alluded to above. Work produces not just economic goods and services but also social and political subjects. In other words, the wage relation generates not just income and capital, but disciplined individuals, governable subjects, worthy citizens, and responsible family members. Indeed, given its centrality both to individuals' lives and to the social imaginary, work constitutes a particularly important site of interpellation into a range of subjectivities. It is, for example, a key site of becoming classed; the workplace is where, as Marx describes it, the seller of labor power who we are invited to follow into the hidden abode of production "becomes in actuality what previously he only was potentially, namely labour-power in action, a worker" (1976, 283). Class identities and relations are made and remade as some people are excluded from and others conscripted into work, by means of educational tracks and workplace training regimens, through the organization of labor processes and the interactions they structure, via the setting of wage levels, and in relation to judgments about occupational status. This process of subjectification is perhaps best understood in terms of a model not of passive construction but of active recruitment, often less a matter of command and obedience than one of inducement and attraction (West and Zimmerman 1991, 27–29). Along these lines, one can observe that some of the attractions of different forms of work are about joining a relatively advantaged class: becoming a member of the working class rather than the underclass, a middle-class rather than a working-class person, a salaried versus an hourly worker, a professional with a career as opposed to a working stiff and job holder. As a way to build on these logics a little further, let us turn to another dimension of this process of subject making and doing and consider work as a site of gendering.

To say that work is organized by gender is to observe that it is a site where, at a minimum, we can find gender enforced, performed, and recreated. Workplaces are often structured in relation to gendered norms and expectations. Waged work and unwaged work alike continue to be structured by the productivity of gender-differentiated labor, including the gender division of both household roles and waged occupations. But the gendering of work is not just a matter of these institutionalized tendencies to distinguish various forms of men's work and women's work, but a consequence of the ways that workers are often expected to do gender at work. Gender is put to work when, for example, workers draw upon gendered codes and scripts as a way to negotiate relationships with bosses and co-workers, to personalize impersonal interactions, or to communicate courtesy, care, professionalism, or authority to clients, students, patients, or customers.

And this is, of course, not limited to waged forms of work. As Sarah Fenstermaker Berk argues, unwaged domestic work too should be recognized for producing not just goods and services, but gender as well (1985, 201). As a result of these activities, work plays a significant role in both the production and reproduction of gendered identities and hierarchies: gender is re-created along with value.

As in the example of class identities noted earlier, gender identities are coordinated with work identities in ways that can sometimes alienate workers from their job and other times bind them more tightly to it. Whether it is the women informatics workers whose pink-collar status and dress code is, Carla Freeman argues, at once a disciplinary mechanism and a source of individual expression (2000, 2), or the specific model of blue-collar masculinity that made industrial work attractive to the working-class boys of Paul Willis's famous study (1977, 150), this gendering of labor – doing men's work or women's work, doing masculinity or femininity as part of doing the job – can also be a source of pleasure in work and serve to promote workers' identification with and investments in the job. This can extend to unwaged forms of labor too; consider, for example, the ways in which conforming to a gender division of household labor might be for some people welcome confirmations of gender and sexual identities and relations. "What is produced and reproduced," in the case of one such example, is thus "not merely the activity and artifact of domestic life, but the material embodiment of wifely and husbandly roles and, derivatively, of womanly and manly conduct" (West and Zimmerman 1991, 30). Sometimes doing gender might be treated as part of doing the job; at other times doing the job is part of what it means to do gender. As Robin Leidner observes in her study of routinized interactive service work, the "degree to which workers accept the identity implied by a job is therefore determined in part by the degree to which they can interpret the job as expressing their gender in a satisfying way" (1993, 194).

But there is more to this story. For an employee, it is not merely a matter of bringing one's gendered self to work but of becoming gendered in and through work. For an employer, it is not just a matter of hiring masculine and feminine workers and putting them to work, but of actively managing workers' gendered identities and relationships. Exploitable subjects are not just found; they are, as Michael Burawoy famously argues, made at the point of production (1979). Even at the level of specific workplaces, individual managers can to some degree fashion the exploitable subjects, including the specific kind of feminized or masculinized subjects they imagine that they have already hired (Salzinger 2003, 20–21). Of course, it is difficult to predict whether various jobs will be segregated by gender in this way, whether they will be considered suitable men's work or women's work, and which particular models of gender such workers will be expected to conform to. In the fast-food franchise that Leidner studied, cooking

was understood by managers and workers alike as men's work when it could have just as easily been coded as a feminized activity. Though it is not always easy to foresee if jobs will become gendered – or, if so, which jobs will be treated as more or less appropriate for which specific ideal of gendered comportment – the occupational segregation that is part and parcel of the gender division of labor stands nonetheless as supposed empirical proof of the necessity of gender difference and hierarchy. Thus, as Leidner notes, “the considerable flexibility of notions of proper gender enactment does not undermine the appearance of inevitability and naturalness that continues to support the division of labor by gender” (1993, 196). In her study of gendered labor in the maquiladoras, Leslie Salzinger argues that it is precisely the combination of rigid gender categories with the malleability and variability of their enactments and meaning that explains the resilience of gender as a principle of human differentiation (2003, 25). In this sense, ironically, the tremendous plasticity of gender reinforces rather than undermines its naturalization.

Work values

The category of the work society refers not just to the socially mediating and subjectively constitutive roles of work but to the dominance of its values. Challenging the present organization of work requires not only that we confront its reification and depoliticization but also its normativity and moralization. Work is not just defended on grounds of economic necessity and social duty; it is widely understood as an individual moral practice and collective ethical obligation. Traditional work values – those that preach the moral value and dignity of waged work and privilege such work as an essential source of individual growth, self-fulfillment, social recognition, and status – continue to be effective in encouraging and rationalizing the long hours US workers are supposed to dedicate to waged work and the identities they are expected to invest there. This normalizing and moralizing ethic of work should be very familiar to most of us; it is, after all, routinely espoused in managerial discourse, defended in the popular media, and enshrined in public policies. The ethic's productivist values are promoted on both the political Right and Left, from employers seeking the most able and tractable workers, and politicians intent on moving women from welfare to waged work, to parents and educators eager to prepare their children or students to embrace the values that might best ensure their future economic security and social achievement.

Let me be clear: to call these traditional work values into question is not to claim that work is without value. It is not to deny the necessity of productive activity or to dismiss the likelihood that, as William Morris describes it, there might be for all living things “a pleasure in the exercise of their energies” (1999, 129). It is, rather, to insist that there are other ways to organize and distribute that activity and to remind us that it is also possible to be creative outside the boundaries of work. It is to suggest that there might be a variety of ways to experience the pleasure that we may now find in work, as well as other pleasures that we may wish to discover, cultivate, and enjoy. And it is to remind us that the willingness to live for and through work renders subjects supremely functional for capitalist purposes. But before the work society can be publicized and raised as a political problem, we need to understand the forces – including the work ethic – that promote our acceptance of and powerful identification with work and help to make it such a potent object of desire and privileged field of aspiration.

Feminism has its own tendencies toward the mystification and moralization of work and has reproduced its own version of this famed ethic. Consider two of the dominant feminist remedies for the gender divisions and hierarchies of waged and unwaged work. One strategy, popular with at least some feminists of both the first and second waves, is to more or less accept the lesser value accorded to unwaged domestic labor and seek to secure women’s equal access to waged work. Waged work would be women’s ticket out of culturally mandated domesticity. While recognizing the importance of the ongoing struggle to secure equal employment opportunities for women, I want to argue that subjecting feminism’s own idealization of waged work to critical scrutiny remains an important task as well. Confronting the present organization of waged labor and its values is especially urgent in the wake of the 1996 welfare reform debate and resulting legislation. Certainly the attack on poor women that was perpetrated in the name of the work ethic should inspire the reconsideration and reinvention of feminist perspectives on waged work – its ever-shifting realities and its long-standing values.

A second feminist strategy concentrates on efforts to revalue unwaged forms of household-based labor, from housework to caring work. Certainly making this socially necessary labor visible, valued, and equitably distributed remains a vital feminist project as well. The problem with both of these strategies – one focused on gaining women’s entry into all forms of waged work and the other committed to gaining social recognition of, and men’s equal responsibility for, unwaged domestic work – is their failure to challenge the dominant legitimating discourse of work. On the contrary, each approach tends to draw upon the language and sentiments of the traditional work ethic to win support for its claims about the

essential dignity and special value of women's waged or unwaged labor.⁷ How might feminism contest the marginalization and underestimation of unwaged forms of reproductive labor, without trading on the work ethic's mythologies of work? Feminists, I suggest, should focus on the demands not simply or exclusively for more work and better work, but also for less work; we should focus not only on revaluing feminized forms of unwaged labor but also challenge the sanctification of such work that can accompany or be enabled by these efforts.

The question is, then, how to struggle against both labor's misrecognition and devaluation on the one hand, and its metaphysics and moralism on the other hand. The refusal of work, a concept drawn from the autonomous Marxist tradition, will help to focus the analysis on the question of work's meaning and value. In contrast to some other types of Marxism that confine their critique of capitalism to the exploitation and alienation of work without attending to its overvaluation, this tradition offers a more expansive model of critique that seeks to interrogate at once capitalist production and capitalist (as well as socialist) productivism. From the perspective of the refusal of work, the problem with work cannot be reduced to the extraction of surplus value or the degradation of skill, but extends to the ways that work dominates our lives. The struggle against work is a matter of securing not only better work, but also the time and money necessary to have a life outside work. Although there are a number of important analyses of the most exploited forms of waged and unwaged work performed by workers both in the United States and beyond its borders, the larger systems of labor and especially the values that help sustain them are often insufficiently theorized, leaving one to conclude that all of our work-related goals would be met and the dominant work values justified if only such work were to resemble more closely the employment conditions at the middle and upper reaches of the labor hierarchy. The theory and practice of the refusal of work insists that the problem is not just that work cannot live up to the ethic's idealized image, that it neither exhibits the virtues nor delivers the meaning that the ethic promises us in exchange for a lifetime of work, but perhaps also the ideal itself.

7 Taken together, the two strategies risk replicating the traditional choice between either valuing work or valuing family, in relation to which various "work-family balance" programs remain the most-cited – but, it seems to me, singularly inadequate – solution to the conflicts generated by the two spheres' competing claims on our loyalties.

Work and labor

Earlier I noted the difference between thinking systematically about work and thinking about this or that job. As a way to further clarify my concerns and intentions, I turn here to another distinction – the first of three additional conceptual pairs that I want to explore – that between work and labor. Although the division that I want to register between these categories is not a terminological one, I want to begin the discussion with a brief clarification about my use of the first term. In this book, the label “work” will refer to productive cooperation organized around, but not necessarily confined to, the privileged model of waged labor. What counts as work, which forms of productive activity will be included and how each will be valued, are a matter of historical dispute. Certainly the questions of whether or not various forms of productive activity – including some unwaged forms – will be recognized as work and at what rate they will be compensated have long been at the forefront of class, race, and gender struggles in and beyond the United States.

Which brings me to the relationship between work and labor: for the purposes of this project, I will use the terms interchangeably, thereby running roughshod over a distinction that is frequently, though inconsistently and variably, posed. For Hannah Arendt, to cite one notable theorist, the distinction between labor as the activity that reproduces biological life and work as the creation of an object world serves, among other things, to establish by way of comparison the singularity of a third category, action, as the definitively political activity of being in common (1958). Within the Marxist tradition, by contrast, it is perhaps more often labor – or, specifically, living labor – that figures as the more expansive category and valued practice. Conceived as a collective and creative human capacity harnessed by capital to the production of surplus value, living labor can yield both a critical standpoint from which the alienating and exploitative conditions of modern work can be critically interrogated and a utopian potential that can inform speculations about the revolutionary transformation of those conditions. By this account, the human capacity for labor may be hobbled by the organization of waged work, but as a collective creative potential, can also exceed them.

As far as the classic Arendtian approach to the categories is concerned, the distance it places between both labor and work on the one hand, and the legitimate business of the political on the other hand, renders it less useful for my purposes. As for the example from the Marxist tradition, while I recognize the power of the distinction it poses, I find it ill-suited to a critique that takes aim at both the structures of work and its dominant values. The trouble with the category of living labor deployed in this way as an alternative to work is, as I see it, that it is haunted by the very same essentialized conception of work and inflated notion

of its meaning that should be called into question. To the extent that it is imbued in this way with the productivist values I want to problematize, it can neither provide the critical leverage necessary to interrogate the dominant ethic of work nor generate an alternative mode of valuation – a vision of the work society not perfected but overcome.⁸ Consistent in this respect with Postone’s antiproductivist Marxism, the ensuing analysis intends not to advance a “critique of capitalism *from the standpoint of labor*,” but to pursue a “critique of labor in capitalism” (1996, 5). My refusal to distinguish between work and labor is thus a wager of sorts: by blocking access to a vision of unalienated and unexploited work in the guise of living labor, one that could live up to the work ethic’s ideals about labor’s necessity and virtues and would be worthy of the extravagant praise the ethic bestows, I hope to concentrate and amplify the critique of work as well as to inspire what I hope will be a more radical imagination of postwork futures.

In place of the opposition between labor and work, I will employ a number of other distinctions over the course of the argument to secure some critical insight into particular dimensions of work and to imagine other possibilities. These will include the distinction between work time and non-work time, between work and life, between time for what we are obligated to do and time for “what we will,” or – to mark differences at yet another level of abstraction – between the category of antiwork used to signal the deconstructive moment of this critique of the work society, and the concept of postwork offered as a place holder for something yet to come.

Work and class

Whereas the distinction between work and labor will be suspended for the purposes of this analysis, the relationship between work and class is a link I want to maintain, if only obliquely. Class is, of course, a central category of Marxist political economy, as Marx makes clear in what follows the passage from *Capital* cited above. Consider the first thing we see when we accompany the two owners of property – in one case, money; in the other, labor power – as they descend from the Eden of market exchange where they meet to trade equivalents into the hidden abode of production where one party is set to work. “When we leave this sphere of simple circulation or the exchange of commodities,” Marx writes, “a certain change takes place, or so it appears, in the physiognomy of our *dramatis personae*. He who was previously the money-owner now strides out in front as a

⁸ Harry Cleaver offers a similar argument against the labor-work distinction (2002).

capitalist; the possessor of labour-power follows as his worker” (1976, 280). Where we had observed two equal individuals, each in possession of a commodity, who agree to make an exchange for the benefit of each, now we witness the inequality that separates the one who steps in front from the one who follows behind; with this shift of the locus of perception from the marketplace to the workplace, the existence of a social hierarchy based on class comes into sharp focus.

Despite the centrality of class in traditional Marxist analysis, work remains my privileged object of study and preferred terrain of political struggle. So let me say something about the relationship between work and class and what might be at stake in different formulations of its terms. There are at least two ways to approach the relationship between the categories: one draws a rather sharp distinction between them, whereas the other finds overlapping concerns. I will start with the first. The difference between the concepts is perhaps most starkly posed when work understood as a process is compared to class conceived in terms of an outcome – that is, as a category (whether explained by reference to ownership, wealth, income, occupation, or forms of belonging) designed to map patterns of economic inequality. To the extent that class is defined and measured in this way, as an outcome rather than an activity, then its utility for my purposes will be limited.

I am, of course, not the first to raise such concerns about this approach to the category of class. For example, the potential shortcomings of the concept have long been debated within Marxist feminism. The original “woman question” was, after all, generated by the disjuncture between the categories of gender and class, and the question this posed for the relationship between feminism and class struggle. But the trouble with class for second-wave feminists was not just that it might be inadequate to broader, extra-economic fields of analysis; the problem was that to the extent that class was conceived – as it typically was – as a gender- and race-blind category, its ability to register the contours of even narrowly economic hierarchies was limited as well. For some of the same reasons that I want to foreground the category of work over that of class, Iris Young once argued in favor of substituting the Marxist category of division of labor for class as a primary analytic of Marxist feminism. In this classic contribution to second-wave Marxist feminism, Young describes at least two advantages of this methodological shift. First, the division of labor has at once a broader reach than class and allows a more differentiated application. Not only can it be used to register multiple divisions of labor by class as well as by gender, race, and nation, but it can, as Young explains, also expose “specific cleavages and contradictions *within a class*” (1981, 51; emphasis added) – not just along the lines of gender, race, and nation, but also, potentially, of occupation and income. Thus the category of the gender division of labor, for example, enables a focus on gendered patterns of work “without

assuming that all women in general or all women in a particular society have a common and unified situation” (55). Like the division of labor, the category of work seems to me at once more capacious and more finely tuned than the category of class. After all, work, including its absence, is both important to and differently experienced within and across lines of class, gender, race, and nation. In this sense, the politics of and against work has the potential to expand the terrain of class struggle to include actors well beyond that classic figure of traditional class politics, the industrial proletariat.

Consider too the second advantage noted by Young: “The category of division of labor can not only refer to a set of phenomena broader than that of class, but also more concrete.” Unlike class, by her account, the division of labor “refers specifically to the *activity* of labor itself, and the specific social and institutional relations of that activity,” proceeding thus “at the more concrete level of particular relations of interaction and interdependence in a society” (51). By this measure, whereas class addresses the outcome of laboring activity, the division of labor points toward the activity itself. Here too there are similarities between Young’s interest in the category of division of labor and my focus on work: after all, work, including the dearth of it, is the way that capitalist valorization bears most directly and most intensively on more and more people’s lives. This politics of work could be conceived as a way to link the everyday and sometimes every-night experiences of work – its spaces, relations and temporalities; its physical, affective, and cognitive practices; its pains and pleasures – to the political problematic of their present modes and codes of organization and relations of rule.⁹ Although the category of class remains analytically powerful, I would argue that its political utility is more negligible. The problem is that while the oppositional class category of the industrial period – the “working class” – may accurately describe most people’s relation to waged labor even in a postindustrial economy, it is increasingly less likely to match their self-descriptions. The category of the middle class has absorbed so many of our subjective investments that it is difficult to see how the working class can serve as a viable rallying point in the United States today. A politics of work, on the other hand, takes aim at an activity rather than an identity, and a central component of daily life rather than an outcome. Once again, the struggle over work in this respect has the potential to open a more expansive terrain than that of traditional class politics, insofar as the problem of work carries the potential to resonate, albeit in very different ways, across a number of income, occupational, and identity groups.

⁹ The notion of “relations of rule” is adapted from Dorothy Smith’s (far richer) category of “relations of ruling” (1987, 3).

The advantages of work over class extend beyond its breadth and tangibility. Crucial for Marx in his own privileging of labor as the point of entry into the materialist analysis of capitalist society – rather than beginning, for example, with political inequality or poverty – is the relationship between labor and agency that he assumes to be fundamental to anticapitalist politics. Thus in the *German Ideology*, Marx and Engels distinguish their materialist methodology not only from the idealism of the Young Hegelians but also from Feuerbach’s “ahistorical” brand of materialism that may have recognized, to borrow another of Marx and Engels’s formulations, “that circumstances make men” but not necessarily that “men make circumstances” (1970, 59). Materialism, as Marx and Engels understand it, is a matter not merely of the social construction of subjects but a matter of creative activity, of doing and making, the ontological trajectories of which are equally synchronic and diachronic. By focusing on laboring practices, or “living sensuous activity” (64), materialism as Marx and Engels conceive it is a matter not merely of the social construction of subjects but of creative activity, the capacity not only to make commodities but to remake a world. In this way, the focus on laboring practices, on the labor process and the relations of labor, can register the workers’ power to act, in contrast, it seems to me, to their relative disempowerment that is registered in the economic outcomes the categories of class are often used to map and measure.¹⁰

So by at least one way of reckoning, class and work belong to different fields of analysis, and my project pursues the critical study of work instead of class analysis and antiwork politics as a substitute for class struggle. But there is another way to approach class that does not produce such a sharp contrast with the category of work and that yields a different and, I think, more compelling approach to this territory. The distinction between the two fields of analysis becomes rather less clear when class too is conceived in terms of a process rather than an outcome. Process notions of class disrupt the functionalism of static mappings of class formations by attending to the practices by and relations within which they are secured, re-created, and challenged.¹¹ If class is figured as a process of

¹⁰ Here, it should be noted, the concepts of living labor and work are rendered more compatible if living labor is conceived not as an interior essence or normative standard, but as a potential for specifically political agency. In this way, the concept serves not as a critical lens so much as “a source of the auto-valorization of subjects and groups, as the creation of social cooperation,” as the potential to construct alternatives (Negri 1996, 171). See also Jason Read’s similar approach to the category (2003, 90–91).

¹¹ Different but compatible approaches to class as process include Joan Acker’s revisiting of class from a feminist perspective (2000), Stanley Aronowitz’s insistence on a class theory that places the emphasis on social time over social space (2003), and William Corlett’s model of “class action” as a process of labor’s self-determination (1998).

becoming classed, it may be that work – including struggles over what counts as work – could be conceived as a useful lens through which to approach class; in this way, the struggle against work could be a terrain of class politics.

But let me add one caveat: rather than conceiving class groupings and relations as the ground of antiwork politics, as that which provides its fuel and organizational form, it might be better to think of them as what might emerge from these efforts. By this reading, class formation, or what the autonomist tradition calls class composition, is best conceived as an outcome of struggles rather than their cause. The particular composition of the working class that might emerge from this politics of work – that is, the collectivities that might coalesce around its issues and the divisions that might develop in the interstices of antiwork struggles and in relation to postwork imaginaries – remains an open question. To the extent that the concerns it raises carry the potential to cut across traditional class divisions, a politics against work might serve to de-constitute the field of working-class politics and reconstitute it in a different, perhaps more expansive, way.

So in the end, I am not saying that we should stop thinking about class, but rather that focusing on work is one politically promising way of approaching class – because it is so expansive, because it is such a significant part of everyday life, because it is something we do rather than a category to which we are assigned, and because for all these reasons it can be raised as a political issue. By this account, work is a point of entry into the field of class analysis through which we might be better able to make class processes more visible, legible, and broadly relevant and, in the process, perhaps provoke class formations yet to come.

Freedom and equality

Whereas my analysis ignores the difference between work and labor and, in the end, defers the question of the precise relationship between work and class, it presumes the significance of another distinction, the one between freedom and equality. To get a sense of how this pair of concepts is conceived for the purposes of this project, let us return yet again to Marx's description of what we see when we descend with the owners of money and labor power from the realm of market exchange to the realm of production. To recall our earlier discussion of the passage, accompanying the change of venue is a visible change in the physiognomy of the dramatis personae: we see the money owner stride out in front as capitalist, while the possessor of labor power follows behind as worker. "The one," Marx continues, "smirks self-importantly and is intent on business; the other is timid and holds back, like someone who has brought his own hide to

market and now has nothing else to expect but – a hiding” (1976, 280; translation modified). Whereas we had, as noted above, witnessed the formal equivalence of contractors in the labor market, in the realm of work we discover hierarchy. As the conclusion of the passage suggests, however, it is not only inequality that is revealed, with the capitalist striding in front and the worker following behind, but subordination, with the former smirking and self-important and the latter timid and holding back. In other words, the critical analysis of work reveals not only exploitation but – as the reference to the violence of a hiding serves to amplify – domination.¹²

The domination and subordination experienced at work is not merely incidental to processes of exploitation. Carole Pateman’s analysis of the employment contract is illuminating on this point. By her account, the problem with the labor contract is not just a function of the coerced entry that is ensured by the absence of viable alternatives to waged labor, nor is it only a matter of the inequality that is produced as the result of the contract’s terms. To translate this into a Marxist vocabulary, the problem can be reduced neither to forced labor nor to exploitation. Rather, we need to pay more attention to the relationship of dominance and submission that is authorized by the waged labor contract and that shapes labor’s exercise. Exploitation is possible, Pateman notes, because “the employment contract creates the capitalist as master; he has the political right to determine how the labour of the worker will be used” (1988, 149). This relation of command and obedience, the right of the employer to direct his or her employees that is granted by the contract, is not so much a byproduct of exploitation as its very precondition.

Marx too would seem to be quite clear that the problem with work cannot be reduced to the terms of its recompense, but rather extends into the very heart of the wage relation and the labor process it commands. That is why he insists on describing the program of raising wages as only “*better payment for the slave*” (1964, 118). To focus narrowly on outcomes rather than processes, and on inequality and not also on unfreedom, is to impoverish the critique of capitalism. Marx muses about a comparably inadequate approach in “Critique of the Gotha Program”: “It is as if, among slaves who have at last got behind the secret of slavery and broken out in rebellion, a slave still in thrall to obsolete notions were to inscribe on the programme of the rebellion: Slavery must be abolished because the feeding of slaves in the system of slavery cannot exceed a certain low maximum!” (1978, 535).

¹² A relationship that might have been captured by a quantitative logic, measured by the distance between the one in front and the one behind, is revealed as something that must be grasped also in qualitative terms, as attitude, affect, feeling, and symbolic exchange.

I am thus interested in adding to the critique of the exploitative and alienating dimensions of work a focus on its political relations of power and authority, as relations of rulers and ruled. My inspiration for this, it should be noted, is not only these readings of Marx, but certain strands of 1970s feminism. A commitment to freedom in conjunction with or beyond equality was what distinguished the more radical sectors of the early second wave of US feminism from liberal feminists of the time. Refusing to honor the “do not enter” sign on the door leading to the so-called private terrains of the family, marriage, and sexuality – a sign meant to ban political judgment of relations that were thought to be governed only by the exigencies of nature or prerogatives of individual choice – the radical elements of the movement sought not women’s assimilation into the status quo but a sweeping transformation of everyday life.¹³ The goal was not, to use the vocabulary of the day, women’s mere equality with men, but women’s liberation. What precisely they were to be liberated from and to were, of course, matters of lively debate, but the language of liberation and the project of conceiving a state of freedom beyond equality did serve to open a broader horizon of feminist imagination and indicate new agendas for action.

In addition to 1970s women’s liberation, about which I will have more to say below, another resource for this project comes from recent work in political theory that affirms freedom as an important feminist goal. The work of Wendy Brown and Linda Zerilli is particularly valuable for its efforts to take up “the project of feminism in a freedom-centered frame” (Zerilli 2005, 95). Freedom is understood in these accounts beyond the liberal model of an individual possession, something that emanates from the sovereign will and guards its independence such that, to quote a familiar formulation, “over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign” (Mill 1986, 16). Instead, freedom is seen as a practice, not a possession, a process rather than a goal. Whether it is drawn from the simultaneously creative and destructive qualities of the will to power in Brown’s Nietzschean analysis, or from the inaugural and disordering capacities of human action in Zerilli’s Arendtian account, freedom emerges in these texts as a double-sided phenomenon. It is depicted, on the one hand, as an antidisciplinary practice – that is, to use Brown’s formulation, as “a permanent struggle against what will otherwise be done to and for us” (1995, 25). But there is more to it: freedom is also a creative practice, what Zerilli describes as a collective practice of world building and Brown characterizes in terms of a desire “to participate in shaping the conditions and terms of life,” a longing “to generate futures

¹³ Indeed, as one radical feminist famously declared, with a combination of daring and grandiosity not uncommon to 1970s feminism, “if there were another word more all-embracing than revolution we would use it” (Firestone 1970, 3).

together rather than navigate or survive them” (1995, 4). Freedom thus depends on collective action rather than individual will, and this is what makes it political. Though freedom is, by this account, a relational practice, it is not a zero-sum game in which the more one has, the less another can enjoy. Freedom considered as a matter of individual self-determination or self-sovereignty is reduced to a solipsistic phenomenon. Rather, as a world-building practice, freedom is a social – and hence necessarily political – endeavor. It is, as Marx might put it, a species-being rather than an individual capacity; or, as Zerilli contends, drawing on an Arendtian formulation, freedom requires plurality (2005, 20). Thus Arendt provocatively declares: “If men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce” (1961, 165). Freedom in this sense demands not the absence of power but its democratization.

Although political theorists like Brown and Zerilli are helpful in elaborating a notion of freedom that can serve as a central analytic and principle of political aspiration, political theory in general, as noted above, has not attended sufficiently to work. Work has been relatively neglected not only as a practice productive of hierarchies – a scene of gendering, racialization, and becoming classed – but as an arena in which to develop and pursue a freedom-centered politics. Yet at the same time, as Michael Denning reminds us, “the workplace remains the fundamental *unfree* association of civil society” (2004, 224). It is the site of many of the most palpable and persistent relations of domination and subordination that people confront, even if these are not conventionally perceived as potentially alterable enough to be regarded as properly political matters. If, as I maintain, a political theory of work should address the problem of freedom, a political theory of freedom should also focus on work. My interest, then, is in developing a feminist political theory of work that could pose work itself – its structures and its ethics, its practices and relations – not only as a machine for the generation of inequalities, but as a political problem of freedom.¹⁴ Linking the previous distinction between class and work to this conceptual pair might help to clarify my concerns in this respect. Rather than a politics of class focused primarily on issues of economic redistribution and economic justice – particularly a politics that seeks to alter wage levels to redraw the map of class categories – the politics of work I am interested in pursuing also investigates questions about the command and control over the spaces and times of life, and seeks the freedom to participate in shaping the terms of what collectively we can do and what together we might become. If what I am calling a “politics of class outcomes” lodges its central

14 Here I obviously part company with more orthodox Arendtian – let alone Nietzschean – analyses that would exclude work from the proper business of the political.

complaint against the inequalities of capitalist society, the politics of work that I would like to see elaborated would also levy a critique at its unfreedoms.¹⁵

Marxist feminism redux

Although I draw on a variety of sources, the version of 1970s feminism that has been of particular importance to this effort to theorize work in these terms is Anglo-American Marxist feminism.¹⁶ As an attempt to map capitalist political economies and gender regimes from a simultaneously anticapitalist and feminist perspective, the tradition in its heyday was committed to investigating how various gendered laboring practices are both put to use by, and potentially disruptive of, capitalist and patriarchal social formations.¹⁷ Three focuses of this literature are especially relevant to my interests here: publicizing work, politicizing it, and radically transforming it. However, the efforts in all three of these areas require some prodding and pushing if they are to be of use to this project in this moment. The category of the refusal of work introduced above will be used to do some of this prodding and pushing, serving as a tool with which to reconfigure each of these focuses by providing certain correctives and additions.

The Marxist – or, as some prefer to call it, socialist feminist – tradition is an inspiration for this project first and foremost because of its focus on labor, both as

15 To be sure, to affirm the value of this latter agenda focused on freedom is not to discount the ongoing importance of the former committed to equality.

16 I will generally use the label “Marxist feminism” to describe a wide variety of feminisms, including my own, despite the fact that I sometimes draw on sources more typically identified (and often even self-identified) as socialist feminist. The distinction between Marxist feminism and socialist feminism is not always clear. Often they are distinguished by period, with Marxist feminism preceding the development of socialist feminism, and the latter described as a synthesis of Marxism and radical feminism developed in the 1970s. The term “socialist” is also sometimes used as a way to designate a more expansive and inclusive project, one committed to political-economic analysis, but not necessarily to Marxism per se. I prefer the term “Marxist feminism” for two reasons: first, because my own work and many of its points of reference, including the domestic-labor and wages for housework literatures, are indebted to Marxist theoretical traditions; and second, because I am skeptical about the contemporary relevance of the term “socialist,” a point I will expand upon below.

17 The late 1960s to the early 1980s marks the period of Marxist feminism’s maximum influence within US feminist theory. Today the project lives on, often under other labels, and explores, among other things, how the present organization of both waged and unwaged work – including current instances of the class, gender, race, and transnational divisions of labor – are implicated in the construction and maintenance of class, gender, racial, and national differences and hierarchies.

a point of entry into the critical analysis of capitalist patriarchy and as a key site of political action. “Socialist feminism,” as one analyst summarizes it, “means paying consistent attention to women *in our capacity as workers*, and in all our variety” (Froines 1992, 128). Perhaps its most significant contribution to the critical theory of work in the 1970s was the expansion of the category. Feminists insisted that the largely unwaged “reproductive” work that made waged “productive” work possible on a daily and generational basis was socially necessary labor, and that its relations were thus part and parcel of the capitalist mode of production. What had been coded as leisure was in fact work, and those supposedly spontaneous expressions of women’s nature were indeed skillful practices. In their efforts to adapt Marxist concepts and methods to new concerns, these feminists usefully troubled the tradition’s definition of work. Nancy Hartsock describes this by way of an addendum to Marx’s story about the owner of money and the owner of labor power. To return to that passage one final time, if after descending with the capitalist and worker into the realm of waged work we were then to follow the worker home, into yet another hidden abode of production, we might observe another change in the *dramatis personae*:

He who before followed behind as the worker, timid and holding back, with nothing to expect but a hiding, now strides in front, while a third person, not specifically present in Marx’s account of the transactions between capitalist and worker (both of whom are male) follows timidly behind, carrying groceries, baby, and diapers. (Hartsock 1983, 234)

By following the worker not only from marketplace to workplace, but also from the place of employment to the domestic space, we find evidence not only of class hierarchy, but of specifically gendered forms of exploitation and patterns of inequality. By descending into the even more hidden, even more fiercely privatized space of the household, we see men and women who may be formally equal under the law transformed through the gender division of labor into relatively privileged and penalized subjects. Thus, Marxist feminists in the 1970s explored the means by which gender hierarchies deliver unwaged women workers to the domestic mode of reproduction while also ensuring a cheaper and more flexible secondary or tertiary waged labor force. These feminists debated the exact value to capital of women’s unwaged domestic labor and exposed the hyperexploitation of women wage earners around the globe. And they studied the interconnections among the family, the labor market, waged and unwaged labor processes, and the welfare state. As we will see, in fact, many of their insights into the conditions of women’s labor under Fordism will prove to be more widely applicable to the forms of work typical of post-Fordist economies. By extending these efforts to publicize, politicize, and transform work into the field of domestic labor, feminists usefully

complicated and upped the ante of all three projects. What might have at first appeared to be a simple addition to Marxist analyses has in fact required a vast rethinking of its concepts and models, its critical analyses and utopian visions.

Whereas many of these texts are helpful for their emphasis on work, the tradition's productivist tendencies, which it shares with some other versions of Marxist theory, prove more troublesome. As we have already noted, feminism has managed to reproduce its own version of the work ethic, whether in the process of defending waged work as the alternative to feminine domesticity in both liberal feminism and traditional Marxism, or through efforts to gain recognition for modes of unwaged labor as socially necessary labor. Feminism, including much of 1970s Marxist feminism, has tended to focus more on the critique of work's organization and distribution than on questioning its values. The autonomous Marxist tradition is thus useful in this instance insofar as it simultaneously centers its analytical apparatus on work and disavows its traditional ethics. Central to that tradition is not only the analytical primacy accorded to the imposition of work as fundamental to the capitalist mode of production, but also the political priority of the refusal of work – a priority recorded in the call not for a liberation *of* work but a liberation *from* work (see Virno and Hardt 1996, 263). The refusal of work is at once a model of resistance, both to the modes of work that are currently imposed on us and to their ethical defense, and a struggle for a different relationship to work born from the collective autonomy that a postwork ethics and more nonwork time could help us to secure. As a simultaneous way to insist on work's significance and to contest its valuation, the Marxist feminist literature on wages for housework – with roots in an Italian feminism that was, as one participant observed, “characterized, with more emphasis than in other countries, by the *leitmotif* of ‘work/rejection of work’” (Dalla Costa 1988, 24) – will be of particular importance to my project in this respect.

Thus work is not only a locus of unfreedom, it is also a site of resistance and contestation.¹⁸ This brings me to the second element of the Marxist feminist literature that I have found instructive: the commitment to work's politicization. Marxist feminists focused not only on exploited workers but, to cite one of these authors, also on subjects that are “potentially revolutionary” (Eisenstein 1979, 8). Within this body of literature, one can find an attention both to structures of domination and to the possibilities for critical consciousness, subversive practices, and feminist standpoints that might be developed in their midst. This investment in constructing collective political subjects on the basis of, or in relation to, work

¹⁸ Both Marxists and feminists, as Barbara Ehrenreich explained her understanding of the socialist feminist project in 1976, “seek to understand the world – not in terms of static balances, symmetries, etc. (as in conventional social science) – but in terms of antagonisms” (1997, 66).

practices, relations, and subjectivities remains for me an aspect of this literature with the most relevance to contemporary feminism. Harking back to the example of a Marxism that conceived the industrial proletariat as a revolutionary class less because it had nothing to lose but its chains than because it had the power to create a new world, many of these authors concentrate on the ways that feminized modes of labor – marginalized by, but nonetheless fundamental to, capitalist valorization processes – could provide points of critical leverage and sites of alternative possibility.

This more capacious understanding of work also entailed a transformation of what might be recognized as a terrain of anticapitalist politics, pushing beyond orthodox Marxism's industrial model of productive cooperation that centered on the factory, in which the Proletariat was once imagined as the singularly revolutionary subject, to a more expansive set of sites and subjects. The focal point of analysis for this expanded political terrain might best be described as the contradiction between capital accumulation and social reproduction.¹⁹ Capital requires, for example, time both to "consume" labor power and to produce (or reproduce) it, and the time devoted to one is sometimes lost to the other. The competing requirements of creating surplus value and sustaining the lives and socialities upon which it depends form a potential fault line through capitalist political economies, one that might serve to generate critical thinking and political action. Under the conditions of Fordism, for example, this meant that capital was dependent on a family-based model of social reproduction, one that was in some respects functional to its purposes but was in other ways a potential hindrance to its hegemony. Thus we find in a body of management literature and practice that spans the Fordist and post-Fordist periods an expressed need to locate and preserve some kind of balance between work and family – a relationship that many feminists, on the contrary, struggled to expose as a product of normative imposition rather than natural proclivity and a site of flagrant contradiction rather than mere imbalance.

But just as Marxist feminism's critical study of work was limited, at least for the purposes of this project, by its productivist propensities, so too the focus on locating and cultivating revolutionary possibilities in relation to work was sometimes compromised by a susceptibility to functionalist logics. The temptation of functionalism is, of course, not peculiar to feminist theory. Indeed, its presence at some level reflects a methodological and political choice: whether to con-

¹⁹ Perhaps the contemporary literature that most directly addresses social reproduction as a feminist analytic, in this case on the terrain of political economy, comes out of Canada. For some good examples, see Bakker and Gill (2003), Bezanson and Luxton (2006), and Luxton and Corman (2001).

centrate on how social systems persist over time, or to highlight the ways that they can and do change. Foucault explains it this way: because of the instability and unpredictability generated by the “agonism” of power relations on the one hand and the “intransitivity of freedom” on the other hand, there is always the option “to decipher the same events and the same transformations either from inside the history of struggle or from the standpoint of the power relationships” (1983, 223, 226) – a pair of options between which his own work could be said to oscillate. This same methodological distinction marks a long-standing division within the Marxist tradition as well. Thus, for example, although they both offer systematic mappings of capitalist logics and social formations, Marx’s *Grundrisse* approaches the analysis more from the point of view of crisis and conflict, whereas *Capital* tells the story from the perspective of capital’s appropriative and recuperative capacities.

To return to the case of 1970s Marxist feminism, the residues of functionalist logics show up in what is, I would argue, a limited understanding of social reproduction. In fact, there are at least two related problems with the analyses from a contemporary perspective. First, whereas these authors arguably succeeded in developing more-complete accounts of the relationship between production and reproduction typical of Fordist political economies than were available elsewhere at the time, these accounts are no longer adequate to the project of mapping post-Fordism. In the classic texts from this period, production and reproduction were associated according to the logic of a dual-systems model with two different spaces: the waged workplace was the site of productive labor, and the household was the site of unwaged, reproductive labor. Reproductive labor in these accounts usually included the forms of unwaged work through which individuals met their daily needs for food, shelter, and care and raised a new generation to take their place.²⁰ However, under the conditions of postindustrial, post-Fordist, and post-Taylorist production, the always vexing exercise of distinguishing between production and reproduction – whether by sphere, task, or relationship to the wage – becomes even more difficult. The dual-systems model, always problematic, is thereby rendered even more deficient.

The second reason why the older models are no longer tenable brings us to the issue of their functionalism. Here is the problem: when reduced, as it tends to be in these analyses, to a familiar list of domestic labors, the category of social reproduction cannot pose the full measure of its conflict with the logics and processes

²⁰ “Social reproduction can thus be seen to include various kinds of work – mental, manual, and emotional – aimed at providing the historically and socially, as well as biologically, defined care necessary to maintain existing life and to reproduce the next generation” (Laslett and Brenner 1989, 383).

of capital accumulation. The specific problems that this more limited notion of reproduction serves to highlight – the invisibility, devaluation, and gendered division of specifically domestic labors – could, for example, be responded to (but not, of course, remedied) through an expanded reliance on marketized versions of such services. As the refusal-of-work perspective suggests, the problem with the organization of social reproduction extends beyond the problems of this work’s invisibility, devaluation, and gendering. Although I want to register that domestic labor is socially necessary and unequally distributed (insofar as gender, race, class, and nation often determines who will do more and less of it), I am also interested in moving beyond the claim that if it were to be fully recognized, adequately compensated, and equally divided, then the existing model of household-based reproduction would be rectified. A more expansive conception of social reproduction, coupled with the refusal of work, might be used to frame a more compelling problematic. What happens when social reproduction is understood as the production of the forms of social cooperation on which accumulation depends or, alternatively, as the rest of life beyond work that capital seeks continually to harness to its times, spaces, rhythms, purposes, and values? What I am in search of is a conception of social reproduction – of what it is we might organize around – that can pose the full measure of its antagonism with the exigencies of capital accumulation, a biopolitical model of social reproduction less readily transformed into new forms of work and thus less easily recuperated within the present terms of the work society.

The third aspect of the Marxist feminist tradition that I want to acknowledge here is its commitment to thinking within a horizon of utopian potential, that is, in relation to the possibility of fundamental transformation (Feminist Review Collective 1986, 8). Work is not only a site of exploitation, domination, and antagonism, but also where we might find the power to create alternatives on the basis of subordinated knowledges, resistant subjectivities, and emergent models of organization. At least some of this literature focuses on both antiwork politics and postwork imaginaries. This model of utopian politics that can “make the creation of prefigurative forms an explicit part of our movement against capitalism” and challenge the “politics of deferment” that would postpone such innovations to some distant future after “the revolution” is something that I think feminist theory should embrace (Rowbotham, Segal, and Wainwright 1979, 147, 140). The problem with these visions of radical social change from a contemporary perspective is that they were most often conceived of as variations on a theme named socialism, even if some called for “a new kind of socialism” or a socialist revo-

lution that would be equally feminist and antiracist.²¹ Today, however, it seems unlikely that socialism can serve as a persuasive signifier of a postcapitalist alternative. There are at least three kinds of problems with the term. At one level, there is the problem of the name itself: it has been some time since the language of socialism could resonate in the United States as a legible and generative utopian vocabulary (even though it continues to serve occasionally as a viable dystopia for the Right). But it is not just a matter of the label; it is about the content of the vision, which has traditionally centered on the equal liability to work together with a more equitable distribution of its rewards. As a certainly more just version of a social form that is nonetheless centered on work, it gestures toward a vision of the work society perfected, rather than transformed.

Beyond the obsolescence of the label and the commitment to work it affirms, there is a third problem with the legacy of socialism. Whereas the Marxist feminist – or, more specifically in this instance, the socialist feminist – tradition was willing to affirm the value of utopian speculation about a radically different future, the use of the label “socialism” often nonetheless seemed to assume that this future could be named and its basic contours predetermined. In this respect – here I anticipate an argument that I will develop in chapter 5 – socialist feminists would seem “to know too much too soon.” There are advantages, I claim, to more partial visions of alternatives, fragments or glimpses of something different that do not presume to add up to a blueprint of an already named future with a preconceived content. I will use the label “postwork society” not to anticipate an alternative so much as to point toward a horizon of utopian possibility, as it seems preferable to hold the space of a different future open with the term “post” than to presume to be able to name it as “socialist.”

In summary, my project can thus be said to begin with a historical tradition of Marxist feminism that often focused on the category of class, the ideal of equality, the problem of domestic labor, and the socialist struggle for more and better work, which I would like to redirect by way of the sometimes rather different commitments and imaginaries referenced by the categories of work, freedom, social reproduction, life, the refusal of work, and postwork. I will thus use work as a point of entry into the territory of class politics; freedom to supplement and redirect an anticapitalist political theory also committed to equality; the refusal of work to confront work’s overvaluation; the field of social reproduction as part of a struggle to wrest more of life from the encroachments of work; and postwork

²¹ That is, in terms of “the new forms of organization and relations between people which we define as socialism” (Berkeley-Oakland Women’s Union 1979, 356), but also sometimes in the more expansive terms of what another group identified as socialist, feminist, and antiracist revolution (Combahee River Collective 1979, 366).

utopianism to replace socialism as the horizon of revolutionary possibility and speculation.

Chapter overviews

The questions raised and points of focus elaborated above are meant to set the stage for the specific arguments pursued in the remaining chapters. One way to approach the overall structure of the discussion that follows is to separate it into two parts: a first part, encompassing chapters 1 and 2, that concentrates on the diagnostic and deconstructive dimensions of the critical theory of work; and a second part, including chapters 3, 4, and 5, that focuses on the prescriptive and reconstructive aspects of the project. Whereas “refusal” is the animating category of the first part, “demand” anchors the analysis in the second part. The argument thus proceeds from the refusal of the present terms of the work society to demands for remedies and for the imagining of alternative futures.

As noted above, the work ethic is at the center of the political theory of and against work that I want to begin to elaborate. A critique of work that seeks to challenge its dominance over our lives must take on the ethical discourse that gives work its meaning and defends its primacy. The first two chapters seek to develop a critical account of the work ethic and to explore some of the theoretical resources through which it might be interrogated. Chapter 1 concentrates on the nature and function of the work ethic in the United States. In what may be a fitting departure for a text so often indebted to Marxist resources, the analysis in chapter 1 draws on one of that tradition’s most famous critiques, Max Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Tracing the continuities and shifts in the work ethic over the course of its different incarnations – first as a Protestant ethic, and later as an industrial and then a postindustrial ethic – the analysis seeks to map the recent history of the work ethic and to raise questions about its future. Today when neoliberal and postneoliberal regimes demand that almost everyone work for wages (never mind that there is not enough work to go around), when postindustrial production employs workers’ minds and hearts as well as their hands, and when post-Taylorist labor processes increasingly require the self-management of subjectivity so that attitudes and affective orientations to work will themselves produce value, the dominant ethical discourse of work may be more indispensable than it has ever been, and the refusal of its prescriptions even more timely. The analysis thus attempts to account not only for the ethic’s longevity and power, but also its points of instability and vulnerability.

Chapter 2 explores some theoretical tools with which we might exploit some of these openings. Drawing on Jean Baudrillard's critique of productivism, the chapter explores the limitations of two familiar paradigms of Marxist theory, labeled here "socialist modernization" and "socialist humanism," and then concentrates on an explication of autonomist Marxism's theory and practice of the refusal of work. The critical review of the two earlier models presents an opportunity to confront the pro-work assumptions and values that remain stubbornly embedded within a number of theoretical frameworks, including some Marxist discourses, as well as instructive contrasts to the very different commitments animating the more recent example of autonomist Marxism. As a refusal not of creative or productive activity, but of the present configuration of the work society and its moralized conception of work, the refusal of work serves as a methodological center of gravity and ongoing inspiration for the models of analysis and speculation that occupy the subsequent chapters. The critical practice at the heart of the refusal of work, as I read it here, is at once deconstructive and reconstructive – or, as the autonomists might describe it, a practice of separation and process of self-valorization – an analysis that is committed at once to antiwork critique and postwork invention.

In keeping with this dual focus of the refusal of work, chapter 3 marks a shift in the project from the critical charge I just described to the task of constructing possible alternatives, from the development of an antiwork critique to the incitement of a postwork political imaginary. More specifically, the argument shifts at this point from a focus on the refusal of work and its ethics to the demands for a guaranteed basic income (chapter 3) and for a thirty-hour work week (chapter 4). The category of the utopian demand (a category I explore in more detail in chapter 5) is one of the ways I want to conceive the relationship between antiwork analysis and postwork desire, imagination, and will as they figure in the practice of political claims making. Utopian demands, including demands for basic income and shorter hours, are more than simple policy proposals; they include as well the perspectives and modes of being that inform, emerge from, and inevitably exceed the texts and practices by which they are promoted. Assessments of their value thus need to be attentive to the possibilities and limits of both their structural and discursive effects.

But first: why single out these demands? Certainly there are any number of demands for change worth exploring, proposals that could affect tangible improvements in the present conditions of work.²² The demand for a living wage is an obvious example; across the United States, campaigns for living-wage

²² Although since it is less a demand for change than a demand for the enforcement of existing policies, it is important to note that even demanding the enforcement of the wage and hours laws

reform have mobilized impressive levels of political activity and achieved significant victories. I focus on the demands for basic income and shorter hours for two reasons. First, like the demand for living wages and others, they represent important remedies for some of the problems with the existing system of wages and hours. A guaranteed and universal basic income would enhance the bargaining position of all workers vis-à-vis employers and enable some people to opt out of waged work without the stigma and precariousness of means-tested welfare programs. A thirty-hour full-time work week without a decrease in pay would help to address some of the problems of both the underemployed and the overworked. The second reason for focusing on these demands – which I think distinguishes them from many other demands for economic reform, including the demand for a living wage – is their capacity not only to improve the conditions of work but to challenge the terms of its dominance. These demands do not affirm our right to work so much as help us to secure some measure of freedom from it.²³ For the purposes of this project, I am interested in demands that would not only advance concrete reforms of work but would also raise broader questions about the place of work in our lives and spark the imagination of a life no longer so subordinate to it – demands that would serve as vectors rather than terminal points.²⁴

Chapter 3 begins with a rereading of the 1970s movement for wages for housework, the most promising dimensions of which, I argue, have been poorly understood. This instance of Marxist feminist theory and practice is particularly relevant to this project because of its roots in the autonomist tradition and for its commitment to, and distinctive deployment of, the refusal of work. Building on some of this literature's unique analyses of the gendered political economy of work, its mode of struggle against the organization of domestic work, and its treatment of the feminist political practice of demanding, I go on to propose a rationale for a different demand: the demand for a guaranteed basic income. I argue that this demand can deliver on some of the potential of wages for housework while being more consistent with conditions in a post-Fordist political economy. Drawing on a framework gleaned from the wages for housework literature, the demand for basic income can do more than present a useful reform; it can serve both to open

already on the books would make an enormous difference, especially to the lives of low-wage workers. See Annette Bernhardt et al. (2009).

23 Another example is the demand for universal healthcare without any ties to employment, although that demand's critique of work per se might be less direct than the critiques posed by the demands for basic income and shorter hours.

24 The demand for less work, as Jonathan Cutler and Stanley Aronowitz explain it, is unusual in its capacity to position workers to make further demands: "No other bargaining demand simultaneously enhances bargaining position" (1998, 20).

a critical perspective on the wage system and to provoke visions of a life not so dependent on the system's present terms and conditions.

This particular understanding of what a demand is and what it can do guides the analysis in chapter 4 of another demand, this one for shorter hours. The chapter explores the demand for a six-hour day with no decrease in pay as at once a demand for change and a perspective and provocation, at once a useful reform and a conceptual frame that could generate critical thinking and public debate about the structures and ethics of work. In contrast both to those who defend a reduction of hours at work in order to expand family time, and to those who fail in their articulation of the demand to address the intimate relationship between work and family, the case for shorter hours developed here focuses on expanding our freedom not only from capitalist command but also from imposed norms of sexuality and traditional standards of proper household composition and roles. Taking aim at, rather than appropriating, normative discourses of the family, the demand for shorter hours is conceived here as a demand for, among other benefits, more time to imagine, experiment with, and participate in the relationships of intimacy and sociality that we choose. This account thus understands the movement for shorter hours in terms of securing the time and space to confront and forge alternatives to the present structures and ethics of both work and family.

Whereas the demands for basic income and shorter hours usefully point in the direction of a critical politics against and beyond work, they could be easily dismissed as utopian. Chapter 5 investigates the case against utopia and, drawing on the work of Ernst Bloch and Friedrich Nietzsche, attempts a response. Rather than rehearse the arguments made in other chapters about why these demands are in fact realistic proposals, chapter 5 pursues another tack. Provisionally accepting the judgment that they are utopian, the discussion explores instead what a utopian demand is and what it might be able to do, arguing that only through a more complicated understanding of the utopian dimensions of these demands can we appreciate their efficacy. To establish the general credentials and specific possibilities and limitations of the demand as a utopian form, the analysis explores its relation to other, perhaps more familiar, utopian artifacts, including the traditional literary and philosophical utopia and the manifesto. The conception of the utopian demand that emerges from this account emphasizes not only its capacity to advance significant reforms, but also its potential as a critical perspective and force of provocation that can incite political desires for, imagination of, and mobilization toward different futures.

The brief epilogue attempts to both reflect on the previous arguments and address some topics that they neglected. I begin with two points of clarification. First, my preference for politics over ethics as the terrain of antiwork struggle and

postwork speculation raises a question about the relationship between politics and ethics that the analysis presumes. Also meriting discussion is a second relationship, between the project's radical aspirations to remake a life outside of work and its comparatively moderate demands. This seeming incongruence between ambitious ends and modest means warrants an elaboration of the relationship between reform and revolution that informs the project. In the final section, I take another step back from the material to consider one way to bring the two demands together as part of a broader political effort to defend life against work, the colloquial version of which could be described as "getting a life." The rubric of life against work is, I propose, both capacious and pointed enough to frame a potent antiwork politics and fuel a postwork imagination.

In the epigraph above, C. Wright Mills laments the fact that we measure the satisfaction of jobs only against the standard of other jobs: "One type of work, or one particular job, is contrasted with another type, experienced or imagined, within the present world of work." That is to say, "judgments are rarely made about the world of work as presently organized as against some other way of organizing it" (1951, 229). I want to make a case for the importance of a political theory of work and specifically, a political theory that seeks to pose work as a political problem of freedom. Beyond any particular claim or category – beyond any of the specific arguments about the role of the work ethic in sustaining the structures and cultures of work, the legitimacy of basic income, the need for shorter hours, or the utility of utopian thought – the project is meant to raise some basic questions about the organization and meaning of work. The assumptions at the heart of the work ethic, not only about the virtues of hard work and long hours but also about their inevitability, are too rarely examined, let alone contested. What kinds of conceptual frameworks and political discourses might serve to generate new ways of thinking about the nature, value, and meaning of work relative to other practices and in relation to the rest of life? How might we expose the fundamental structures and dominant values of work – including its temporalities, socialities, hierarchies, and subjectivities – as pressing political phenomena? If why we work, where we work, with whom we work, what we do at work, and how long we work are social arrangements and hence properly political decisions, how might more of this territory be reclaimed as viable terrains of debate and struggle? The problem with work is not just that it monopolizes so much time and energy, but that it also dominates the social and political imaginations. What might we name the variety of times and spaces outside waged work, and what might we wish to do with and in them? How might we conceive the content and parameters of our obligations to one another outside the currency of work? The argument that follows, then, is one attempt to assess theoretically

and imagine how to confront politically the present organization of work and the discourses that support it.

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