

Contradictions of Modern Work

MA Reading Seminar (10 points)

Instructor: Wanda Vrasti

Institut fuer Sozialwissenschaften, Humboldt University

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Work occupies a central place in our society: it is the way we acquire income, citizenship rights, social status and a sense of self-worth. Work is a vehicle for socialization and integration. And many of our modern institutions are designed to prepare (schools), discipline (prisons) or rehabilitate (hospitals) people for work. But modern work, that is, paid work, performed in the public sphere, sold in increments of time, and organized according to specialized functions, is only a recent invention, not older than industrial society itself. People have always worked to meet their needs, but with the rise of manufacturing capitalism, work becomes a commodity to be sold and bought on the free market, and rarely has anything to do with the reproduction and maintenance of human life.

Industrial society is a society of workers. The sheer size and latent revolutionary potential of the working class have forced those in power to give worker a place at the table of political negotiations. Workers, gradually, and only through struggle or the threat of communism, secured a shorter workday, better wages, and stronger bargaining rights. The Fordist post-war period was the highpoint of this labor-capital compromise. Today we are seeing these accomplishments reversed and the historic bond between capitalism, democracy and the welfare state disintegrating. Technological changes in production, transportation and communication, introduced under the umbrella of post-industrial capitalism, have drastically altered the nature of modern work and weakened the power of worker organizations. Productive work has been automated and outsourced, forcing many people into low-wage, casual employment in the service, retail and security industries.

We now have the technological means to produce more goods with less human input, but the prophecy of a future when we will work less and work will be returned to us has not yet come true. On the contrary, we work more hours than before, in more precarious circumstances, and the obligation that everyone work for a living is enforced with greater resolve. Modern society is a society of workers, yet we do everything in our power to reduce the value of work. What are the reasons and consequences of this contradiction? What happened to the utopia of a society of less work and how can we reclaim it in a time of mass unemployment and precarization? How will democracy and citizenship continue after mass employment?

Themes covered:

- The origins of modern wage labor;
- Reactions to modern work: industrial vs. humanist socialism;
- The making of the working class and the “revolts against work”;
- Technological shifts and shifts in the accumulation regime;
- New managerial techniques: rise of the freelancer, affective labor, etc.;
- The working class as a historical subject and its defeat through the neoliberal counter-revolution;
- The transformation and disappearance of working-class culture;
- Surplus populations excluded from work and new methods of population

- management;
- Post-work perspectives and new forms of worker organization.

Course Requirements (10 points):

Class Participation: I will not monitor your attendance in class. However, the overall success of this seminar and your performance in it depends on your active in-class participation. You should come to class prepared to participate in seminar discussion.

Discussion Questions: Each week students will email me ahead of time (Wednesday night) **three** questions or observations that they would like to see discussed in class. These can be things you didn't understand, things that intrigued or surprised you or just exploratory ideas. I will compile these questions in a document and email it to everyone. Presenters must familiarize themselves with these questions/comments and use them as a guide for their presentations.

Presentations: Each week, at least one student will give a brief introduction (10-15 min) to the weekly readings and topics. The presenter should not summarize the texts, but identify main themes and debates, point out strengths and weaknesses, and suggest possible topics for discussion. They should also, as far as possible, try to situate the readings within the wider material of the course. PowerPoint presentations are not necessary unless you have audio-visual (film, music) material you would like to show. You should try to speak freely and be prepared to pose questions for further discussion.

Final Paper: During the semester break, students will write a 12-page (1.5 spacing, 12 pt. font) research paper on a problem, debate or event of their choice relevant to the course. The paper should meet all standards of research and academic writing. Your work will be assessed based on knowledge of topic, thesis/argument development, structure and organization, evidence provided, quality of research conducted, grammar and spelling, and presentation. For the bibliography please use the Chicago style as demonstrated below.

Course Readings: All readings are available online.

Week 1/Oct 18: Course Introduction

Week 2/Oct 25: The origins of modern work

Marx, Karl. *Capital*, vol. 1. "The Twofold Character of the Labour Embodied in Commodities." 1867. 28 – 31. <http://libcom.org/library/capital-karl-marx>

Federici, Silvia. *Caliban and the Witch*. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2004. 11-20. <http://libcom.org/library/caliban-witch-silvia-federici>

Polanyi, Karl. *The Great Transformation*. New York: Beacon Press, 1944. 33-43; 68-86.

<http://libcom.org/library/great-transformation-political-economic-origins-our-time-karl-polanyi>

Gorz, Andre. "The Invention of Modern Work." *Critique of Economic Reason*. New York: Verso, 1989. 13-22. [Search libgen](#)

Week 3/Nov 1: Class Cancelled

Week 4/Nov 8: From work to labor power

Braverman, Harry. *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974. 45-152. http://www.academia.edu/4720467/Harry_Braverman_Labor_and_Monopoly_Capital_The_Degradation_of_Work_in_the_Twentieth_Century_1974

Paul Romero. "Life in the Factory." <http://libcom.org/history/american-worker-paul-romano-ria-stone>. Sections V and VII

Clip from *Working Class Goes to Heaven* (1971): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXwqaSAKsUE>

Week 5/Nov 15: Productivist vs. humanist socialism

Weeks, Kathi. *The Problem with Work: Marxism, Feminism, Antiwork Politics and Postwork Imaginaries*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. 79-92. <http://libcom.org/library/problem-work-feminism-marxism-antiwork-politics-postwork-imaginaries-kathi-weeks>

Morris, William. "Useful Work versus Useless Toil." 1984. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1884/useful.htm>

Cox, Judy. "An Introduction to Marx's Theory of Alienation." *International Socialism* 79 (1998). <http://pubs.socialistreviewindex.org.uk/isj79/cox.htm>

Week 6/Nov 22: Revolt against work

Weeks, Kathi. *The Problem with Work: Marxism, Feminism, Antiwork Politics and Postwork Imaginaries*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. 92-111. <http://libcom.org/library/problem-work-feminism-marxism-antiwork-politics-postwork-imaginaries-kathi-weeks>

Federici, Silvia. "Wages against Housework." <http://libcom.org/library/wages-against-housework-silvia-federici>

Terkel, Studs. *Working: People Talk about What They Do All Day and How They Feel about What They Do*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1972. 1-11. <http://libcom.org/library/working-people-talk-about-what-they-do-all-day-how-they-feel-about-what-they-do-studs-te>

Week 7/Nov 29: The rise of neoliberalism...

Harvey, David. "Freedom's Just Another Word..." *Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. 1-38. [Search libgen](#)

Harvey, David. "Accumulation through Dispossession." *The New Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. 137-82. [Search libgen](#)

Week 8/Dec 6: ... and the defeat of the working class

Kunkel, Benjamin. "Full Employment." *n+1*. 4 June 2010. <http://nplusonemag.com/full-employment>

Gorz, Andre. "From *Strategy for Labor*." *The New Left Reader*. Carl Oglesby, ed. New York: Grove Press, 1969. 41-56.

Salnikov, Vladimir. "The Image of the Worker in Visual Arts." *Chto Delat*. http://www.chtodelat.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=66%3Athe-image-of-the-worker-in-the-visual-arts&catid=127%3A3-emancipation-of-from-labor&Itemid=429&lang=en

Jones, Owen. *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. London: Verso, 2011. 13-38. [Search libgen](#)

Week 9/Dec 13: New management strategies and new subjectivities

Gorz, Andre. "The Ultimate Ideology of Work" and "The Latest Forms of Work." *Critique of Economic Reason*. New York: Verso, 1989. 63-90. [Search libgen](#)

Holmes, Brian. "The Flexible Personality: For a New Cultural Critique." EIPCP, 2002. <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/holmes/en>

Ross, Andrew. *No-Collar: The Humane Workplace and Its Hidden Costs*. New York: Basic Books, 2003. 1-20. http://www.academia.edu/4720601/Andrew_Ross_No-Collar_The_Humane_Workplace_and_its_Hidden_Costs_2003

Week 10/Dec 20: Class Cancelled

Week 11/Jan 10: The immaterial labor debate

Hardt, Michael and Tony Negri. *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: Penguin Books, 2004. 99-115; 140-53. [Search libgen](#)

Federici, Silvia. "Precarious Labor: A Feminist Viewpoint" *In the Middle of a Whirlwind* 2008. <http://inthemiddleofthewhirlwind.wordpress.com/precious-labor-a-feminist-viewpoint/>

De Angelis, Massimo. "Immaterial Labor: The End of the 'Law of Value'?" *The Beginning of History: Value Struggles and Global Capital*. London: Polity Press, 2007. 165-71.

Optional background reading: David Eden. "The Perspective of Autonomy." *Autonomy: Capitalism, Class, Politics*. Ashgate, 2012. 11-33.

Week 12/Jan 17: The crisis of the society of work

Peters, Aaron. "Forget the 'Golden Age' of Capitalism: There's No Return, and Our Future Can Be Better." *Open Democracy*. 6 March 2012.
<http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/aaron-peters/forget-%E2%80%98golden-age%E2%80%99-of-capitalism-there%E2%80%99s-no-return-and-our-future-can-be--1>

Bolton, Matt. "Work Isn't Working." *New Left Project*, 31 August 2012.
http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article_comments/work_isnt_working

Wacquant, Loic. "Crafting the Neoliberal State: Workfare, Prisonfare and Social Insecurity." *Sociological Forum* 25.2(2010): 197-220.
<http://loicwacquant.net/assets/Papers/CRAFTINGNEOLIBERALSTATE-pub.pdf>

Week 13/Jan 24: Workless life vs. capitalism without workers

Keynes, Maynard. "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren." *Essays in Persuasion*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1963. 358-373.
<http://www.econ.yale.edu/smith/econ116a/keynes1.pdf>

Frase, Peter, "The Politics of Getting a Life." *Jacobin*. April 2012.
<http://jacobinmag.com/2012/04/the-politics-of-getting-a-life/>

Maisano, Chris, "Take this Job and Share It." *Jacobin*. January 2011.
<http://jacobinmag.com/2011/01/take-this-job-and-share-it/>

Maisano, Chris, "Working for the Weekend." *Jacobin*. October 2012.
<http://jacobinmag.com/2012/10/working-for-the-weekend-2/>

Cole, Juan. "Detroit's Bankruptcy and America's Future: Robots, Race, Globalization and the 1%." 19 July 2013. <http://www.juancole.com/2013/07/bankruptcy-americas-globalization.html>

The Jetsons (Intro): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FyinD6ZDqeg>

Week 14/Jan 31: Informal work and wageless life

Denning, Michael. "Wageless Life." *New Left Review* 66, November – December 2006.
<http://newleftreview.org/II/66/michael-denning-wageless-life>

Berger, John. *Pig Earth*. London, Bloomsbury, 1979. xi-xxvi.
http://www.academia.edu/4720726/John_Berger_Introduction_to_Pig_Earth_1992

Davis, Mike. "A Surplus Humanity?" *Planet of Slums*. New York: Verso, 2006. 174-98.
Search libgen

Week 15/Feb 7: Subsistence struggles/struggles beyond work

De Angelis, Massimo. "Marx and the Enclosures We Face" and "Enclosures with No Limits." *The Beginning of History: Value Struggles and Global Capital*. London: Polity Press, 2007. 133-49.

Mies, Maria and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen. *The Subsistence Perspective: Beyond the Globalised Economy*. London: Zed Books, 1999. 1-23.
http://www.academia.edu/4720749/Maria_Mies_and_Maria_Benholdt-Thomsen_The_Subsistence_Perspective_2000

Federici, Silvia. "A Feminist Critique of Marx."
<http://endofcapitalism.com/2013/05/29/a-feminist-critique-of-marx-by-silvia-federici/>

Week 16/Feb 14: Where next for the working class?

Gorz, Andre. "Non-Commodity Activities" and "Questions and Proposals." *Critique of Economic Reason*. New York: Verso, 1989. 154-69; 183-212. Search libgen

Frase, Peter. "Curious Utopias." *Jacobin*. May 2013.
<http://jacobinmag.com/2013/05/curious-utopias/>

Wolff, Richard. *Democracy at Work: A Cure for Capitalism*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012. 117-35; 169-180.