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The Critique of Work in Modern French Thought

From Charles Fourier to Guy Debord

Alastair Hemmens



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Alastair Hemmens

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From Charles Fourier to Guy Debord

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Studies in Revolution and Literature

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For my daughter, Alice

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Praise for *The Critique of Work in Modern French Thought*

“*The Critique of Work in Modern French Thought* is one of the most original and insightful contributions to European intellectual history and a critical theory of labour in recent years. Anyone interested in the crisis of capitalism as a work society will read this book with great benefit and fascination. Through a series of thoughtful readings of Fourier, Lafargue, Breton, Debord and others, Alastair Hemmens illuminates a largely eclipsed tradition in French thought. His superbly researched and enviably clear account of the critique of work in France demonstrates moreover why we can no longer afford to be blissfully ignorant towards the Marxian tradition of Wertkritik in general, and its categorical critique of ‘labour’ in particular, if we want to break free from the utopian loop of sociodicy. While not everybody will agree, no-one can fail to be intrigued by the profound scholarship of Hemmens’ work. With its rigour and unflinching radicality, it will be a touchstone for the seriousness of critical political theory for years to come.”

—Heiko Feldner, *Reader in German and Critical Theory*,
Cardiff University, Wales/UK

“These days the worship of ‘work’ seems almost as obligatory as the worship of God was in times past. It is also the case, on the other hand, that today the ‘work society’ is running out of work and that which it is still able to offer is hardly tolerable. In such a context, the critique of work is more important than ever. Hemmens’ excellent book provides a highly informative and detailed account of the French part of the history of that critique, from Fourier to the Situationists, and beyond. More importantly, however, Hemmens does not simply limit himself to a description of this little-known aspect of modern intellectual history. Rather, he provides an innovative and far-reaching analysis of the authors in question, and often points out the limitations of their respective critiques. He does so on the basis of the ‘critique of value’, a new reading of Marx’s basic categories (including work). Hemmens’ exceptional account of this new school of thought in itself makes this book an important contribution to contemporary debates about the decline of labour. Never work! Read this book instead.”

—Anselm Jappe, *Professor of Aesthetics, Accademia di Belle
Arti di Sassari, Italy*

“Hemmens’ book constitutes a thoughtful and inventive engagement with a core object preoccupying much of the landscape in critical thought and theory around politics and ontology today: namely, how does one not only arrive at a critique, but, more crucially, imagine a way out, of the neoliberal impasse which reduces life itself to an economic logic of work and competition. [...] Thus, the bold, utopian question coursing through Hemmens’ study is not only “how do we work our way out of (the ontological and social dead end) of work,” but, more fundamentally and pointedly: “who needs work?” By its concluding pages, one cannot but find oneself nodding in assent: who needs it, indeed? An impressive, timely, and indeed necessary inquiry into the critique of work.”

—Robert St. Clair, *Assistant Professor of French,*
Dartmouth College, USA

CONTENTS

1	Marxian Theory and the Critique of Work	1
2	Charles Fourier, Utopian Socialism and Attractive Labour	45
3	Paul Lafargue, Early French Marxism and the Right to Laziness	79
4	André Breton, the Artistic Avant-Garde and Surrealism's War on Work	105
5	Guy Debord, the Situationist International and the Abolition of Alienated Labour	137
6	The New Spirit of Capitalism and the Critique of Work in France Since May '68	167
7	News from Nowhere, or an Epoch of Rest	193
	Bibliography	205
	Index	215



CHAPTER 1

Marxian Theory and the Critique of Work

The critique of work has historically been treated as a marginal topic in discussions of French thought. Although there have been a number of studies of popular resistance to work in the workplace itself,¹ analysis of the intellectual history of anti-work discourse in France is fragmentary at best and only very rarely a focus of critical interest. This is an unfortunate state of affairs because France has a singularly rich intellectual tradition of criticising work which stretches at least as far back as the early nineteenth century and which has galvanised some of its most important thinkers and cultural movements. It includes the utopian-socialist Charles Fourier (1772–1837), who called for the abolition of the separation between work and play; Marx’s wayward son-in-law, Paul Lafargue (1842–1911), who called for *The Right to Laziness* (1880); the father of Surrealism André Breton (1896–1966), who demanded a ‘war on work’; and, of course, the French Situationist Guy Debord (1931–1994), who authored the infamous graffito, ‘never work’; as well as a host of other groups and figures before and since. Nevertheless, although many of these figures are today quite rightly considered to have made major contributions to the development of French thought, the anti-work aspects of their respective intellectual projects, along with the key ideas that drove this dissident tradition as a whole, have not been the subject of a great deal of serious theoretical analysis. It would not be too much of a caricature to say that, just as workers who refuse to obey the beat of the factory drum have often found

themselves vilified and marginalised, so too those radical French thinkers who have argued that work might be something quite suspect have, by and large, found this aspect of their writing ignored and dismissed as naïvely utopian and even as reactionary.²

The fact that critiques of work in theory and practice still meet with a great deal of resistance today is not surprising. The political consensus, since at least the nineteenth century, is that work is both a natural necessity and, barring exploitation at least, a social good. There are many who consider it the foundation stone of all human society and even the defining characteristic of human being. The identification of mankind with *homo faber*, or ‘man the maker’, a being who consciously constructs himself and the world around him through the productive process is foundational to nearly all forms of modern social thought. Work as such has been treated variously in the modern era as a source of social wealth, of identity, of pride, of freedom, social progress, social justice and even as the essence of society or, as Marx puts it in *Capital* (1867), ‘life itself’.³ Indeed, to the extent that labour has a hold on modern society, this really is the case. Most modern people, from the moment they are born, are destined for a childhood given over to training for competition on the labour market and, if they are one of the ‘lucky winners’, for an adulthood that is spent mostly in the factory, the shop or the office. Even the son of the bourgeois, who, and this is said with no judgement, may never have to work a day in his life, owes his continued existence to the world of work and often has a job all the same. Political and social theory has therefore turned not so much on the critical analysis of work as such but on how best to manage work and distribute its fruits for the greatest social benefit.

In fact, far from criticising it, both sides of the political spectrum have, to a greater or lesser degree, turned work (and very often the ‘Worker’) into a veritable cult of worship. As Anselm Jappe notes, even the more libertarian wings of leftism, such as anarcho-syndicalism, were not entirely free from this fanaticism, as can be seen from this ideology’s celebration of industry.⁴ This religion of production reached its terrible apogee, of course, in the Soviet gulags and in the ‘negative factories’⁵ of Nazi concentration camps, where, as the Situationists once noted, the sign above the gates read ‘Work will set you free.’⁶ At present very few governments, save for rogue states such as North Korea, feel the need to organise anything as systematic as the gulags; contemporary capitalism, as even the briefest glance at today’s newspapers will attest, is quite capable of pulling off the most extreme sacrifices to the labour god without state intervention. It should be recalled

that the crude productivist propaganda images of the ‘recuperative modernisation’ regimes of the past,⁷ so easily mocked by today’s liberals, were only considered necessary because these ‘backward’ peasant populations had not yet fully submitted themselves to an industrial labour discipline that had long ago been internalised in the West in the form of the deepest structures of the modern psyche. In other words, attendance at the church of labour is no less compulsory in the present-day world of Western ‘free markets and democracy’ where we are now supposedly recognised only as citizen-consumers. If anything, as the Orwellian doublespeak of today’s left-wing politicians will attest, the language has only become more insidious. There is no longer a ‘working class’, only ‘working people’ and ‘working families’. There are no ‘unemployed’; there are only ‘job seekers’. As the German social-democrat Friedrich Ebert (1871–1925) once said, in all seriousness, ‘Socialism means working a lot.’⁸

There are signs, however, that the social consensus that has surrounded work for the past several centuries is in a state of decomposition. Although there have always been pockets of resistance and opposition to work, capitalism thankfully can never evenly develop everywhere and at all times, what we are witnessing today, even in the most developed capitalist countries, seems to be something far more widespread, as a kind of desperation takes hold. The furore in France over the ‘loi travail’, or labour law, which saw a socialist government seek to knock back some of the meagre protections that workers are allotted, has led to huge protests with people marching in the streets holding signs reading ‘work kills’ and, in a call back to Debord, ‘never work’ once more. One might also think of the mainstream success in France of books, such as *Bonjour Laziness: Why Hard Work Doesn’t Pay* (2004) by Corinne Maier, which suggest ways of resisting corporate discipline in the modern workplace; and of Pierre Carles’ documentary *Attention Danger Travail* (2003) that follows the movement of French ‘jobseekers’ who proudly say, in a manner that is genuinely brave in the context of the ‘work society’, that they simply want to be left to enjoy their lives living off the dole without the hassle of looking for work that either does not exist or, under the conditions imposed, is hardly worth doing.

Indeed, everywhere one looks, one finds an ever-growing number of proposals from all quarters of society, even business management schools, for dealing with the ‘problem of work’: from well-intentioned calls for basic income, ‘degrowth’ and wages for housewives, to arguments in favour of a better work-life balance, a green economy and, the same refrain that has been sung since the start of the Industrial Revolution, hope that

technology will finally liberate us from the ‘natural necessity’ of labour through automation. In Britain and America alone, the past few years have seen a plethora of titles that claim to offer the possibility of a more critical stance towards work.⁹ Many of these studies, like the social movements taking place in France today, make reference to figures from the history of the French critique of work, albeit sometimes quite superficially, both to find a source of intellectual inspiration from the past for dealing with the problems of the present and to situate themselves within an ongoing history of popular resistance to capitalist exploitation. It is not in the least bit surprising that British and American authors should look to France given our shared history of projecting onto the French either the quality of laziness or of placing greater cultural value on life outside work, depending on one’s point of view. Although, while such projections might have had a certain truth to them in the past thanks to the history of uneven industrial development (with the caveat that laziness, if it means resistance to the modern labour process, can only be a good thing), it could hardly be said to characterise post-war French society, even if a few French workers preserve the dignity of not hastily eating a sandwich at their desk for lunch and still enjoy some social benefits denied to their British and American counterparts.¹⁰

These recent developments are first and foremost a reaction to the global financial crisis of 2008 that was itself only an epiphenomenon on the surface of the deeper structural crisis that capitalism has been undergoing since the end of the post-war boom in the early 1970s. Although there are still plenty of paid-up economists who continue to beat the drum of future prosperity, it has become increasingly difficult for even the most partisan of observers to ignore the patent absurdity of the immense productive capability of society and the reality of mass under- and unemployment, working poverty, precariousness and relentless cuts to the arts, education and social services. Even the official figures of unemployment in many Western countries today would have made any post-war government resign in embarrassment.¹¹ At the same time, there is an awareness, even in the higher echelons of power, that we cannot go on as we have been if we want the planet to continue to be a viable habitat, and yet we continue to do so. Mainstream papers in the UK and France are even talking about the plethora of, what David Graeber has described as, ‘bullshit jobs’¹² (something of a tautology one might add) and there is a genuine sense of decline of the ‘work society’ as conditions of hyper-competition drive successive national governments to impose worse conditions in an

age that the baby-boomer generation was told was to be dominated by the pursuit of leisure.¹³ Everything, in short, suggests that social movements, if they are to be effective, are increasingly being forced to address the cult of labour head on and this is why the French critique of work has more relevance than ever.

It is not the job of critical theory, however, to chase after social movements and oppressed subjects to tell them how great they and what they are doing already are. While there are many positives that have emerged from these intellectual and social developments, there also seems to be a great deal of incoherence and confusion about what work actually is and of what the critique of work, as a result, might meaningfully consist. On the one hand, there is clearly a growing dissatisfaction with the concrete forms and conditions of work, and its compensation, as it currently stands. There has even been a widespread sense of the loss of the importance of the work ethic and of work itself as the centre of social life.¹⁴ On the other hand, while there is a general desymbolisation, or post-modern deconstruction, of the work ethic, a recognition of its relativity, there is no real sense of what it is relative to nor what socially substantiates it. Indeed, the work ethic, which is only a cultural epiphenomenon, is nearly always conflated with ‘work’ as such or work in general. And it shows just how attached to work *per se* the modern subject truly is. Everything and everyone can be at fault but work itself: the work ethic, neo-liberal governance, the work-life balance, the historical losses and betrayals of the working class, capitalist exploitation in general (as if it were not a veritable privilege today to even have a job where one can be exploited) and so on. All of the major left ideologues, including the likes of Thomas Piketty,¹⁵ continue to aim their critique at the spheres of circulation and exchange as though work as such really were an entirely neutral fact of life.

In 1999, the French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello had already noted that a certain artistic critique of work embodied in the French avant-gardes of the past had been incorporated, albeit denuded of wider social critique, into a ‘new spirit of capitalism’.¹⁶ Indeed, in the course of researching this book, I came across a consultancy firm that used the phrase ‘never work’ in its advertising spiel because ‘if you enjoy your job, you’ll never work a day in your life’. The traditional Protestant work ethic, long ago, ceased to be treated by mainstream Western society as an unquestionable positive. However, as this example demonstrates, simply rejecting the work ethic and seeking to escape its drudgery is really quite meaningless if it is not part of a deeper social critique. You can hate work

in the name of making other people work for you. You can hate your job, but imagine a better one where you would have longer holidays and a nicer car. You can work minimum wage and live in a tiny bedsit in New York City while convincing yourself that your precariousness is a glamorous bohemianism. You can abhor the neo-liberal workplace, but dream nostalgically about the post-war Fordist factory floor. Above all, you can think that, under the right conditions, work would not be a problem at all for anyone, and see yourself as part of a heroic history of popular opposition to capitalist oppression. Even if you imagine a post-capitalist ‘non-work’ future, you can still think in terms of the organisation of labour. Workers and capitalist alike are just as likely to condemn as ‘parasites’ those who do not work or do not work hard enough (an accusation they have often thrown at each other). What is surprisingly rare, however, and ultimately this applies to a greater or lesser extent to many of the French thinkers examined in this study, is to take the promise of a ‘critique of *work*’ literally and criticise the category of work or labour itself.

THE EXOTERIC MARX

The main philosophical argument of this book, and the mode of analysis that it takes up, is that there are really only two possible ways of understanding and approaching the critique of work. The first effectively dives straight into an empirical, historical, ethical and moral critical analysis assuming that work as such is not problematical but might become so under certain conditions. The second grounds its analysis of these phenomenological expressions of work in capitalism in a critique of the category itself. Although these two different approaches might occasionally arrive at very similar conclusions, though they may equally diverge radically from one another, they must necessarily start from very different conceptions of what work and its role in capitalist society actually is. It is even possible, as we shall see, that aspects of both approaches can be found in the work of a single author and, most significantly of all, in the writing of Karl Marx himself, who could be thought of as the main intellectual founder of two different, and sometimes complementary, opposing schools of thought about work in modern critical theory: that found in traditional Marxism and the Marxian ‘critique of value’ respectively. A better understanding of these two approaches helps to highlight some of the key theoretical problems and critical perspectives that the current work seeks to address.

The first approach, which is broadly tied to, what Robert Kurz calls, the ‘exoteric’ side of Marx’s thought (more about this later),¹⁷ but is equally characteristic of modern thought in general, we might refer to as a ‘phenomenological’ mode of analysis in that it starts primarily with a critique of definite empirically perceived objects in a fashion that is, as Kurz argues, even in post-modern form, implicitly positivistic.¹⁸ From such a perspective ‘work’ *per se* could never be the object of critique, only specific phenomena that fall under its rubric. Plenty of ink has been spilled therefore criticising or describing the phenomenology or sociology of work: the division of labour, its conditions, its compensation, who does it, why, in an immediate sense, do they do it, how it is organised, how it has developed, its technologies, its unfairness, what it feels like to do it, how its products, and the activity itself, are alienated from the producer and so on. These kinds of analyses can produce very powerful historical and empirical critiques of how work has been promoted to and experienced by the masses over the course of the past two centuries and more. They have even, at times, galvanised large numbers of people in revolutionary social movements and, as in the case of many of the authors examined in this study, provided the basis for imagining entirely different societies where the ‘abolition of work’ and some other kind of human ‘metabolism with nature’, as Marx puts it, might be possible.

On the other hand, such a perspective, precisely because it does not begin with a critique of work *in and of itself*, comes with a lot of philosophical baggage that is not always perceived as such. So that, when it comes to defining work (or under its other banners of ‘labour’ and ‘production’), many thinkers try to understand the category without reference to capitalism and its historical specificity as a mode of social life. Work is, above all, understood to be a ‘rational’ or ‘nominal’ abstraction that can be applied, as part of a critical analysis, to any form of historical or, potential, post-capitalist society. That is to say, it is imagined to be, in itself, a neutral, anthropological constant or transhistorical social form of fundamental human activity. The anthropologist Herbert Applebaum, for example, in his *The Concept of Work* (1992) provides a definition that would be fairly familiar to almost anyone:

The human condition compels the existence of work as the condition of life. Human beings are both in nature and outside of nature. They are in nature as biological beings subject to the laws of nature and the cycles of birth and death. They are outside of nature by what they create as a human environment

which is built and organised through work [...] no human society can exist without work. There are no Gardens of Eden for human beings. Even picking apples is work. Whatever type of future we project with our high technology, we still must grow food, build shelters, and make clothes and other objects to protect ourselves and to satisfy our material needs. And we will also have to offer and exchange services to satisfy our needs. What is work? No definition is satisfactory because work relates to all human activities, and one would have to exhaust all such activities to exhaust the provinces of work.¹⁹

At face value, this definition could not be more innocuous. It certainly describes a reality that we all, as modern people, are completely familiar with. Applebaum is definitely not wrong to state that many if not all of the different activities he describes will need to continue even in a vastly different future and that many of the activities we perform today were done by our ancestors also. But what is it that allows Applebaum to group all of these different activities under the rubric of a single abstraction, ‘work’, when he himself points out that there is nothing about the concrete qualities of these various activities themselves that might meaningfully allow us to group them together? Equally, can we be so sure that ‘work’ exists to satisfy material human needs? Is the opposite of not working simply society having everything handed to it on a plate as if by magic, as his Garden of Eden image seems to suggest? And is nature really what compels us to work? Suffice it to say for now, before answering these questions, that treating ‘work’ in this way carries with it a set of basic assumptions about human society and human beings, or what we might call a social ‘ontology of labour’, that is by no means neutral or not open to question.

This kind of ontological discourse about labour, which is not transhistorical, is in fact an inheritance from the idealism of Enlightenment philosophy. Work, in the period when capitalism was starting to emerge as a transforming social dynamic, had been seen as a limited form of social activity that was both torturous and reserved for the lowest members of society. This is perhaps best evidenced by the dubious etymologies established for ‘labour’ in early-modern French dictionaries, oft quoted with glee by the critics of work, as deriving from the Latin *tripaliare*, to torture with a three-pronged instrument.²⁰ Enlightenment thinkers, however, increasingly came to understand ‘work’ or ‘labour’ in terms of a broader, universal abstraction for all social activity and the simple expenditure of human energy in general (the nineteenth-century French physicist Gaspard-Gustave de Coriolis [1792–1843] would later introduce the

concept of ‘work’ as a description of the energy expended by a force in mechanical action). Work could be understood therefore as an innate category of Reason, or *logos*, through which the individual could grasp hold, both materially and ideally, of the whole of reality. Labour was as a result closely tied to the Enlightenment notion of human being as an individual ‘subject’—in this specific case as the ‘producer’, the man of industry or *homo faber*, if not *homo economicus*—that consciously dominates itself and its environment through the application of reason, becoming, as René Descartes (1596–1650) put it, the ‘masters and possessors of nature’.²¹ Descartes, for example, is famously meant to have claimed that the only reason that apes do not speak to humans is that they do not want to be forced to work.²² Much later, Kant, likewise, simply identified labour with the ‘realisation of reason’ full stop.²³

Labour, which had previously been a term reserved for the lowest members of society, was increasingly a category that was positively applied to everyone and almost any kind of activity. Even monarchs were thought and actually expected to ‘work’ in some sense like the lowliest of peasants. Queen Elizabeth II (1952–), who today is often praised for her extremely active role in public life (the no doubt nauseating and endless round of hospital openings and public parades), would have been looked on with disdain by the medieval aristocracy, and perhaps the peasantry also, for ever submitting to such a Protestant work ethic.²⁴ The same could be said for today’s bourgeoisie in general. ‘Economics’, which, in pre-modern times, simply meant the running of the household,²⁵ now became a scientific discussion of how to manage most rationally and, in the true utilitarian fashion paved by ‘philanthropic’ social reformers such as Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), for the greatest social benefit, the ‘energies’ embodied in the nation’s ‘workforce’; a reductive mode of thinking about human beings and society that could then be projected retroactively as a critique of the imagined backwardness and irrationality of ‘economic’ life in the pre-modern world. Bourgeois political economists, in particular David Ricardo (1772–1823), further aided the cultural valorisation of labour from an economic point of view by arguing that work was the source of all economic value or social wealth (a discovery that is often incorrectly imputed to Marx though he himself never claimed to have invented the idea).²⁶

Marx, at least in the ‘exoteric’ side of his work where he plays both the theorist of the workers’ movement and the political economist *par excellence*, largely adopts the progressivist and positivistic conception of labour and the development of productive forces from bourgeois idealism. In the

Grundrisse (1857–1858), for example, Marx recognises that ‘*production in general* is an abstraction’, but he claims, without any attempt to substantiate this, that it is ‘a rational abstraction in so far as it really brings out and fixes the common elements’.²⁷ Elsewhere, Marx asserts, again without establishing any kind of evidence, that ‘the notion of labour in this universal form, as labour in general, is also extremely old’ and that it ‘express[es] an ancient relation existing in all social formations’ that is ‘valid in all epochs’.²⁸ Though he immediately contradicts himself by saying that “labour” is a modern category as are the relations which create this simple abstraction’.²⁹ In *Capital*, Marx attempts to rationalise the abstraction of ‘work itself’ by defining it simply as ‘purposeful activity’.³⁰ This is equally contradictory, however, because the fact that an action is performed with a purpose could logically only form the basis for a rational abstraction if those purposes were the same. The abstraction ‘worship’, for example, unites many different forms of activity together by the fact that they have a common purpose even if they are performed very differently. Under Marx’s definition, however, even private prayer or obeying a call of nature could equally be considered a form of ‘labour’.

In another section of *Capital*, Marx attempts to fix the rationality of the labour abstraction to a concept of utility: ‘Labour [...] as the creator of use-values, as useful labour, is a condition of human existence which is independent of all forms of society.’³¹ Here the same problem arises, however, because, as Kurz notes about this passage, use-value itself, or the ‘paradoxical-real determination’ of abstract utility, is only the specific way in which capitalism takes hold of ‘objects that are in themselves not abstract’.³² Use-value, that is to say, is a concrete manifestation of the abstract universality of labour. It does not refer to the real usefulness or necessity of particular products and services for human life. It is only the expression of the historically specific ‘need’ to ‘realise’ value in exchange by means of some product or service in which dead labour can be congealed. This explains, for example, the great efforts that producers go to in order to ‘educate’ and excite the ‘need’ for their, often absurd and poor quality, products in potential consumers. Use-value is therefore not a transhistorical social form. This is a point of confusion for traditional Marxism which, while it can, when it considers the problem at all, occasionally allow that a ‘bad’ value-producing (or profit-making) ‘abstract labour’ form—terms discussed in more detail below—might be specific to capitalism, always wishes to preserve the concept of a ‘good’ transhistorical ‘use-value’ producing ‘concrete labour’. Such aporetic, and ultimately

simplistic, thinking about work means that a certain progressivism, utilitarianism and Protestant work ethic is often able to creep into the critical theory of even many of the most radical critics of capitalist society in very subtle ways. Moreover, at the more extreme end of the spectrum, this can be expressed as a hatred of ‘bad’ profit-making capital (and jobs), in favour of the celebration of ‘good’, ‘productive’ and ‘socially-useful’ capital (and jobs); an ideology that played an important role in the development of modern Antisemitism, as we will see in our chapter on Fourier, as well as other dangerous forms of pseudo-opposition to capitalist domination.³³

Marx, although he is thankfully far more interesting and ambiguous in his approach to work than many of his latter-day Marxist interpreters, still wishes to preserve some concrete basis for labour as a rational abstraction because his thinking reflects and even further contributes to the social ontology of labour of bourgeois political economy. Marx goes on to say, for example, that ‘[labour] is an eternal natural necessity which mediates the metabolism between man and nature, and therefore human life itself’.³⁴ Here Marx conflates the fact that human beings must have some kind of relationship with the natural environment with the mediation of a single social abstraction. A fact of life that, while typical of capitalism, is certainly not the case for all forms society. Marx, in other words, reproduces the Cartesian formal opposition between the subject, ‘man’, and the object, ‘nature’, such that ‘labour’ takes on the role of dominating and appropriating nature that *logos* does in rationalist thought.³⁵ Through the labour process, Marx says, the producer imposes his ‘sovereign power’ on nature.³⁶ Marx, in this aspect of his writing at least, imagines this relationship, which is very real in modern society, not as the product of a specific form of social life, capitalism, but as a kind of positivistic scientific fact that arises out of human biology.³⁷ Labour, and the rational domination of nature (and oneself), therefore becomes synonymous with the mediation of ‘life itself’ and, as a result, the essence of human being. Man *is* labour or, to put it in the language of the younger Marx, labour is man’s ‘species being’. It is, for Marx, transhistorical ‘natural necessity’ then, not a historically specific socially imposed reality, that makes work a ‘rational’ abstraction and provides the basis for the work ethic (something to which he himself, unlike his son-in-law Paul Lafargue, was quite attached).³⁸

Marx, despite offering a very different perspective elsewhere in his work, wants to preserve labour as a rational abstraction based in human need in large part because he is deeply attached to bourgeois notions of social ‘progress’ through technological development and, albeit more

ambiguously, the rationalisation of the labour process. Nature, in the context of such a teleological development of productive forces, can only be envisioned as a barrier to the full flourishing of human powers and a frontier that must be crossed. Marx, in volume three of *Capital*, develops this social ontology of labour further by dividing all human activity into a realm of necessity and a realm of freedom.³⁹ The realm of necessity, which gives rise to ‘necessary labour’, is the concept that labour is first and foremost characterised by those activities that are most basic to human survival in a hostile world. Because Marx places it in opposition, it is implicitly characterised by a lack of ‘freedom’. However, through the development of productive forces, mankind increasingly wins for itself, through the social appropriation of free time made possible by technological development, the ‘freedom’ to perform activities that are not strictly concerned with reproduction. The realm of freedom is therefore the domain of ‘surplus labour’, not strictly ‘necessary’ labour, and leisure.

The increasing domination of nature is, as a result, the tool of mankind’s liberation, in this limited sense and in the context of a socialist society, because it allows the ‘necessary labour’, demanded by a hostile nature, to be temporally reduced through rationally ‘accomplishing it with the least expenditure of energy’, even if it will never entirely disappear.⁴⁰ Though even then Marx criticises pre-modern elites for using up their free time in ‘pure idleness’, so presumably much more will be expected from workers in a socialist society.⁴¹ Marx presents here, in volume three of *Capital*, a real mishmash of different concepts that, while they may—due to the historically specific relationship of labour power to capital discussed below—characterise modernity, make very little sense as transhistorical social categories. Indeed, the idea of ‘necessary labour’ is far more redolent of bourgeois notions of natural scarcity and the hardships of imagined pre-modern subsistence economies, which have been overturned, or at least complicated, by more recent historical and anthropological research.⁴² It, nonetheless, allows Marx, in this ‘exoteric’ part of his work that became foundational for the Marxism of the classical workers’ movement, to preserve labour, particularly in its ‘concrete’ form of utility, *homo faber* and the rational domination of nature, as a transhistorical and progressive activity. These issues will be of particular importance in our chapter on Guy Debord and the Situationists.

The fact that Marx does not fully identify labour *per se* with capitalism, a practice that characterises all major modern intellectual paradigms, has had a major impact on how his critique of capitalist society has been

understood. Traditionally, Marx is believed to have ‘corrected’ political economy by revealing the ‘theft’ of the full value of the workers’ labour that is carried out by the capitalist class. Workers are forced to sell the only commodity that they possess, their ‘labour power’ or their capacity to perform labour, because the capitalist class owns the means of production. The capitalist, however, only pays the workers in the form of a wage enough to reproduce their labour power, so the workers are only fully compensated for a fraction of their working day, while the capitalist takes the value produced in the rest of the time that the worker works, or surplus value, in the form of profit. Capitalism is, as such, imagined to be primarily a system of personal domination in which a small stratum of wealthy elites, the bourgeoisie or the capitalist class, extracts the surplus created by the producers. The ‘theft’ is concealed because the exchange of labour power for wages appears to be an exchange between equivalents. In vulgar Marxism, this process can often be understood simply as a kind of trickery. Workers are, as a result, alienated from the product of their labour and from the activity itself, over neither of which have they any control. The capitalist class uses propaganda and state institutions to prevent workers from questioning the system of oppression and, when they do pose a problem, to crush them with the use of violence. The economic interests of the workers are therefore entirely opposed to the capitalist class. They must through a process of class struggle seize the means of production and, in more authoritarian versions, the institutions of the state in order to create a society in which workers receive back the full value of their labour (or value is made to work for the workers more rationally) and, in more libertarian versions, control the conditions and results of production themselves through direct democracy. Work, and the working class, would thereby be liberated from capitalism.

This is the ‘exoteric Marx’—the Marx of class struggle, the dissident of political economy and the positivistic scientist who celebrated the process of modernisation embodied in technological development—that we are all familiar with from our basic educations and that is easy to understand. It is above all this aspect of Marx’s work that has animated the workers’ movement and traditional Marxism, and in many respects, there is a great deal to recommend this schema. Profit certainly does arise from the extraction of surplus value and, at a phenomenological level, there are obvious structures of oppression, including great inequalities in wealth and power, that are tied to sociological classes. Equally, the state certainly has, and continues, to use propaganda and violence to enforce capitalism; even if its

self-proclaimed enemies are far fewer and further between than earlier in its historical development. Furthermore, while many of the worst regimes in history—one need only think of the USSR, Maoist China or Pol Pot—have been inspired by this ‘exoteric’ side of Marx’s work, there have also been some movements, particularly within the Anarchist tradition, that have taken it very close to realising a genuinely emancipatory social movement against capitalism. There is certainly room for a great deal of variation in what it has and continues to inspire, and it is not by any means the intention of this book to dismiss these historical experiences out of hand.

The ‘exoteric’ reading of Marx, however, holds within it a number of very problematical assumptions about the essence of capitalism, and of social oppression in capitalism, thanks to the social ontology of labour upon which it is built. Is work really just a neutral activity that is ‘perverted’ in some sense in capitalism? Are human beings actually subject-producers who must rationally dominate the natural world? Can the vast complexity of capitalist society, with its, seemingly out of control, social and environmental destructiveness, really be reduced to the machinations of a class of powerful elites (the ‘one per cent’ as so many contemporary activists like to claim)? Is the development of productive technology and the crossing of all external frontiers an unquestionable social good that arises out of human need? Why have so many social movements against capitalism failed or even, as in the case of real-existing socialism, become the most violent expression of many of its core features? Above all, how can it explain the current crisis, worsening working conditions and the difficulty of finding work today? There are, of course, many attempts from within this exoteric Marxian tradition to answer these questions, not all of which can be dealt with in detail here, but, alternatively, might not it be possible that Marx himself, in another part of his work entirely, provides us with a very different understanding of the labour form and the nature of oppression in capitalist society? Might not we be able, following a very different reading of Marx, to take the critique of *work* literally?

THE ESOTERIC MARX

The notion that Marx might point the way towards a critique of work *per se* is a relatively new one in the history of ideas. It is perhaps most clearly expressed in the critical theory of the late Robert Kurz (1943–2012) and other members of the Wertkritik, or ‘critique of value’, school of Marxian theory associated with the German-language journals *Krisis* and *Exit!*.⁴³ It

equally finds expression in the radical reinterpretation of Marx's mature works undertaken, on an entirely independent basis, by Moishe Postone (1942–2018), a professor of history at the University of Chicago, in the United States.⁴⁴ Postone is now, quite rightly, a widely respected critical theorist and academic. Kurz, however, is still hardly known in the English-speaking world despite enjoying an important reputation abroad. Anselm Jappe (1962–), who has himself contributed to the development of the Wertkritik paradigm particularly in France,⁴⁵ has suggested that this is in large part due to a certain hostility towards a body of theory that overturns many traditional Marxist assumptions.⁴⁶ One might also refer to the fact that Wertkritik was, from the start, a critical project that self-consciously took place, for the most part, outside the official spheres of intellectual discourse such as academia and the media in favour of a more polemical and independent position. Kurz, for example, was himself a worker, in the traditional sociological sense, who worked nightshifts packing newspapers for delivery. Moreover, although Postone is obviously available to English readers, there has been a dearth of translations of Wertkritik theory that has only relatively recently started to be addressed.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, as this book hopes to show, the critical approach of Kurz, and others like him, represents a major leap forward in terms of our understanding of what work *is* and, therefore, of what a critique of work might meaningfully consist today.

The importance of these critical theories is to have shown that, far from unambiguously presenting a positivistic vision of the social ontology of labour, Marx, in another part of his work, puts forward a radical critique of the labour form. Here Marx presents labour, first and foremost, already as an inherently destructive, fetishistic and anti-social category of social synthesis that forms the basis for an 'abstract domination' by an 'automatic subject', the value form (or 'dead labour'), that proceeds, in the manner of a quasi-Kantian *a priori*, the sociological 'character masks' worn by workers and capitalists alike. This 'esoteric' side of Marx's work—'esoteric' for being difficult to understand, little known and requiring a certain initiation⁴⁸—was largely ignored by traditional Marxism, which, when it considered the problem at all, tended to either reduce the discussion of fetishism to a description of the obfuscation created by bourgeois property relations or dismiss it entirely as unfortunate Hegelian nonsense.⁴⁹ Western Marxism, however, which included such movements as the Frankfurt School and the Situationists, would take on certain aspects of this 'esoteric' critique, in particular as *commodity* fetishism, but often in a manner that reproduced Marx's aporetic understanding of labour.

Labour ‘in capitalism’ might, for these critical theorists, be in some sense abstract, but the abstraction itself was still preserved as a rational one, as was the notion of the proletariat as the revolutionary subject, which, through the process of class struggle, could or would liberate labour, or productive activity, from the yoke of bourgeois exploitation. This is not to say that class struggle and the subject form do not exist; they certainly do (even if neither is necessarily emancipatory), but that the radical importance of the ‘esoteric’ Marx, which suggests a very different conception of social transformation—that is, through an ‘ontological break’ with the labour form—was not fully understood nor developed to its logical conclusion, which would have meant a break with modernisation, the subject form and class struggle.

Postone shows, through a rigorous rereading of his mature works, that Marx provides not only ‘a critique of capitalism *from the standpoint of labour*’, and therefore a *critical* political economy, but ‘a critique of labour in capitalism’, and therefore, as the subtitle of *Capital* tells us, ‘a critique of political economy’, that is, of the basic categories themselves, which mediate social reality in capitalism.⁵⁰ Labour as such therefore forms the basis of a form of ‘abstract domination’, historically specific to modernity, that cannot be sufficiently understood within the traditional Marxist remit of a ‘concrete’, or personal, domination carried out by individuals or groups, nor primarily as a critique of private property relations and the market, that is, the particular modes of distribution and exchange.⁵¹ Rather, labour, and the industrial mode of production itself, ‘constitutes a historically specific, quasi-objective form of social mediation that, within the framework of Marx’s analysis, serves as the ultimate social ground of modernity’s basic features’.⁵² In other words, labour is, for Marx, not a neutral fact of all social life, nor is modern industry an inevitable stage in human evolution; rather it is a historically specific social form that establishes the grounds for an impersonal, subjectless, and abstract domination that gives a historical ‘directionally dynamic’ character to phenomenological reality.⁵³ Work, as such, is essentially a category of social mediation that forms the grounds of social being only in capitalism, structuring both historically determinate, social practices and quasi-objective forms of thought, culture, worldviews and dispositions.⁵⁴ Work, within the limited sphere of capitalist modernity, mediates and therefore shapes the whole of objective and subjective reality (and even necessarily overcomes, and explains, such theoretical dichotomies).⁵⁵

Kurz, and Wertkritik as a whole, has arguably gone further even than Postone in the direction of a critique of work as a basic category of social

synthesis specific to capitalism. Work, for Kurz, is not only, as in Postone, the basic social ground for the fundamentally abstract oppression embodied in capitalist modernity, it is also a category that is, and has been since the mid-1970s, in a state of crisis. Wertkritik distinguishes itself from other critical theories in large part by its insistence that the financialisation of markets and various forms of crises currently visible at all levels of capitalist society are part of a wider process of collapse as capitalism reaches its inner limits of accumulation due to technological development.⁵⁶ Such an end to capitalism, however, is not imagined necessarily as a moment of emancipation but rather as the threat of even greater barbarism precisely because the ‘subjects’, which, for Kurz, are no more than ‘objects’ of the valorisation process, by definition have no control over the ‘beautiful machine’ of capitalist accumulation and, at the same time, have themselves already internalised its constraints into the deepest parts of their psyche. Equally, Wertkritik has made another significant theoretical advance through the theory of ‘Abspaltung’, or ‘dissociation’, developed by Roswitha Scholz (1959–), that seeks to encompass those areas of modern life—such as domestic ‘labour’—that are excluded from and subordinated to the sphere of valorisation.⁵⁷ These different facets of Wertkritik are discussed in more detail below and will provide an important context for our analysis of the authors studied in the current work.

On what basis then can we claim that work is an inherently destructive social form? Let us return first to the notion that work, or labour, is a ‘rational’ or nominal abstraction that is so crucial to the social ontology of labour examined above. We normally understand abstractions as generalisations that human beings make about the concrete world in order to describe and think about complex phenomena. An abstraction is ‘rational’ to the extent that it is a generalisation that is based on the concrete similarities, the form or essence, that objects, which are strictly speaking non-identical, share. The word ‘tree’ is a rational abstraction because it refers to different species of flora that, although not the same, share common characteristics: they have limbs, leaves, roots and so on.⁵⁸ Equally, the abstraction ‘carpentry’ refers to a set of different activities that, nonetheless, use the same or similar tools, similar movements of the hands, similar materials and create similar products. The substance, of these abstractions, the characteristics that give them form, and a certain rational validity, arise out of the shared qualities that these objects possess. Each substance, in turn, can be thought to be essentially different with respect to its form and content from another.⁵⁹

Pre-modern societies had a variety of ‘rational’ or ‘nominal’ abstractions to refer to different kinds of human activity, some of which contained decidedly social content, but there was no concept, nor material reality, of a universal and generalised social activity or substance.⁶⁰ The medieval words ‘labour’ and ‘travail’, from which our modern terms arise, had much more restricted meanings and, arguably, a more rational basis. In French, for example, *travail* referred almost exclusively to activities that were either reserved for the lowest members of society, in particular field work, or empirically painful or exhausting, or both. Modern English retains some of the original meaning of ‘travail’ in its archaic usage such as the ‘travails of Christ’. Equally, we speak about the ‘labour’ that women perform in childbirth. Labour could, potentially, have a wider, and linked, social meaning in medieval society of fulfilling one’s Christian duty. The medieval Christian criticism of ‘sloth’, for example, did not refer to a social need to be ‘productive’ but rather to carrying out one’s social role as a Christian, within the context of the feudal hierarchy, which would be different depending on a person’s caste. There was absolutely no sense in these pre-modern societies that the activities of a peasant, a knight and a king were essentially the same thing. Equally, although each task had its own concrete time (the harvest always needs to be brought in before the storm and the emperor needs his new clothes yesterday), there was no universal abstract time through which these tasks could be compared to one another.⁶¹ There was therefore no abstract social pressure to be ‘productive’, no ‘work ethic’, beyond what was necessary to the reproduction of social life, something that could be debated, or that was, at least, *overtly* exploitative. As Kurz puts it, ‘All premodern societies implicitly start from the position that there is in any case always enough time available so that everyone “has time” and this does not have to be put additionally into some “shortage relation” of various human activities or alienation generally.’⁶² Indeed, if medieval people, including peasants, aspired to anything, it was precisely to be like God, and to *rest*, as the lives of the nobility, the weekly ritual of the Sabbath and the surprisingly large number of holy days would attest.⁶³ In some parts of the world, whole seasons would, thanks to weather conditions, be from the modern perspective ‘unproductive’. At the same time, there was no separate social space for ‘productive’ activity that had its own rules from that of the home and normal social life. It is incorrect therefore to think that pre-modern people ‘worked’ and, as Kurz argues, it is a mistake to translate these pre-modern words directly⁶⁴, even if many of the activities, such as the growing of food and the building of shelter, which we call work today were also performed in these societies.⁶⁵

The modern abstraction ‘labour’, however, cannot meaningfully be said to be a primarily ‘rational’ or ‘nominal’ one of the sort described above. There is nothing about the activities themselves, no movement of the hands, no training, no concrete purpose inherent to the task, no materials, no tools, no physical qualities or even strictly sociological class grouping that allows us to bring together the work of a banker, a cleaner, a schoolteacher, a miner, a prime minister and a plantation slave under the rubric of a single abstraction. Nevertheless, the objectivity of the labour abstraction, of a universal form of social activity—whether embodied in the concept of ‘work’ or ‘labour’ or even, strictly speaking, ‘production’—is no less real in our society for all that.⁶⁶ It would be impossible, if this were not the case, to use the word with the confidence, and naturalness, that we do in modern society. The abstraction ‘labour’, that is to say, takes on, increasingly over the course of the past five centuries, a phenomenological form that is in many ways ‘empirically’ abstract.⁶⁷ ‘Work’, for example, is an activity that often takes place in a separate social place that is removed from the rest of social life such as an office or a factory.⁶⁸ Here there are regulations that do not necessarily apply in other spheres of life. One is expected to be ‘working’ all the time that one is employed, breaks are expected to be reduced to a minimum and the rhythm and conditions of production are defined according to criteria established by direction. One is not ‘at home’ when one is at work.⁶⁹ One is expected to be ‘useful’ to the production process. More importantly, work is something that a person performs, necessarily, in order to have access to a market of goods that allows them to purchase commodities, and, as a result, and particularly when times are hard, many workers are ultimately *indifferent* to what the particular form of work in question is. They, after all, have no other way to survive. These kinds of phenomenological forms of abstraction, in particular the emergence of ‘wage labour’, embodied in a separate sphere of social life are in large part what have made it possible to think in terms of a generalised social activity in our everyday language. However, these phenomenological forms—the ‘concrete’, or empirical, ways in which labour is organised and which are the subject of most critical discussions of labour—are not the ‘essence’ of ‘labour’ or ‘work’ as such, but only secondary, albeit no less objective, modes of appearance that arise out of it. Equally, just because this concrete side of labour produces material *things* or services, it does not make it transhistorical or non-destructive, it is still the same anti-social (abstract) labour.⁷⁰

The *real*, and more essential, abstraction embodied in labour is already contained in the *form* of social mediation itself. In fully developed capitalism, which is what we are always referring to here, human beings do not decide in advance on what they are going to produce and under what conditions. Instead individual producers—individuals or businesses—produce commodities for anonymous markets in conditions of total competition. Human activity as such—which is not in itself abstract but made up of an infinite variety of concretely different forms of activity—only ‘counts’, at the most essential level of social reality, as an abstract undifferentiated expenditure of human energy. This expenditure is measured in ‘socially necessary labour time’ which is the average amount of time that it takes to produce a particular commodity. If, for example, it takes an artisanal tailor on average one hour to make a shirt, a shirt will be ‘worth’ one hour of socially necessary labour time. If, however, a factory owner introduces a machine that allows a worker to produce a shirt in 30 minutes, the same tailor, using the old method, might still take 1 hour to make a shirt, but that shirt will, under the new social conditions of production, only be worth 30 minutes of socially necessary labour time. Equally, if it takes two hours to make a cluster bomb and one hour to make a child’s toy, the bomb will be worth, in the capitalist sense, which is nonetheless the most essential mode of socialisation, twice as much as the child’s toy. Of course, what really matters from the point of view of the actors involved is the difference in surplus value, and ultimately the profit, that is produced. Labour is an ‘abstract’ social form—it is ‘abstract labour’—therefore because it recognises only differences in quantity and does not, at the deepest ontological level, recognise any concrete qualitative social content. If it is more profitable to employ people to make bombs than toys, that is, regardless of the moral compunctions of the various actors involved, what will tend to happen. The particular form, what Marx calls ‘concrete labour’, that labour takes—bomb-making or tailoring—and the ‘use values’ it makes—bombs or shirts—does not matter from the perspective of ‘value’.⁷¹

The ‘value’ form, or ‘dead labour’, is the form that labour or ‘living labour’—labour, that is, simply in the moment that it occurs—takes on once it has been expended. Human activity, in capitalism, is therefore transformed into an abstract ‘substance’; it takes on a new function or essential character, as its essence changes through the mediation of labour. There is more or less ‘value’, more or less social ‘substance’, produced in the labour process according to how much living labour has been turned into dead labour. One hour of expended living labour, or undifferentiated

human energy measured in socially necessary labour time, is embodied in one hour of dead labour, or value. The goal of production is to produce value (use-value only occurs as a necessary by-product that allows dead labour to be ‘crystallised’ in an object that is not itself abstract). However, the value created in production only counts once it is recognised as a valid expenditure of socially necessary labour time. A value, in other words, can only be *realised* in exchange, that is, on the market, because it is only here, after production is complete, that the energy expended can be socially recognised by comparing all of the different labour performed in society. It is perfectly possible, and it happens at every moment of every day, that labour is performed and commodities are produced that do not find a buyer. In such cases the labour is simply voided because its value has failed to realise. This is precisely because the products of labour are not created to satisfy pre-existing human needs, nor are they, as in pre-modern societies, the result of a social discussion and negotiation (even if, as in feudal society, such social discourse and control could be one sided and hierarchical). The individual producers are forced, by structural constraints, to compete with each other to realise the social validity of the labour that has been employed in order to win back, in the form of money, a portion of the total mass of social substance, or ‘value’, produced by society.

We can already see here that it makes no sense to try to define labour without reference to the specific negative forms of social mediation that occur in capitalist society because it is only on the basis of these abstract social forms that the category of ‘labour’, and the social ontology of labour, could have any material basis to exist. It is, indeed, nothing less than labour, in its form of ‘dead labour’, that gives value, money and capital *substance*. At the same time, it is precisely from the perspective of ‘dead labour’, or rather the forms that result from it—value, money and capital—that ‘living labour’ must be constantly employed. The individual producers, particularly from the perspective of ‘living labour’, the workers, once they have realised a value on the market, selling their labour power, for example, must repeat the formal process of substantialisation in order to reproduce themselves. Equally, from the perspective of the possessors of ‘dead labour’, in its money form, simply trying to repeat the process so as to arrive at the same amount of value with which one began makes no logical sense. Recall that labour does not refer to any concrete content or to qualitative human need. It only knows quantitative differences. A greater quantity of value means a greater quantity of the substance of social wealth in capitalism. Value that is simply consumed,

CMC (commodity–money–commodity), or arrives at the same amount of social substance, MCM (money–commodity–money), must therefore be considered a failure because it disappears or remains the same, it is not ‘productive’ for the individual producers and possessors of dead labour (persons, businesses, states, pension funds, etc.).⁷² As a result ‘dead labour’ cannot simply sit idle, rather it must transform itself, in a purely quantitative movement, into more dead labour or, as Marx puts it in *Capital*, MCM’ (money–commodity–more money). It is here therefore that ‘dead labour’ logically takes on the form of capital: dead labour that invests itself in living labour in order to produce a greater quantity of dead labour.⁷³ The whole of society, regardless of sociological class, therefore relies on the successful realisation of value and its self-valorisation because, in capitalism, it is the *only* way that social ‘wealth’ can be accessed and created. In essence, therefore, the labour form, labour *sans phrase*, can be defined as the undifferentiated expenditure of human energy—measured in socially necessary labour time—for no other purpose than the purely formal, quantitative, fetishistic and autotelic process of turning itself into greater quantities of itself in its dead form, that is, turning £100 into £110.

The labour form, furthermore, contains within itself another fundamental and essential directional and destructive social dynamic that escapes the control of the individual producers. Let us return to our previous example. When the capitalist introduces a machine that can make a shirt in 30 minutes as opposed to the artisanal tailor’s 1 hour, he can reduce the price or exchange value (which, as we can see from this example, is not directly identical with value)⁷⁴ of the shirt just enough to undercut the artisan and take over his share of the market. The capitalist will therefore, for a period of time, not only take over the market but, equally, he will be able to make a significant profit because he is selling shirts at a price that reflects the fact that other individual producers, his competitors, are still artisanal tailors taking one hour to make a shirt. One of the results of this process is that the capitalist, by introducing his machinery, has essentially destroyed jobs and therefore livelihoods, irreversibly, because less labour is required to produce the commodity. However, in capitalist society, the introduction of new technology is incapable of allowing people to work less because access to social wealth can only take place through commodity production and the reduction of labour time does not, paradoxically, contribute to ‘wealth creation’, from the perspective of capitalism as a whole, but destroys it. Instead the artisanal tailor has to either go work for the capitalist or find a job in a new sector, which, precisely because labour

power can only reproduce itself with access to the market and because living labour is the only source of value, means that capitalism constantly has to find new sectors of growth to provide new jobs to keep people employed.⁷⁵ Without such growth, it would be impossible for labour power, and society at large, to reproduce itself.

At the same time, although the capitalist will, for a time at least, dominate the market, he still has to compete with other individual producers who must, in order to realise their dead labour on the market, seek to catch up with or surpass him technologically. Indeed, this is one way in which Kurz theorises the various ‘Communist’ systems that emerged in the twentieth century, as models of ‘recuperative modernisation’ that allowed certain industrially backward countries to ‘catch up’ with Western production techniques so that they would not be as vulnerable to the modernisation of the global marketplace, as was the case for much of the Global South.⁷⁶ Technological development is, thanks to competition on anonymous markets, a question of survival for individual producers. However, when competitors catch up to the technology of our shirt-making capitalist, the socially necessary labour time, or average production time, for the creation of a shirt drops to just 30 minutes. The shirt, which, under artisanal conditions, was ‘worth’ 1 hour, is now only worth 30 minutes. It embodies half as much ‘dead labour’ or ‘value’ as before. Such ‘time-saving’, which can only seem innocuous from the perspective of ‘necessity’ and ‘efficiency’, leads to the destruction of livelihoods and the ruin of whole communities (as can be seen in much of the misty-eyed nostalgia for the heyday of industrial working-class manufacturing communities). More subtly, however, it also reduces the amount of value that can be realised in the production of a specific commodity. In other words, in order to realise the same amount of ‘value’, or ‘dead labour’, the capitalist must produce and sell twice as many shirts as he did before. At the same time, the same capitalist must use up twice as much physical matter to create that same amount of value. That is, if a shirt now embodies 30 minutes of value, he must sell two shirts to realise 1 hour of value, when it only took one shirt before.⁷⁷

It is this constant time pressure, and pressure on materials, arising out of the labour form that gives capitalism its directional and destructive historical dynamic, its need to constantly grow and expand, to dominate ever more ‘rationally’ and utilise scientifically human energy and the natural world. The more one can reduce the amount of labour time it takes to produce a commodity, the less expensive it becomes to make, the higher

the rate of surplus value realised; until a competitor catches up, and the whole cycle begins once again from a new technological standard. This is why in modernity there is, indeed, never enough time and time is money in a very literal sense. The competitive mechanism built into labour means that an abstract universal time of production becomes the measure for all things; there can be no ‘unproductive’ seasons, the labour process must be intense and any pauses during work hours must be reduced to a minimum. It is this dynamic that shapes, and brings about, the phenomenological side of labour: the work ethic, the working week, the division of labour, wage labour, the workplace, the different social classes (and their roles) and everything that is, quite rightly, usually discussed within the context of a study related to ‘work’. At the same time, this need for constant growth is the root cause of the history of primitive accumulation as a whole, the destruction of pre-modern ways of life, Western imperialism and the expansion of consumer culture. The value form, and, indeed, the entire society that has become mediated by it, requires ever newer and larger markets regardless of the social and environmental cost. Equally, it is the cause of our seemingly unstoppable destruction of the planet; for technological development means ever more material must be used to create the same amount of value. The human beings that are caught up in this real-existing cult of labour are reduced to ‘combustion engines’: they are only the ‘human material’ that, to the tick of the universal clock time that has taken over the globe, is used up in a runaway process of abstraction that is beyond the control of any persons, institutions or groups.⁷⁸

The labour form, nevertheless, contains within itself a kind of pre-programmed limit against which the valorisation process, and the whole society mediated by it, must ultimately come up against. If the amount of value embodied in a commodity will fall over time due to technological competition, this means that the overall *mass* of surplus value produced by society is also being gradually reduced.⁷⁹ As noted above, capitalism has historically responded by constantly growing and expanding into new areas. The most dramatic of these expansions in the twentieth century was the post-war boom, or ‘Thirty Glorious Years’ as it is known in France, when, through a combination of Keynesian government policies and Fordist business practices, a huge amount of labour was employed in the modernisation and rebuilding of a devastated European continent. These modernisation efforts, which relied in large part on the creation of mass consumer commodities, which were previously only luxury goods, such as automobiles and televisions, led to an unprecedented increase in the mass of value pro-

duced by society as a whole. It was above all this historically specific, and today unrepeatable, situation that allowed, from an economic standpoint, increases in the standard of living for working people—including full employment, rising wages and the expansion of social programmes—as enough labour was being productively employed, and, therefore, value created, to fund these kinds of social-democratic measures.

However, at the same time as new jobs were being created, the Second Industrial Revolution, which relied upon a Taylorist hyper-rationalisation of the division of labour, and the emerging Third Industrial Revolution, which introduced cybernetics, was expelling huge amounts of labour from the production process, on a scale that had never before been seen. The sheer size of post-war modernisation and rebuilding programmes was, from the late 1940s to the late 1960s, able to compensate for the real subsumption of labour by displacing workers into new jobs, but it could not do so indefinitely. The OPEC oil crisis of 1972–1973—which appeared around the same time as the end of the gold standard and a growing awareness of the ecological crisis—was an epiphenomenal moment that revealed how fragile the Keynesian model of capital accumulation had become and brought an end to the post-war boom. In the decades that followed, successive governments, including socialists, in France, for example, François Mitterrand in the 1980s and François Hollande more recently, found that the introduction of neo-liberal policies and the financialisation of the markets appeared as the only ways in which to keep the economic system going at all. On the one hand, this has meant trying to stay more competitive on the global market by reducing the cost of labour power through reducing wages, taking away many labour protections and cutting social programmes. On the other, it meant encouraging markets to trade in financial products that, essentially by betting on the future creation of value in the real economy, allowed value that had not yet been created to be spent. As each of these transactions relies upon a false premise, that value will be created in the future, such financialisation has led to the creation of ever-larger financial bubbles, which, when the promised value inevitably fails to realise, must, as with the dotcom bubble in the 1990s or the subprime market in 2008, burst with devastating social consequences.⁸⁰

The process of crisis that we are currently living through is an intractable and systemic one that cannot be resolved by changing government policies. This is why, for example, there is constant pressure on and cuts to education, social services and healthcare because, from the perspective of the valorisa-

tion of value, these are nothing but necessary evils. It is equally why capitalism cannot be saved by simply paying people a basic income or putting people to work in jobs that, from a qualitative point of view, might seem socially beneficial such as teaching and medicine, or the arts. All of these proposals rely upon someone somewhere producing both value *and* surplus value, yet it has become increasingly impossible for capitalism to do so due to technological development based on conditions of absolute competition. The only way to keep capitalism going at all, over the course of the past decades, was to virtualise the process of valorisation for a time through financialisation and to engage in the vicious circle of cuts to basic social protections, wages and anything not immediately profitable that we have witnessed from the mid-1970s onwards. Even these are only desperate temporary measures, however, and the crisis can only deepen at all levels of society as time progresses. What we are witnessing therefore is nothing less than a crisis of ‘work’ itself and the way of life founded upon it.

It should be noted at this point that ‘labour’, understood as ‘abstract labour’, is a more or less precise category that cannot be applied to anything and everything. In fact, perhaps one of the most oppressive and fundamental characteristics of labour—and, by extension, of value—is precisely that it is based upon the exclusion, abstraction and denigration of vast swathes of human experience that do not, and cannot, contribute directly to the valorisation of value. Labour, that is, necessarily assumes a division and organisation of social life into that which contributes to the valorisation of value (the fetishistic heart of capitalist society) and that which cannot (the ‘unsaid’ or ‘dark side’ of capitalist socialisation).⁸¹ Work, in other words, assumes and requires the existence of non-work: those aspects of social life that cannot be mediated by the labour form, which do not produce value, but without which it could not properly function. Scholz employs the concept of ‘dissociation’, or ‘Abspaltung’, a term consciously taken from Freudian psychoanalysis, in order to describe the process of suppression, repression and interdependence of these different aspects of social life.⁸² That which is ‘dissociated’ (and does not take the form of labour)—in particular, domestic activity such as childcare, but also art, friendship, community, love, family life and so on—is not just a pre-existing, nor an inessential, derived, substrate, a mere appendage, to capitalism, that exists autonomously from production; rather, it is absolutely necessary to the continued existence of the labour form and tied up, albeit indirectly, with its rule over society. These facets of social existence are necessary for the reproduction of labour power, but they cannot be

placed directly under or understood within the exigencies of the ‘time-saving’, total competition and production of surplus value that characterise the labour form. One is not in competition, as a parent, for example, with all other parents, to reduce the amount of time it takes to comfort a crying child; nor does one expect, by investing in one’s household, necessarily to realise a profit. Scholz argues, as such, that it is incorrect to try to understand domestic ‘labour’ as a form of ‘work’ or ‘labour’.⁸³ Rather, it is one of the oppressive realities of capitalism that the labour form—and the valorisation process as a whole—exists in tandem with an *informal*, subordinate, set of dissociated realities, functions and roles, which include ‘housework’.⁸⁴ The common cultural application of the words ‘work’ and ‘labour’ to these aspects of modern life is misleading and does not reflect the most essential social determination. The activities that generally fall under the rubric of ‘housework’ may well be just as hard, if not harder, and just as, if not more, socially beneficial—looking after children all day and cleaning the house is obviously both an extremely taxing task and more beneficent than making AK47s—but they do not take the form of ‘labour’ in the modern capitalist sense. This structural relationship of subordination to the sphere of valorisation—the turning of dead labour into more dead labour—explains why these ‘jobs’ are generally unpaid and often understood, culturally speaking, as being in some sense inferior. The ideological tendency to apply the category of ‘work’ to everything in existence—no matter how inappropriate from the perspective of a critical theory of labour—is due to the abstract, empty and completely irrational character that the labour form gives to the concrete world—its incapacity to see in any human action anything other than an ‘undifferentiated expenditure of human energy’. Labour, as such, makes a false claim to totality that it could never truly realise in practice and, as a result, ‘dissociates’—in the full psychoanalytical sense—from all that contradicts it.

To be clear, the argument that ‘domestic labour’ is not a form of ‘labour’ as such is not an omission on the part of the critical theory of value-dissociation, but, on the contrary, one of the ways in which the theory seeks to describe the fundamentally *patriarchal* character of capitalist modernity. Its role in society requires its own theorisation and it cannot be subsumed within the categories of the critique of political economy, nor understood simply in terms of an extension of class exploitation. Value-dissociation, labour and non-labour, *logos* and that which lies outside it, ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’, emerge together as a dynamic and dialectical process transforming each other and the world around them. Capitalism is a ‘broken totality’,⁸⁵ a system of

identity and non-identity, wherein the sphere of valorisation developed those characteristics that came to be designated as ‘male’ (as well as white and European)—hard-heartedness towards oneself and others, Reason, hard work, physical and moral strength, leadership and the ‘rational’ use of force (everything in short that allows one to realise a profit)—and the dissociated sphere of all that lay outside it was projected onto the ‘female’ (and various ‘others’)—soft-heartedness, sentimentality, irrationality, laziness, physical and moral weakness. As a general rule, therefore, the character mask of value—in its forms of money, labour and capital—fell to men and everything left was allotted to women and other marginalised groups. Nevertheless, value-dissociation should not be understood in simplistic terms as a strictly binary, static, structure. On the contrary, not only were women historically active in the sphere of valorisation from the very beginning (albeit often less well paid and unrecognised), gender roles, and notions of gender, have been in a state of constant flux since the inception of capitalism. Today, for example, there are many house husbands and female CEOs, and gay marriage is accepted as law in many of the most developed capitalist countries; all of which would have, at other periods in the history of capitalism, been unthinkable. However, even though the particular race, gender and sexual orientation of those assigned to these different spheres have been made more equal or queered or become more gender fluid (with the caveat that racism, transphobia, homophobia and sexism remain entrenched empirical problems to be overcome), the structural problem of dissociation has not essentially changed: ‘housework’, whoever is performing it, necessarily remains unpaid, degraded, dissociated from and in a subordinate position to ‘production’. Value-dissociation can change its forms of appearance but not its essentially oppressive character. The critique of work should, as such, go hand in hand with a concomitant critique of patriarchy and other forms of marginalisation and discrimination, but it has not always done so.⁸⁶

It is necessary to stress here that all of the oppressive social processes that have so far been described—from unemployment and hospital closures to financial crises and the destruction of the planet—can be explained without any recourse to the malevolent machinations of any human persons or groups. They arise out of the essentially fetishistic character of the labour form itself. There are people performing these actions, but they are only carrying out the orders of the fetishistic social laws that govern them. The only ‘doer’ in all of this is the value form, or ‘dead labour’, which

seeks to mediate the whole of social reality, setting strict rules for what it is possible and necessary for the various actors in this historically specific social system to do. This is why Marx refers to both workers and capitalists as the ‘character masks’ of value. The value form demands that the whole complexity of human relationships be mediated by a purely quantitative and undifferentiated expenditure of human energy for no other purpose than its own tautological expansion. Whole alternative ways of life are destroyed, and millions are killed or maimed or have their lives wasted, in the name of this form of abstract social mediation that is unrelenting in its indifference to human suffering. All of social reality must be made to be ‘useful’, to serve a ‘purpose’, to the value form, which demands that the natural world be further appropriated and dominated through the development of productive technology and highly rational modes of scientific thought that project its abstract categories of social life as timeless universals. This impersonal, quasi-autonomous, quality of capitalism is the reason why Marx chose to describe value, or ‘dead labour’, as the ‘automatic subject’,⁸⁷ or, as Kurz puts it, capitalist society is a form of fetishistic domination ‘without a subject’.⁸⁸

Labour—and, at a metalevel, value-dissociation—has the quality of being a quasi-Kantian *a priori* or ‘total social form’.⁸⁹ The category of labour—and with it the commodity, value, money and capital—precedes, limits, shapes and determines the forms of thought and action that are possible in modern society. It should be stressed, however, that such a position is understood as a criticism of capitalism and not a general statement about human society as such. Capitalism, in other words, is oppressive, destructive and alienating precisely because of its deterministic, unconscious and fetishistic character. Of course, no society can be, or has ever been, entirely conscious, in control, and rational, but capitalism, thanks to the abstract character of its social forms, has a peculiarly deadly and tight grip on what is, and can be, done and thought. Value, the ‘automatic subject’, only recognises human beings in as far as they are able and willing to carry out its orders. The very emergence of the concept, and reality, of the ‘subject’ form in the early modern period was closely tied to the rise of capitalism as it transformed social life and notions of human being. Early modern philosophy, as we saw above, relegates nature, and concrete reality, to an object that the subject, man, consciously and rationally acts upon and transforms, realising his will. The notion of the subject, however, is not simply incorrect, as some have argued; rather, it reflects the reality of the value form as it shapes human consciousness and

action. It is value, and its iron laws, that is the true subject that relegates the entire concrete world to an object in which it realises itself. Human beings attain the status of ‘subject’ when they begin to perceive the world as it does, when they have proved capable of acting as a character mask of value, whether in its form of labour, capital or money. As a result, to be a subject is, ironically, in reality to be an ‘object’ of value. Historically, the status of subject was first accorded to white European property owners—the first real ‘NCOs’ of capital—and only gradually awarded to different groups, such as workers, once they had fully incorporated the exigencies of value; that is, they could be trusted to carry out, even with enthusiasm, its orders and further its interest (in the name of technological ‘progress’ or the ‘Republic of Labour’, for example).⁹⁰

The critique of the subject put forward in Wertkritik marks a major point of departure from traditional Marxism and has ‘political’ implications.⁹¹ Most anti-capitalist theories hold that capitalism is a form of personal domination in which a subject, the bourgeoisie, exploits a growing portion of humanity, the proletariat. The proletariat develops through its history of struggles with its enemy into a consciousness of its own existence as a class and, in turn, becomes a subject that asserts its interests against those of the bourgeoisie. These proletarian interests, moreover, were supposed to be entirely opposed to those of its class antagonist. Capitalism, as such, was imagined to bring about its own ‘gravedigger’ in a ‘radical’ subject: the working class. However, as Kurz argues, in many respects, the concept of a radical subject is problematical. The subject, as it is generally conceived here, is a fetishistic concept because, on the one hand, it claims to be autonomous from capitalism and emancipatory, while on the other, it is always thought of precisely as an object that is created through the development of the logic of capitalism itself.⁹² The development of the class struggle schema of social emancipation emerges from the history of struggles of living labour against capital. These struggles were very real, sometimes deadly and even a matter of life or death for the participants; however, they were still battles that turned around the distribution and management of categories—value, money, labour and capital—that were not in themselves questioned. Not least because to be seen to break with these forms would mean to cease being a ‘subject’. Indeed, the workers’ movement—precisely because it represented the interests of human beings only in as far as they were ‘workers’, that is, as labour power, the character masks of labour—often played an important role in breaking barriers to the full realisation of the valorisation of value. It pushed for

many modernisations in the face of a reactionary bourgeoisie that was, especially in the nineteenth century, quite happy to maintain the status quo. Workers gained the right to vote, to take part in government, to enter into contracts, to demand higher wages and so on; all of which implicitly promoted and extended the material and ideal reach of the value form over social life. Class struggle is therefore not an emancipatory conflict but a ‘family quarrel’ or competition over categories that are taken for granted or even celebrated, as in the case of labour, by both sides. The gradual erosion of the importance of the workers’ movement in politics over the course of the twentieth century has led many thinkers to identify new potential radical subjects that could fulfil the promise of social emancipation—youth, students, the precariat and so on—but the same logic applies. No ‘subject’ can save us.

Wertkritik has often been criticised for these positions because it would appear, from the perspective of a more traditional approach, that it simply dismisses the immanent struggles of social movements and seems to offer no space for any kind of autonomy from capitalism to emerge. However, Kurz is quick to argue that immanent struggles—over, for example, social protections, the closure of hospitals, wage cuts and so on—are the necessary starting point for social movements. What is important, nevertheless, is the way in which these movements develop.⁹³ The same old tactics will not work anymore. It is not possible, in the context of the current crisis, to impose Keynesian economic policies, and this is not simply due to a lack of political will. In the face of ever-worsening conditions, we need social movements that seek to construct a different way of life beyond, and against, the mediation of labour, the market and the state. Jappe, for example, states the need for a new ‘grassroots revolution’ that would not hesitate to seize basic necessities—food, shelter and other things necessary for a new metabolism with nature—by ‘bypassing’ money.⁹⁴ He argues, moreover, in favour of uniting different struggles, over the environment and technology, for example, in order to bring about a real ‘transformation of civilisation’ that would be far more profound than anything that could occur in the ballot box or through the seizure of the state. What is necessary therefore is that social movements develop in the direction of a ‘categorical break’ with the ontology of labour that we have described in this chapter. The end of capitalism, as such, requires the abolition of work.

The ambiguity of the history of the ‘critique of work’ that is explored in this study also has important political consequences. It demonstrates quite clearly the pitfalls of what Kurz calls ‘affirmative critique’: a critique

of work that touches upon its phenomenological side but does not reach, at least not fully, the category itself.⁹⁵ Such an approach, Kurz argues, may logically only result in the call for a ‘quasi-adjectival’ change and not the necessary ‘categorical break’:

The critique and suspension of the categories themselves appears to be unthinkable. Thus, it is possible to critique a certain politics in order to replace it with another; but within modern ontology it is impossible to critique politics in itself and replace it with another mode of social regulation. For this we lack the appropriate form of thought, and therefore all the concepts as well. Only the determinate content of politics is malleable, but not the categorical form or mode of all content. The same goes for the categories of nation, state, rights, labour, money, and market, as well as of the individual, subject, and gender relations (social masculinity and femininity). At any given point, any of these categorical forms can be modified, only in a quasi-adjectival sense. Yet the category itself and its corresponding social mode are never put up for substantial negotiation.⁹⁶

Work is already *per se* a form of social being that is worthy of our criticism even before we start to think about issues of workplace hierarchy, exploitation and ‘alienation’ in the immediate sense. What Kurz is saying is that the ‘critique of work’ must be taken literally as a critique of a historically specific and socially destructive real abstraction. Critical insights into the essentially negative character of the labour form have, for a long time, only been partial and often contradicted in the writing of a single author by a more limited, one-sidedly phenomenological, mode of critical discourse that constantly reasserts the social ontology of labour. One of my wishes for this book therefore is that it will, by counteracting this trend, contribute in some small way to the development of the forms of thought necessary for effective social critique. The abolition of work, if it is to have a positive meaning at least, will not be a technological achievement but the result of actual human beings thinking critically and acting accordingly. Before we can do that, we need to understand what it is we are facing.

This lengthy exposition of the categorical critique of work as developed by the ‘critique of value’ might seem out of place in a book that is ostensibly devoted to the critical analysis of an aspect of French intellectual history. However, the perspective that I have put forward here is fundamental to my analytical approach and, due to the fact that it is little known in the English-speaking world, I felt it necessary to clarify for the reader a perspective with which they might not be familiar. In short, the critical theory

of work that I have described above provides a new critical perspective from which to analyse past critiques of work. Traditional Marxist, Anarchist and liberal conceptions of labour could, at best, see in these historical forms of anti-work discourse only a history of ongoing popular resistance to the capitalist exploitation of the working class. It is true that many of the critiques examined in this book adopt something of this perspective themselves. However, what makes these specific authors—and the French anti-work tradition in general—so interesting is precisely that they contain, to a greater or lesser degree, elements of a ‘categorical’ critique of labour. We can therefore draw upon the critique of value in order to unpack and explain the complexities and ambiguities of these discourses, their historical and social context and their strengths and weaknesses. The fundamental distinction drawn by Kurz and others between a purely phenomenological, and therefore ‘affirmative’, critique of work and a negative categorical critique is absolutely essential to the argument put forward in this book. What is ultimately presented is, I hope, more interesting, and useful, than a far-left utopian hagiography, while still being deeply sympathetic to the shared radical goal of overcoming the crushing restraint that labour imposes upon human life.

NOTES

1. See, for a historical example, Michael Seidman, *Workers Against Work: Labor in Paris and Barcelona During the Popular Fronts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), and, for a sociological study of more recent trends, Stephen Bouquin, ed. *Résistances au travail* (Paris: Syllepse, 2008).
2. A particularly egregious example of the latter occurred in 2007 when the reigning French Finance Minister Christine Lagarde surprised the National Assembly by accusing Paul Lafargue of being a reactionary. Lagarde claimed that Lafargue represented an aristocratic disdain for work that he had inherited from the Ancien Regime. The implication being that any attack on the length of the working day was in some way an attack on liberty itself. Suffice it to say that the absolutist monarchies of the past would certainly not have advocated anything like Lafargue’s call for a three-hour working day. National Assembly, 13th Legislature, Extraordinary Session, First Sitting, Summary, 10 July 2007. www.assembleenationale.fr
3. Karl Marx, trans. Ben Fowkes, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 133.
4. Anselm Jappe, trans. Alastair Hemmens, *The Writing on the Wall: On the Decomposition of Capitalism and Its Critics* (London: Zero Books, 2017), p. 15.

5. Moishe Postone, ‘Anti-Semitism and National Socialism: Notes on the German Reaction to “Holocaust”’, in *Germans and Jews since the Holocaust*, edited by Anson Rabinbach and Jack Zipes (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1986).
6. ‘Arbeit macht frei’, literally ‘Work *makes* free.’ The phrase was taken from the title of an 1871 novel by the nationalist writer Lorenz Diefenbach (1806–1883) in which a gambler and fraudster is reformed into a productive German citizen through hard work. The phrase can be interpreted in a number of ways: first, a lie to the entrants of the camps that they would be freed if they were to work hard; secondly, a mantra that expresses the belief that the internationalisation of labour discipline would reform them of their ‘degeneracy’; and thirdly, that the German people would be ‘freed’ by working its purported enemies to death.
The Situationists would later reproduce a picture of these words above the gates of Auschwitz in the same issue of their journal as a reproduction of Guy Debord’s, diametrically opposed, ‘never work’ graffito. See Chap. 5.
7. Robert Kurz’s manner of referring to real-existing socialism. See Robert Kurz, *Der Kollaps der Modernisierung: Vom Zusammenbruch des Kasernensozialismus zur Krise der Weltökonomie* (Frankfurt: Eichborn, 1991).
8. Cited in Anselm Jappe, *Les Aventures de la marchandise: Pour une critique de la valeur* (Paris: La Découverte, 2017), p. 114.
9. See, for example, Peter Fleming, *The Mythology of Work: How Capitalism Persists Despite Itself* (London: Pluto Press, 2015); David Frayne, *The Refusal of Work: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Work* (London: Zed Books, 2015); Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London: Verso, 2015); and Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).
10. Indeed, many observers have, in typical pro-work fashion, discussed the advantages of the French social model precisely on the basis that the working population is, despite common misconceptions, statistically far more productive than the British. See Ferdinando Giugliano and Sarah O’Connor, ‘Boasts Debunked as France Gets Last Laugh over UK on Productivity’, *Financial Times*, 19 March 2015, <https://www.ft.com/content/c413ca76-ce3c-11e4-86fc-00144feab7de>
11. See Robert Kurz, *Schwarzbuch Kapitalismus. Ein Abgesang auf die Marktwirtschaft* (Eichborn Verlag, 1999), pp. 354–359.
12. David Graeber, ‘On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs’, *Strike! Magazine*, 17 August 2013, <http://strikemag.org/bullshit-jobs/>
13. Lorraine de Foucher, ‘Absurdes et vides de sens: ces jobs d’enfer’, *Le Monde*, 22 April 2016.

14. See, for example, Dominique Méda, *Le Travail: une valeur en voie de disparition?* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010).
15. Thomas Piketty, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, *Capital in the 21st Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).
16. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, trans. Gregory Elliott, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2007).
17. The notion of an ‘esoteric’ and ‘exoteric’ Marx is put forward in Robert Kurz, trans. Hélène Steinberg and Lucien Steinberg, ‘Les Destinées du marxisme’, in *Lire Marx: Les textes les plus importants de Karl Marx pour le XXIe siècle, choisis et commentés par Robert Kurz* (Paris: La Balustrade, 2013), pp. 13–41.
18. See Robert Kurz, trans. Robin Halpin, *The Substance of Capital* (London: Chronos, 2016), pp. 8–13.
19. Herbert Applebaum, *The Concept of Work: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern*, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. ix–x.
20. Jean Dubois, Henri Mitterand, and Albert Dauzat, eds. *Dictionnaire étymologique et historique du français* (Paris: Larousse, 1995), p. 778.
21. René Descartes, trans. Ian Maclean, *A Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One’s Reason and Seeking the Truth in the Sciences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 51.
22. This apocryphal tale is, unfortunately, almost certainly untrue. The Dutch physician Jacobus Bontius (1592–1631), in his *Historiae naturalis et medicae Indiae orientalis libri sex* (1658), notes that the people of Java claimed that orangutans could talk ‘but they did not want to because they did not want to be forced to work’, cited in Chris Herzfeld, trans. Kevin Frey, *The Great Apes: A Short History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), p. 14. Descartes, who had no doubt read the book, then mentions this observation in a private letter, seemingly as a joke, where he complains that, since he has made it known to the world that he is a writer of books, he is never left alone in peace. ‘If I had only been as wise as they say the savages persuaded themselves that the monkeys were, I never would have become known as a maker of books: Since it is said that they imagined that the monkeys could indeed speak, if they wanted to, but that they chose not to so lest they be forced to work. And since I had not the same prudence to abstain from writing, I now have neither as much leisure nor as much peace as I would have had if I had kept quiet.’ Letter to Pierre Chanut, 1 November 1646, cited in Amir Aczel, *Descartes’s Secret Notebook: A True Tale of Mathematics, Mysticism and the Quest to Understand the Universe* (New York: Broadway Books, 2005), p. 182. While the apocryphal tale might not be true, it nevertheless says something about how the author has been interpreted over the years.
23. Chris Rojek, *Decentring Leisure: Rethinking Leisure Theory* (London: Sage, 1999), p. 189.

24. In this vein Jappe cites an anecdote told by an eighteenth-century French moralist that recalls a time just before the Revolution when France had already gone through the Enlightenment cultural valorisation of labour, while Spain clearly had not:

A Frenchman was given permission to visit the study of the King of Spain. Coming before his chair and desk, he said: 'So this is where the great king works.' 'What's that! Work,' said the guide, 'what insolence! The great king, work! You just came here to insult His Majesty!' A quarrel erupted in which the Frenchman had to take great pains to make the Spaniard understand that he had meant no offence to the majesty of his master.

Sébastien-Roch Nicolas de Chamfort, *Maximes et pensées, caractères et anecdotes* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1968), p. 242. (N.B. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.)

The king, of course, was a 'man of leisure' and any suggestion that he 'worked' was an insult not only to his subjects but to his subjects also. Such examples of uneven historical development give some clue as to how different the pre-modern understanding of the word 'labour' is from our own.

25. Aristotle, in *The Politics*, underlines the importance of 'economics' for other aspects of life, such as the running of the city (politics), but the key difference is that it is a question of establishing the nature of the right social roles, relations between people (as in a household), rather than relationships between people and things or the most efficient and utilitarian expenditure of their own 'undifferentiated energy'. Equally, what we might think of as the 'stuff' of economic life, such as merchandise and coin is by no means the focus of his work. Rather, it is a question of socially managing land and people, in which objects that are traded and bartered are only one part rather than the essential focus of social life. See Moishe Postone, 'Thinking the global crisis', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Spring 2012, pp. 247–248: 'In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx notes that, for Aristotle, shoes and houses are incommensurable. Hence he could not locate the grounds for their mutual exchangeability. Those grounds, for Marx, are historically specific and social. What renders them commensurable is value, a historically specific form of wealth that has nothing to do with their properties, whether material or immaterial, but is the crystallized expression of a historically specific form of social mediation that, in Marx's analysis, is constituted by a historically specific form of labor.'

26. Marx, although he contributes in many respects to the cultural valorisation of work, actually criticises Ricardo for his ahistorical conception of the labour abstraction. See Anselm Jappe, *Les Aventures*, p. 137.
27. Karl Marx, trans. Martin Nicolaus, *Grundrisse* (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 85.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 103, 105.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
30. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 284.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
32. Kurz, *Substance*, pp. 28–29.
33. See Postone, ‘National Socialism’, op. cit.
34. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 133.
35. In the same passage, Marx even reinforces the gendered character of labour and the labouring subject with reference to the eighteenth-century economist William Petty: ‘Labour is the father of material wealth, the earth is its mother.’ *Ibid.*, p. 134.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 283.
37. Marx, it should be remembered, was a great admirer of Darwin and, at times, expressed the wish that his work should take on a similar scientific status.
38. What is being presented here is explicitly an examination of the pro-work, or ‘exoteric’, *side* of Marx; something that should become clearer below where we see that Marx also presents a very different, negative, theoretical conception of the labour form. For a detailed exploration of these ambiguities in the work of Marx himself, however, see Jappe, *Aventures*, ‘Le travail est une catégorie capitaliste’, pp. 120–131.
39. Karl Marx, trans. David Fernbach, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 3 (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 958–959.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 959.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 958.
42. See, for example, the anthropological research of Marshal Sahlins on hunter-gatherer communities, Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (New York: de Gruyter, 1972), and, his critique of *homo economicus*, *The Western Illusion of Human Nature* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2008). For a historical analysis of how modern economies differ from more recent pre-modern modes of life, made on the basis of a non-Marxian framework, see Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* [1944] (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).
43. For a brief introduction to Kurz and Wertkritik, see Anselm Jappe, trans. Alastair Hemmens and John McHale, ‘Kurz, A Journey into Capitalism’s Heart of Darkness’, *Historical Materialism* 22, no. 3–4 (2014), pp. 395–407; and trans. Alastair Hemmens and Engel Di Mauro, ‘Towards a

- History of the Critique of Value', *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 25, no. 2 (3 April 2014), pp. 25–37.
44. Moishe Postone, *Time, Labour, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
 45. See Jappe, *Aventures*, *op. cit.* This book serves as an excellent detailed introduction to the critique of value, in particular its anti-work aspects, for sceptical readers more familiar with traditional Marxist modes of analysis.
 46. See Jappe, 'Kurz', *op. cit.*
 47. See Neil Larsen, Mathias Nilges, Josh Robinson and Nicholas Brown, eds. *Marxism and the Critique of Value* (Chicago: MCM Publishing, 2014). The volume brings together English translations of a number of texts that are foundational to key aspects of Wertkritik.
 48. The Left Young Hegelian Heinrich Heine distinguished between the 'esoteric' and 'exoteric' readings of Hegel in his *On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany* (1834). Marx himself would go on to apply a similar schema to Adam Smith in *Theories of Surplus Value* (1863) (both in chapter 10 and chapter 20). See Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value* (Moscow: Progress Publishers), vol. 2 (1968), pp. 166, 169 and vol. 3 (1971), p. 69.
 49. The French Structuralist, Louis Althusser, in a preface to a 1969 edition of *Capital* volume one (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1969), infamously advised first-time readers to skip completely the first chapter, which, ironically, contains the foundation of Marx's critique of commodity fetishism, and he spends much of his introduction criticising Hegelian-influenced readings of Marx.
 50. Postone, *Time*, p. 5.
 51. *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4, 6.
 52. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
 53. *Ibid.*
 54. *Ibid.* Postone, it is true, largely glosses over the more positivistic conception of labour found in Marx, examined above. Moreover, he preserves the notion of labour as a rational abstraction, in the form of 'necessary labour', but, as Kurz argues, this still does not detract greatly from the extent of his original insights. See Kurz, *Substance*, 'Critique of Moishe Postone's Concept of Labour', pp. 60–69.
 55. Postone, *Time*, p. 5. As Jappe argues, the 'economic determinism' of traditional Marxism, or the 'objective' base versus 'subjective' cultural superstructure model of historical materialism, is not entirely wrong to the extent that it reflects the real subordination of human life to the 'economic' in capitalism, but it is certainly not characteristic of any other form of society: 'It follows that "economism", as the subordination of all human activity to the economy, is not a theoretical error: it is actually quite real in capitalist society, but only in this society. It is not an immutable fact of

human existence, much less something that must be defended. On the contrary, this subordination constitutes an aspect of capitalist society that can and must be changed. At the same time, it should be stressed that this centrality of the “economy”, and of the “material” aspect in general, in modernity (at the expense, for example, of “gratitude”) can only be explained by the autonomisation of abstract labour.’ Jappe, *Writing on the Wall*, pp. 89–90.

Equally, even in capitalism, the cultural superstructures or forms of subjectivity structured by labour can sometimes trump its ‘objective’ economic base or strictly economic individual interests. A person might, for example, choose, for moral reasons, to do, what they perceive as, ‘honest’ blue-collar work, working with one’s hands, when a better paid, but supposedly morally inferior, ‘white’ collar job, working with ‘other people’s money’ in a bank, for example, is on offer. This can also work the other way around, for example, when middle-class parents discourage their children from pursuing a skilled blue-collar career, rather than a white-collar one, even when, as is often the case today in the West, they are better paid and more secure, due to cultural prejudice against manual labour, which, for historical reasons, is seen as a step down the social ladder.

56. For a detailed exposition of this argument, see Ernst Lohoff and Norbert Trenkle, trans. Paul Braun et al., *La Grande dévalorisation: Pourquoi la spéculation et la dette de l'état ne sont pas les causes de la crise* (Fécamp: Post-éditions, 2014).
57. Strictly speaking the contributors to the journal *Exit!* now refer to their theory as Wertabspaltungskritik, the ‘critique of value-dissociation’, to reflect this development. See Roswitha Scholz, *Das Geschlecht des Kapitalismus: Feministische Theorien und die post-moderne Metamorphose des Kapitals* (Bad Honnef: Horlemann Verlag, 2011) and ‘Patriarchy and Commodity Society: Gender without the Body’, in *Marxism and the Critique of Value*, op. cit., pp. 123–142.
58. See Norbert Trenkle, ‘Terror of Labour’, in *Krisis: Contributions to the Critique of Commodity Society* (London: Chronos, 2002), pp. 3–8.
59. Modern philosophy, with the rise of capitalism, began to put forward the concept that material reality might constitute a single abstract substance. See Kurz, *Substance*, ‘The philosophical concept of substance and the real metaphysics of capitalism’, pp. 12–21.
60. For empirical evidence and discussion of the historical specificity of ‘labour’, see, for example, Jacques Le Goff, ‘Pour une étude du travail dans les idéologies et les mentalités du Moyen Âge’, in *Lavorare nel medio evo: rappresentazioni ed esempi dall'Italia dei secc. X-XVI* (Todi: Presso L'Academia Tudertina, 1983); Robert Fossier, *Le Travail au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Pluriel, 2012); Daniel Becquemont and Pierre Bonte, *Mythologies*

- Du Travail. Le Travail Nommé* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004), pp. 8–9; Michel Freyssenet, 'The Emergence, Centrality and End of Work', *Current Sociology*, 1999, vol. 47, n. 2, pp. 5–30 (a longer French version of this text can be found at freyssenet.com); Marie-Noëlle Chamoux, 'Société avec et sans concept de travail: remarques anthropologiques', *Sociologie du travail*, vol. 36, Sept. 1994, pp. 57–71.
61. On the historical development of abstract time over concrete time, see Postone, *Time, Labour and Social Domination*, pp. 200–216.
 62. Kurz, *Substance*, p. 55.
 63. See Michael Perelman, *The Invention of Capitalism: Classical Political Economy and the Secret History of Primitive Accumulation* (London: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 17–18; also Juliet Schor, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), pp. 43–53. Notwithstanding, it is also obviously the case that, particularly in certain monastic communities, toil for its own sake was often seen as a means of expiating the sinful nature of the human condition. The existence of such a self-abasing ideology in the Middle Ages was certainly a factor in the future development of the modern work ethic.
 64. Kurz, *Substance*, p. 27.
 65. Some medieval historians have suggested that the originally negative connotations of 'labour' were the result of classism or an 'aristocratic disdain'. However, it is just as important to say that medieval people, in particular the peasants themselves, quite rationally saw tasks that were, empirically speaking, difficult or painful as something to be either suffered or avoided. Indeed, to the extent that 'labour', in its original sense, was a curse for original sin, the whole of pre-modern Christianity could be thought of precisely as a form of consolation for and absolution from such activity.
 66. This is a problem that, as we saw in the case of Applebaum above, is deeply frustrating to thinkers who want an intellectually satisfying, generally positivistic, definition of labour as a transhistorical abstraction but who, at the same time, can find no rational basis for it. A more postmodern vein of thinking might simply recognise how seemingly arbitrary what is and is not considered work in society and, as a result, conclude that it is simply a matter of one's point of view, which simply dodges the question under the guise of promoting the voices of the oppressed. (E.g. see Keith Grint and Darren Nixon, *The Sociology of Work* [Oxford: Polity Press, 2015], p. 2.) A more moralising definition might say that these activities are unpleasant or forced and, therefore, a form of 'work', a common one for critics of work; but, while this may hold true for some, it is hardly the case that all of the activities that fall under the rubric of work as a generalised social activity are, at an empirical level, experienced universally as pain and *personal* domination, even if this is, objectively, often the case. It would also not explain

why there is a strong tendency, even within physics, to project work onto activity in general. Equally, attempts, such as those of Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* (1958), to draw philosophical distinctions between ‘work’ and ‘labour’ bare no relationship to how these words are actually used nor how the form of abstract labour itself mediates social reality, and are, therefore, equally empty.

67. See Jappe, *Aventures*, pp. 53–54.
68. For a further discussion of this concretely abstract side of labour, or ‘concrete labour’, see Kurz, *Substance*, ‘What is really abstract about abstract labour’, pp. 84–111.
69. ‘Modern humans come upon the space of business as a finished shape whose disembedded character they feel, but can no longer name.’ *Ibid.*, p. 90.
70. ‘If abstract labour is the abstraction of an abstraction, concrete labour only represents the paradox of the concrete aspect of an abstraction – namely of the form-abstraction “labour”. It is only “concrete” in the very narrow and restricted sense that the different commodities require materially different production processes: a car is made differently from, say, an aspirin tablet or a pencil sharpener. But even the behaviour of these processes of production is in no way indifferent, technically or organizationally, to the presupposed goal of valorization. [...] the capitalist process of production is configured in this respect: it is organized solely according to the maxim of producing the greatest possible number of products in the shortest possible time. This is then called the economic efficiency of a business. The concrete, material side of labour is thus nothing other than the tangible form in which abstract labour’s diktat of time confronts the workers and forces them under its rhythm.’ Norbert Trenkle, ‘Value and Crisis: Basic Questions’, in *Marxism and the Critique of Value*, op. cit., pp. 9–10.
71. It should be stressed again that ‘abstract labour’ and ‘concrete labour’ are not different types of labour. They are rather categories that allow us to talk about labour at different levels of social ontology. Indeed, ‘abstract labour’ is, Kurz argues, strictly speaking, a ‘logical pleonasm’—like ‘wet water’—because labour is already an abstraction and this abstract quality of labour is what defines its essence or form. At the same time, ‘concrete labour’ is a kind of oxymoron or paradoxical-real determination because the labour in question is, by definition, not concrete, but the category allows us to talk about the paradoxical fact that, in an inversion of all previous social logic, a real abstraction, ‘abstract labour’, grasps hold of, organises and mediates concrete reality at all levels. All forms of ‘concrete labour’ are therefore just as abstract, at an essential social level, even if empirically they appear otherwise. As such, concrete labour, along with use value, is not a category that can be projected onto the pre-modern world. See Kurz, *Substance*, pp. 27–28.

72. Jappe, *Aventures*, pp. 70–75.
73. ‘It is not too much of an exaggeration to say that the inversion of the formula C-M-C to M-C-M’ contains within it the entire essence of capitalism. The transformation of abstract labour into money is the only goal of commodity production; all use-value production is only a means, a “necessary evil”, with a single goal: to have at the end of the operation a larger sum of money than at the start. The satisfaction of needs is no longer the goal of production, but only a secondary aspect. [...] the concrete serves only to feed the materialised abstraction: money.’ Jappe, *Aventures*, p. 73.
74. See Jappe, *Aventures*, pp. 83–85.
75. Society has reached such a state of absurdity that these days ‘job creation’ has become a job in itself and even a foundation stone of left-wing politics.
76. See Robert Kurz, trans. Alias Recluse, ‘The Apotheosis of Money: The Structural Limits of Capital Valorization, Casino Capitalism and the Global Financial Crisis’, 2012, <https://libcom.org/library/apotheosis-money-structural-limits-capital-valorization-casino-capitalism-global-financi>. See also Jappe, *Aventures*, pp. 204–205.
77. See Trenkle, *Dévalorisation*, pp. 92–93.
78. ‘A threefold real, practical process of abstraction takes place paradoxically in the abstract space-time of the economy. Although it is they themselves that “labour”, the functional subjects must first abstract from themselves, extinguishing themselves in a certain way as human beings, to obey the imperatives of abstract labour. This does not follow from the material character in itself, for instance from (social) production for others rather than for one’s own needs, but from the fundamentally “alien” fact of the capitalist self-sufficient purpose, the valorisation of value. The point is not to produce useful objects, either for oneself or for others, but it is essentially to produce value and surplus value, that is to burn up a maximum of one’s own abstract human energy within the functional space of economic space-time, to turn oneself as a human being into a social combustion engine.’ Kurz, *Substance*, pp. 101–102.
79. Traditional Marxism always understood this process as the ‘tendency of the rate of profit to fall’, which is a more phenomenological way of trying to understand this process, but precisely because it was not based on a categorical critique, it was not something that was thought to put capitalism itself into question.
80. See Trenkle, *Dévalorisation*, op. cit.; Jappe, ‘Le capital fictif’, *Aventures*, pp. 157–166, and ‘The Writing on the Wall’, *The Writing on the Wall*, pp. 60–80.

The more the labour and value forms come to mediate social life the more dangerous these kinds of financial crises become. In a period when

the agricultural way of life was still widespread alongside modern industry, people could simply return to the land. Today, at least for most people in the West, this is simply not an option.

81. Anselm Jappe, 'The "Dark Side" of Value and the Gift', *The Writing on the Wall*, pp. 84–103. Here Jappe draws parallels between the Maussian concept of the 'gift' and Scholz's theory of 'dissociation'.
82. For a detailed discussion of value-dissociation and gender, see Roswitha Scholz, *Das Geschlecht des Kapitalismus: Feministische Theorien und die post-moderne Metamorphose des Kapitals* (Bad Honnef: Horlemann Verlag, 2011); 'Patriarchy and Commodity Society' (2009) in *Marxism and the Critique of Value*, op. cit., pp. 123–1400; and trans. Stéphane Besson, *Simone de Beauvoir aujourd'hui* (Paris: Le Bord de l'eau, 2014). See also, Johannes Vogele, 'Remarques sur les notions de 'valeur' et de 'dissociation valeur' in Richard Poulin and Patrick Vassort, eds. *Sexe, capitalisme et critique de la valeur* (Paris: M éditeur, 2012), pp. 89–102 and 'Le côté obscur du Capital, 'Masculinité' et 'féminité' comme piliers de la modernité' in *ibid.*, pp. 103–120; Kurz, *Substance*, pp. 90–92, 96–97.
83. Scholz, 'Patriarchy', pp. 127–128, and Vogele, 'Le côté obscur', p. 112.
84. On the other hand, this does not prevent the domestic sphere from becoming a utilitarian, functionalist and 'productivist' one in a certain sense. The dissociated aspects of life constantly have to justify their existence and specific modes of organisation as taking place outside of the logic of production and often they do so in its terms (e.g. one can imagine a worker in a nuclear family stating to a spouse, 'I work eight hours a day so you should do eight hours of housework'); but, although they can have empirical similarities, they still do not take the form of (abstract) labour.
85. Vogele, 'Le côté obscur', p. 112.
86. Although it is our focus here, we cannot think of 'value-dissociation' purely in terms of patriarchy. The dissociated traits of laziness and irrationality have often been projected onto the disabled and people of colour; they have likewise suffered discrimination and been excluded from full participation in public life. Even illness, in modernity, is essentially defined by whether a person is capable of working or not. In official French language, for example, injury or ill health is usually spoken in terms of a period of 'incapacité de travail' or inability to work.
87. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 255.
88. See Jappe, *Aventures*, 'Le sujet automate', pp. 98–107.
89. For a detailed exploration of these positions, see Anselm Jappe, *La Société autophage: capitalisme, démesure et autodestruction* (Paris: Découverte, 2017). Jappe, drawing on Freud and the work of Christopher Lasch, argues that the subject form is essentially narcissistic in character as it recognises no limits on itself. It therefore fixes the human psyche in an infan-

tile stage of psychological development where the objective world is seen only as a projection of the self. The empirical ‘subjects’ are increasingly unable to form healthy reciprocal relationships with the exterior world, which instead becomes the playground for the realisation of the most primitive desires. At the same time, these subjects are increasingly caught between feelings of omnipotence and total impotence as capitalism collapses by reaching its own internal and external limits.

90. Jappe, *Aventures*, ‘Critique du progrès, de l’économie et du sujet’, pp. 207–211.
91. The nature of value and labour as *a priori* forms, though historically specific, obviously excludes voting in general elections, active citizenship or seizing the state as means of resolving the problem of capitalism. These forms of ‘participation’ only permit empirical subjects access to different management roles, or to cast an opinion on styles of management, within the system of valorisation, which itself could never be voted upon or abolished with a law.
92. Robert Kurz, *No Revolution Anywhere* (London: Chronos, 2012), pp. 19–21.
93. *Ibid.*, pp. 21–22.
94. Anselm Jappe, ‘We Gotta Get Out of this Place’, *Brooklyn Rail*, Sept. 2015. <https://brooklynrail.org/2015/09/field-notes/anselm-jappe-with-alastair-hemmens>
95. Kurz, *Substance*, p. 61. In his case, Kurz specifically has in mind Autonomism.
96. Robert Kurz, ‘The Ontological Break: Before the Beginning of a Different World History’, *Marxism and the Critique of Value*, op. cit., pp. 357–72.



Charles Fourier, Utopian Socialism and Attractive Labour

On 10 March 1969, at seven in the evening, a group of 20 Parisians, calling themselves ‘the barricaders of the Rue Gay-Lussac’, erected a statue of Charles Fourier in Place de Clichy on an empty plinth.¹ The plinth had lain bare since the Nazis had removed the original statue of Fourier during the Occupation. The replacement of the statue, a replica of the original first erected in 1899, was made of plaster but given a bronze effect and had not been sanctioned by any official institution. It was instead a political statement that coincided with the start of a general strike. The police, who were almost immediately alerted, arrived soon after and placed a guard around the statue. A couple of days later, a team employed by the authorities, under the supervision of the police, dismantled it and left the plinth empty once more. For the next few decades it remained vacant, but not forgotten. In 2007, the Aéroporté collective, a radical group inspired by the Situationists, placed another unauthorised work of art on the plinth: an empty box made of glass that was meant to bring attention to the absence of the statue.² City authorities, once again, chose to remove the piece. However, this time, they launched a competition to replace it. The winner was *The Fourth Apple* by Franck Scurti, a huge shining metal apple, upon which the continents of the globe are etched, atop a multicoloured glass box—representing Newton’s discovery of the light spectrum—encasing the original plinth. The apple refers to a moment in the life of Fourier when, having travelled from Rouen to Paris, he saw that an apple was worth a hundred times more in the capital than in the provinces.

He describes this as a eureka moment, the ‘fourth apple’—the first, the apple given by Eve to Adam, the second, from Paris to Venus, the third, that inspired Newton to theorise gravity—that began his critique of the ‘fundamental disorder’ of industrial society.³

Fourier, who, as we can see, was not afraid of situating himself in the most exalted of company, is a cult figure for the left. In his own lifetime, he already had a devoted coterie of followers who did their utmost to spread his ideas. In the nineteenth century, his theories inspired experimental communities in countries as far away as the United States.⁴ He was, moreover, compulsory reading for every generation of Anarchists and socialists, from Proudhon (who once met him) and Marx himself to Guy Debord and our present-day critics of capitalist society. Marx and Engels, in particular, had a great deal of admiration for Fourier.⁵ At the same time, they criticise Fourier and Utopian Socialism in general both for their impossible schemas and for failing to recognise the proletariat as the subject of history.⁶ However, Fourier’s popularity, at least as a point of curiosity, has stuck. The French avant-garde, in particular André Breton, above all celebrated his fantastical imagination: his fanciful images of copulating planets and seas of lemonade. Likewise, in the 1960s, his ideas about free love found a ready audience in the prevailing counterculture.⁷ The Situationists, Raoul Vaneigem most of all, were especially enthused by his notions of replacing an ‘alienated labour’ with a more playful ‘attractive’ one. Today, Fourier remains a recurring point of reference. His work finds echoes in radical ecology and in more recent debates about the future of labour in light of automation.⁸ Fourier is therefore an important source of inspiration for contemporary anti-work debates.

There are many reasons that Fourier should be seen as a foundational figure in the history of the French critique of work. He was one of the earliest critics of industrial capitalism and much of his focus is on changing the empirical situation of labour in modern society. Unlike many other ‘utopian socialists’—such as, Robert Owen and Saint-Simon (about whom he had very little positive to say)⁹—Fourier could be considered a critic of the Protestant work ethic and the cult of labour in general. He explicitly criticises, for example, those philosophers who call on man to ‘love work’: ‘You wish us to love labour that is unrewarding and repugnant, and you do not even give it to those who ask.’¹⁰ Furthermore, Fourier is not only concerned with ‘exploitation’. His critique rests upon the theory that work, at least in its current empirical state, is unnecessarily unpleasant and destructive. The unpleasantness of labour, for Fourier, is not an inherent

aspect of society but the result of a historically specific social order that can and should be changed. While he does not necessarily question the category of ‘labour’ as such, labour qua labour, Fourier is clear that modern work is intrinsically at odds with human being and, more fundamentally, an affront to the very order of the universe (an idea that, as we shall see, carries with it the full weight of its metaphysical implications). As such, when, in his *The Theory of Universal Unity* (1822), Fourier tells us that ‘[t]he refusal of work [is] the first right of man’,¹¹ he does not simply mean that we have the right to withdraw our labour. He means that it is a matter of human dignity and even moral responsibility to refuse the modern industrial system in favour of something better.

DIVINE LEGISLATION

Perhaps the strangest, and least mentioned, aspect of Fourier is that his theory is in many respects fundamentally a theological one. Unlike the other authors examined in this book, all of whom were committed atheists, Fourier believes strongly in the existence of God and, like many of the thinkers of the Enlightenment that inspired him, he assumes that there is a natural social order or human destiny that can be discerned through the scientific study of his creation. Fourier, as we saw above, often compares himself and his method to his hero Newton who, likewise, understood his own mathematical theorems as the reflection or revelation of divine laws. Fourier even frequently claims that his own theories and arguments are simply an extension of Newton’s own work.¹² Where Newton had discovered the laws of gravity that bound celestial objects together and provided calculation as proof, Fourier seeks to reveal and calculate, in similar mathematical fashion, the divine laws of ‘attraction’ that bind together human society. At the same time, it would be a mistake to think of Fourier as a religious thinker in the mode of an interpreter of religious doctrine. On the contrary, while he accepts God as a deistic principle, Fourier marshals his observations of these ‘laws’ against the dominant morality as interpreted through the world’s major religions. Where others see vice—laziness, corruption and infidelity—Fourier sees a society at odds with the innate, God-given, desires for creativity, pleasure and sexual self-fulfilment. Human desire is, for Fourier, a far better source of information as to the divine will than any moral philosophy or holy book. It is a perspective that he applies as equally to labour as to sex. If human beings are ‘lazy’, if they do not want to perform the labour on offer, it is not a problem with

human beings, but with the work itself, which, in its repugnant form, exists in contradiction to natural law.

Given that he was so religiously minded, and justified his critique of work on the basis of God's 'divine legislation', Fourier does not shirk from addressing the supposed biblical origins of labour (which by this time in history had become implicitly synonymous with the empirical reality of 'abstract labour'):

Labour, Scripture tells us, is man's punishment: Adam and his children were condemned to earn their bread by the sweat of their brow. Before this punishment, the primitive happiness of man was to have nothing to do, like Sunday for our own populace. It is therefore clearly recognised, even in religion, that civilised labour is a state of unhappiness for man [...] Scripture, in telling us the truth about the unhappiness that is currently attached to work, never said that this punishment should not end one day, nor that man could never return to the happiness that he primitively enjoyed.¹³

Labour, as such, may be a punishment of some kind from God, but it was never the plan that it should be an eternal punishment for humanity. Fourier suggests that to claim otherwise, to say that God intended labour to be an eternal form of punishment, encourages atheism and, in the hands of moral philosophers, even something far worse than atheism; it suggests that the creator is ill intentioned.¹⁴ Throughout his work Fourier therefore casts himself, quite explicitly, in the role of God's prophet. He has come to proclaim an end to labour as punishment and to bring the good news that a paradise on earth is at hand.

Fourier, however, does not approach the critique of work primarily from a categorical perspective. He clearly understands labour largely in the positivistic sense of a transhistorical social category. Nevertheless, he is concerned with the way in which labour, or the organisation of labour, has changed empirically over the course of human history. He does not see in modern industry any kind of 'natural' state of affairs or evolution. Although he pertains to a religious *telos* that would result in a material heaven on earth, Fourier does not conceive of human history as one of positive progression (despite the occasional whiff of excitement about certain technological developments). At the same time, the historical periodisation of human society that he does adopt complicates how we should understand the object of his critique. Fourier, unlike Marx, does not clearly identify 'capitalism'—nor 'bourgeois society' or even 'modernity'—as a distinct historical form of society. Rather, and to give a somewhat foreshortened version, he divides human history and pre-history

into the states of Eden, Savagery, Barbarism and Civilisation. What we would call capitalism falls into the latter category. However, ‘civilisation’ would also include the so-called high cultures such as Ancient Greece, Rome and Byzantium. The tendency simply to group capitalism into the category of ‘civilisation’—in contrast to ‘non-civilised’ societies (a division that perhaps arises out of value-dissociation logic projected onto the past)—was a common one in the nineteenth century, stressing continuity with the past rather than rupture. Fourier was, of course, aware that there are empirical differences between the way in which ‘production’ is organised between, for example, Ancient Greece and Modern France. Moreover, where he does criticise ‘civilisation’, it is clear that his main target is the mode of life and thought that dominates in what we would call the modern period. Nevertheless, in focusing on ‘civilisation’, rather than capitalism, he departs somewhat from discussing the historical specificity of labour.

Fourier constantly uses the state of ‘Eden’, of biblical fame, and ‘Savagery’, meaning the hunter-gatherer societies encountered by European colonisers, as a point of comparison against which to contrast and satirise contemporary society. Edenic peoples, at the dawn of time, lived in a state of ‘primitive series’, that is, forms of pleasurable free association that organise society around innate individual desire (albeit not perfected). Fourier states that the collapse of the original ‘series’, or social organisation, came about, in typical Malthusian logic, from overpopulation and the emergence of dangerous animals. Hunter-gatherer societies—he uses the colonialist terminology of ‘wild men’ or ‘savages’—are, for Fourier, the closest living examples of an ideal society because they are ‘closest to nature’ and therefore the divine will.¹⁵ Moreover, unlike Marx, Fourier believes that hunter-gatherer societies are founded upon the assumption of abundance and pleasure, rather than scarcity and mere survival. Yet Fourier, because he relies upon a civilisation versus non-civilisation dichotomy, the subject and its other, does fall into the ‘noble savage’ trope wherein he constructs an idealised and uncorrupted nature and human other, without any attempt to grasp the complexity of the societies in question (his ‘savages’ are, generally speaking, empty, abstract and cultureless). The picture of these hunter-gatherers is not that of concrete human beings in all their complexity—as, for example, in the best of modern anthropology—but rather a projection onto colonised peoples of an ideal mode of existence that he finds lacking in modern society and its subjects. As such, his statements about ‘savages’ obviously tell us much more about Fourier, and the prejudices of his time, than they do about the peoples in question.

Nevertheless, these comparisons do provide clues as to what exactly it is Fourier finds objectionable about modern life. Specifically, Fourier states that the ‘savage’ enjoys a ‘right to work’ that is denied to ‘civilised’ man.¹⁶ Although couched in the language of political economy, what Fourier has in mind here is the fact that in hunter-gatherer societies, a person’s subsistence is not at the mercy of the vagaries of the labour market. Hunter-gatherers are able to provide for themselves through direct access, unmediated by private property, to natural resources: through hunting, fishing, gathering, herding and so on. Human beings, who do not need to worry about where the next meal is coming from, can live a more ‘care-free’ existence:

[The savage] has [...] the full flight of passions of the soul; he is, above all, carefree, a state very much unknown to civilised man. He is, it is true, obliged to hunt and fish for his subsistence, but this labour, which is attractive to him, does not detract from his active corporeal freedom. Enjoyable work is not a form of servitude, as the plough would be. For the savage, hunting is a form of amusement [...].¹⁷

Here Fourier makes a point that will, as we shall see, be central to his concept of ‘attractive labour’. Not all forms of activity that provide human beings with sustenance and shelter can be characterised as inherently repugnant or painful. On the contrary, as in the case of hunting or fishing, there is not necessarily any distinction that can be made, at least in these societies, between that which one does purely for fun, play, and that which one does out of necessity, work. Furthermore, although it is questionable to characterise hunter-gatherer life as ‘carefree’ (like all human communities these societies have to deal with natural disaster and human conflict), it is true that there is no socially imposed scarcity of ‘work’, that is, one is not prevented, by the absence of a ‘job’, from directly providing for oneself and one’s community.

Fourier also asserts that if one were to give the empirical human beings in question, the ‘savage’ or the modern wage worker, a choice between these two models of social being, it is clear which one they would choose every time: ‘Ask an unhappy worker with no job and no bread, under pressure from creditor and debt collector, if he would not prefer enjoying the right to hunt and to fish, to have, like the savage, trees and a flock? He would certainly opt for the role of the savage.’¹⁸ Despite the obviously idealised alternative, it is a conclusion that has some basis in reality.¹⁹ The

fact that ‘savages’ reject the imposition of wage labour is, given that they are supposedly closer to nature, further proof that modern wage labour is against divine law: ‘Civilised or fragmentary industry is not natural to man as savages or men of nature obstinately reject it.’²⁰ Fourier is, moreover, fond of repeating the claim that ‘savages’ will insult one another with the phrase ‘May you be reduced to labouring in a field.’²¹ Fourier, however, who clearly is not concerned with the social and cultural achievements of these peoples, is not interested in them beyond their utility as a point of contrast. The purpose of the figure of the ‘savage’ in Fourier is to call into question the claims to universality of the modern organisation of production. What he believes is that, at the very least, society should be able to provide each individual with the ‘rights’—freedom of expression, a means of subsistence, and pleasurable activity—enjoyed by these ‘non-civilised’ peoples. At the same time, his mode of making these arguments rests in part upon a racist stereotype of non-European societies as both ‘uncorrupted’ by ‘civilisation’ (implicitly inferior in terms of culture and complexity) and, as we will see below, ripe for further colonisation.

REPUGNANT LABOUR

The central motif of the critique of work found in Fourier is that labour in ‘civilised’ society is a fundamentally oppressive and repugnant activity. In particular, Fourier rejects the notion that labour, as it currently stands, can meaningfully be said to be ‘free’.²² First of all, wage labour, in his own time as in ours, always exists alongside a whole range of explicitly ‘unfree’ forms of labour: including slave, workhouse, galley and prison labour.²³ Indeed, Fourier notes that those nations that are the most ‘loquacious philanthropists’ and who vaunt most loudly the principles of liberty—the English, the Dutch and the French—also tend to be the ‘most atrocious towards their slaves’.²⁴ Secondly, Fourier points out that, even in the case of ‘free’ wage labour, there are a vast array of socially produced forms of coercion that seem to be required to make people work. Labour, that is, does not only function through engaging the individual in the national quest for prosperity:

A Russian, an Algerian, labour out of fear of the whip or a beating; an Englishman, or a Frenchman, out of fear of the starvation that torments their poor household; the Greeks and Romans, whose freedom is often vaunted, laboured in slavery and fear of torture, as today our blacks do in the colonies.²⁵

Fourier paints a picture of workers that are recalcitrant before the forms of labour on offer and that will only submit to labour under the most severe threats. Beneath all of the discourse about the freedom of labour in modern society, therefore, there still remains underneath all of it the threat of the ‘gibbet’.²⁶ ‘Truth and evidence’, Fourier writes, ‘tell us that industrial man is not free because he works only out of fear of starvation and the gallows, and that he rises up the moment authority appears to be weak.’²⁷ Thirdly, Fourier takes aim at the empirical conditions of the large manufacturing factories found in central Europe where workers are harshly disciplined and children are sorely mistreated.²⁸ He calls these circumstances a kind of ‘half-slavery’ that is, in a certain sense, arguably worse than slavery itself due to the risk of starvation.²⁹ Fourier notes, for example, that it is not uncommon in Poland for freed serfs, faced with the vagaries of the market, to sell themselves back into servitude.³⁰

Despite the claims of liberalism, therefore, Fourier is not convinced that mankind has been liberated in the form of the wage. For Fourier, who was by no means a revolutionary in the political sense, this state of affairs is an extremely dangerous one from the point of view of human peace and prosperity:

We are nothing more than a society of slaves of whom some few know how to escape labour and come together to maintain themselves in idleness. These latter are hated by the masses, who, like them, tend to free themselves from labour. From thence are born the fermentations of revolutionaries, agitators who promise to make the people happy, rich and lazy, and who, once they have reached this role by some upheaval, pressure the multitude and subjugate it further, in order to maintain themselves in the role of layabouts or managers of industrial men, which is the same as laziness.³¹

It is quite striking how, while they do at the same time point to some of his pro-work tendencies in their critique of the idleness of the ruling class, these same words could have come from the mouth of a left-communist critic of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, it was already a historical tendency that Fourier had clearly observed in the French Revolution and in the hypocritical discourses of ‘liberty, equality and fraternity’ that Jacobins promoted while condemning the French labourer to longer hours at the workshop and abolishing his holy days. His conclusion is that ‘wage labour [is] a wage of misfortune, of persecution, of despair’.³²

Fourier, equally, rejects the notion that the new industrial society inevitably brings about an increase in social wealth. He notes, for example, that poverty and unemployment remain problems in the most industrialised regions of the world—specifically in England and the most developed parts of France—and can even be worse than in non-developed countries: ‘We observe that industrial regions are just as, and even more so, chock full of beggars as countries where this degree of progress is unknown.’³³ There is no ‘guarantee’ that the ‘growth of wealth’ that industrial labour creates serves the producers themselves.³⁴ On the contrary, while the Industrial Revolution has undoubtedly developed the technical aspects of production, it cannot seem to put them to good use: ‘Today we see the work that poverty imposes. It brings sweat to the brow. It leaves the creature isolated, without consolation, without any increase in happiness, without hope. It degrades and kills the creature.’³⁵ ‘Industrialism’, as such, is, Fourier says, a ‘scientific chimera’ that amounts to ‘the art of turning gold into leather’.³⁶ Modern labour relations, then, produce immense poverty as well as the misery of the work itself. Indeed, the fact that the majority of producers have no real economic interest in the production process and the ‘growth of wealth’ is one of the central criticisms, of a more political-economic bent, that Fourier makes in his writing. He argues it discourages productivity (an aspect we will return to later). The repugnant nature of the work means that the rich have to place workers under constant surveillance to ensure that they do not slack-off and steal from them.³⁷ The critique of poverty in Fourier, however, is not tied, as it would later be in traditional Marxism, to a critique of private property relations or class (nor, much later, to a fetishistic valorisation of value—Fourier does not criticise capital or property), but rather, through drawing explicitly on Malthus, Fourier, when he is not blaming the tricks of merchants and bankers, identifies its causes with the gap between the available material product and the size of the population.³⁸

Fourier discerns further evidence that modern labour is against ‘divine legislation’ in the behaviour of contemporary Europeans. He focuses, in particular, on the fact that wage labourers will choose to shirk the work on offer whenever possible. The empirical fact of laziness and the work shy is proof that something is deeply wrong, not with the people in question, but with the way in which labour is organised:

We see wage labourers and the whole popular class more and more inclined to idleness. We see them in the towns adding unemployment on Monday to unemployment on Sunday. They work without ardour, slowly and with disgust.³⁹

The people, in civilisation, [*le peuple civilisé*] aspire only to inertia [...] Why is this labour, which we are told is our destiny, only torture for the civilised and barbarian wage labourers and slaves, who seek only to rise up against the exercise of industry, and abandon it from the moment that they are no longer constrained by the fear of punishment?⁴⁰

Fourier evidently considers it unreasonable to expect human beings to engage in any activity that appears to be so against natural inclination and that will only be assented to under duress. The sight of the wilfully unemployed is a negative one for Fourier both because it speaks to the lack of pleasure in the contemporary human condition and, as we will see, it represents a vast amount of wasted productive capacity (individual and collective ‘inertia’ is evidently not an option).

Fourier identifies a number of concrete reasons for the laziness or revolt against work that he observes in modern society. His main focus, which speaks to the increasing industrialisation of labour in early-nineteenth-century France, is on the ‘repetitive’ character of most jobs. Modern wage workers engage in the same type of work all day, every day, for the whole working week. For labour to be attractive, however, according to Fourier, it requires ‘frequent variation’.⁴¹ Nevertheless, writes Fourier, ‘the people, in civilisation, [*le peuple civilisé*] enjoy only a variety [*alternante*] of suffering and privation, the only variety they experience is worry [*ennui*] on top of worry. They leave an exhausting, repugnant, workshop to come home to a starving family in rags devoured by vermin.’⁴² The problem, to put it in simpler terms, is that modern wage labour is fundamentally boring: ‘Our sages say, “We must love work”. Uh! How? What is there to love in civilisation for the nine out of ten beings for whom it produces only boredom [*ennui*] without benefit?’⁴³ Fourier, it should be clear, does not see labour, understood in the positivistic sense as material production, as necessarily unpleasant. Rather, it is the way in which it is organised that is the problem. Moreover, Fourier believes that it is hypocritical for philosophers and the rich to promote the cult of labour, as something to be loved, when they themselves do absolutely everything in their power to avoid doing it: ‘The rich, who only participate in that part which is profitable and convenient, [...] generally consider [labour] to be repugnant. How is the poor man to be made to love [labour] when we are ignorant of how to make the rich love it [...]?’⁴⁴ This is, for Fourier, the fundamental question that faces modern society and the problem that his philosophy seeks to address: ‘Up to now politics and morality have failed in their project to make work likeable.’⁴⁵ Fourier believes he has succeeded where others have failed.

ATTRACTIVE LABOUR

Fourier is clearly not afraid of making direct attacks on modern industrial labour. However, by far the major part of his critique takes the form of a highly detailed schema for a new type of ideal society that he calls 'Harmony'. This positive image of a utopian society is the main conduit through which Fourier casts a critical light upon 'civilisation'. Nevertheless, Fourier does not imagine Harmony so much as a product of his own mind. Rather, it is a schema that is already immanent to the universe. It is the revelation of a 'divine legislation'—analogous to the law of gravity—that can be deduced through the observation of Creation. Where Newton observed, and came to understand, the movement of the planets, Fourier observes human behaviour in order to deduce the desires or drives that God has imparted to each individual in society. The distribution and sum total of these drives, for Fourier, is the key to understanding the creation of a harmonious, divinely ordained, human community. As we saw above, Fourier believes that moral principles can be drawn from these observations. If promiscuity and laziness are widespread, it must be concluded that marriage and labour—at least as they are currently practised and applied in 'civilisation'—are against the views of God. Such general observations are, however, only the very tip of the iceberg. Throughout his work, Fourier develops extensive, detailed and frankly bizarre calculations based on his observations of humanity. God has endowed the subjects that make up society with the exact variation—across the group and in the individual—of desire necessary for everyone to find a functional and pleasurable role in the world. He asserts, for example, that only one in eight women actually enjoys looking after children and that, with the right social division of labour, this is the perfect fraction necessary for the fulfilment of the task. Fourier even asserts that the divine plan is so detailed that there are people who would spontaneously prefer cultivating green apples instead of yellow ones and vice versa.⁴⁶ These distributions and variations of desire attached to particular objects form the basis of his theory of 'passionate attraction', a social bond based purely on pleasure, that forms a 'chain of flowers that unites the universe'.⁴⁷

The centrality that Fourier gives to unconscious human drives in his theory of society has led many commentators to note similarities with Freudian psychology. Fourier has less in common with Freud himself, however, than he does with Wilhelm Reich and other so-called Left Freudians.⁴⁸ Freud holds that civilisation and its moral strictures (such as

the incest taboo) are necessary constraints on destructive human drives that, through a process of sublimation, allow human beings to develop into maturity. Reich, in contrast, identifies these constraints as the primary cause of human unhappiness. Human beings need to push back against all socially imposed barriers in order to arrive at a maturity based on the unmediated expression of desire. Fourier expresses very similar sentiments in his work, for example: ‘The goal is to reach a spontaneous mechanism of the passions, without repressing any of them.’⁴⁹ In the 1960s, these ideas obviously found a ready audience among non-conformist youths and artists for whom such taboos were associated with bourgeois social domination. We might ask, however, to what extent these arguments rest upon, and perhaps contribute to, an uncritical conception of the ‘subject’. A traditional argument of liberalism, from Mandeville onwards, has always been that taking the lid off ‘private vices’ will lead to ‘public virtue’.⁵⁰ Roland Barthes suggests, for example, that Fourier, in his call for a realisation of every desire, could be read as a cognate to the philosophy of de Sade.⁵¹ Likewise, we could, following Anselm Jappe, suggest that a subject that recognises no barriers would be narcissistic to the extent that the exterior world is reduced to an object in which desires are realised without restraint and mutual reciprocity. Such criticisms, of course, are not meant as a reactionary defence of Protestant morality; it is only to point out that the problem is not as simple as the removal of all constraints in an abstract way, regardless of content, from an already ‘good’, pre-existing, ‘subject’ that subsists beneath the corruption of civilisation. Fourier uses a God-of-the-gaps explanation—Harmony is a perfect, clockwork system—to resolve the conflict between subjects and between subject and object. Nevertheless, it does have the ironic benefit of implying, in the face of the Protestant work ethic, that labour, as it currently stands, is irreligious, even blasphemous.

Fourier places the principle of ‘attraction’ at the heart of his reconceptualisation of society. It plays a similar role in his oeuvre to gravity in the theory of Newton (even to the point of ruling the relationship between celestial objects). Attraction is the lynchpin of the transformation of the ‘fragmented’ and ‘false’ labour of civilisation into the ‘attractive labour’ of Harmony. The key feature of ‘attractive labour’ is, as one would expect, that each individual citizen is motivated to perform it almost exclusively for the pleasure that it accords them. That pleasure requires a complete transformation of every sphere of social life, from agriculture and manufacture to politics and the arts. Moreover, in contrast to many utopian

theories, it does not assume the creation of a ‘new man’ or new subject; rather, it claims to be based upon a realistic picture of mankind as it already is, transforming his vices into the greatest civic virtues.

First, Fourier seeks to address the repetitive nature of labour in ‘civilisation’. Any activity, he argues, whatever it may be, will become unattractive if one is forced to engage in it too often or for too long a duration. Fourier argues therefore that it is essential that any activity—be it work or recreation—never be undertaken for longer than two hours. The everyday life of a Harmonian—a citizen of Harmony—is to be a kaleidoscopic succession of endless variation in pleasurable activity with no clear distinction between work and play:

In industry, as in pleasure, variety is evidently the wish of nature. All enjoyable activity [*jouissance*] that lasts longer than two hours without interruption leads to excess, fullness, dulls the organs and wears pleasure out. [...] Functions must be varied from day to day, week to week, month to month, season to season, year to year, successively exercising each part of the body and the mind. This is the opposite of the current regime where one sees a worker do only the same thing from morning to night, all year round and all his life; a regime that we could call a veritable industrial hell in comparison to the continuous charm of the passionate series.⁵²

Here we see how Fourier uses the image of Harmony to shine a critical light on contemporary society. Capitalism, or ‘civilisation’, commits the individual to an overly specialised role that necessarily excludes the pleasure that comes from variation and the full exercise of the faculties.⁵³ Over-specialisation, especially as it is imposed rather than chosen, is an insult to nature—it does not engage the whole concrete individual in all its parts—and, as such, is even an affront to the Creator. ‘Attractive labour’, as such, has a quasi-devotional quality. Moreover, variation and the pleasure it provides serves a sanitary function. Fourier argues that a society founded upon his theories would see a dramatic increase in life expectancy—well into the mid-hundreds—as the different diseases associated with a life of drudgery and unattractive work would disappear.⁵⁴ Fourier is clear that his system would essentially eliminate workplace accidents and, what we would call, stress: ‘Attractive labour causes no physical difficulty, nor mental pain, it is for industrial man an amusement, a free exercise of his faculties.’⁵⁵ ‘Work’, as such, ceases to exist in separation from ‘play’. The whole of social life becomes a kind of playground in which the individual engages

in a variety of activities that are both necessary to material production and enjoyable. Harmonians are, thanks to this system, able to fully flourish as individuals, both in the mind—something currently denied to the poor and overworked—and in the body—denied to the idle rich.⁵⁶

Secondly, Fourier departs from a vision of labour as an isolated, individual, activity, in favour of collective, pleasurable, endeavour. All social activity in Harmony is organised through a near-infinite, constantly changing, matrix of ‘passionate series’, or groups, made up of freely associated individuals that share a passion for a particular form of activity. There would, for example, be different passionate series for the cultivation of cherries, the fashioning of tools, the construction of fine sculpture, the organisation of musical performances. Anything, in short, that one could imagine: ‘It is nothing other than the art of refining, varying, intriguing pleasures, and then agricultural and manufacturing jobs, which, in this new order, are metamorphosed into pleasures.’⁵⁷ Individuals would flit, from hour to hour, year to year, from one series to another. Unlike in ‘civilisation’, where the distribution of social roles is filtered through age, race, gender and class, in Harmony, ‘every man, woman and child fully enjoys the right to take part at any time in whatever branch of labour that they so choose’.⁵⁸ Moreover, these series are not imagined to be made up of isolated, competing, individuals, whose only interest is in the task at hand, but rather a ‘company of friends spontaneously brought together’.⁵⁹ Friendship, the fact that one will be spending one’s time with people one likes, forms a core part of the ‘attractiveness’ of the labour in question. Competition exists, but it is not the competition of the market. Rather, it is a matter of friendly rivalry between friends, between series, over who can make the best quality product and achieve the most attractive organisation of labour.⁶⁰ As we noted earlier, Fourier argues that these ‘passionate series’ are made possible thanks to the endless variations of desire that are innately present in each individual that makes up society. God, in his infinite wisdom, endows each person with the exact degree and variation of natural impulses necessary for the creation of a harmonious social matrix. Fourier, as such, rejects Jacobin notions of ‘equality’. Harmony is made possible only through the rich and varied distribution of human personality and talent in different fields. If mankind were simply a uniform, empty vessel, the passionate series would not be possible. It is the combination of concrete particularities and not abstract equality before the market that makes ‘attractive labour’ possible.

Thirdly, Fourier bases the organisation of ‘attractive labour’ within these ‘passionate series’ on a rationalisation of the labour process. Fourier frequently insists that rationalisation would make it possible for a single person to work for only one hour on a task that would otherwise take 50. His reasoning is that if everyone has the opportunity to take part in a variety of activities, then work can be divided up between everyone. Instead of one man working on a single task for 50 hours, 50 people will work on that same task and complete it in 1 hour.⁶¹ Likewise, in contemporary society, a housewife may be expected to cook a whole meal and perform each individual part of the process from beginning to end. Instead, Fourier argues, meal preparation could be a collective endeavour where each task is shared out between a large number of people only engaging in that aspect that they enjoy.⁶² There are a number of obvious objections that can be made to these ideas. Fourier does not consider, for example, that there are plenty of tasks that require sustained attention and that cannot be divided up abstractly on the basis of a strict division of time. Equally, there is a pleasure in seeing through some tasks from start to finish. Perhaps, however, he would not be so prescriptive in such cases (it is mainly the producers themselves in his system who decide how to organise the conditions of production). Our main observation is that these ideas obviously enter into a capitalist logic of ‘time saving’. At the same time, here the rationalisation of labour does not, as in Taylorism pure and simple, occur in order to drive down costs, but rather, in a more salutary fashion, to make work lighter and more enjoyable. It is quite the opposite, at least in its own visionary terms, from the ‘dark satanic mills’ of industrial England.

Fourthly, the world of ‘attractive labour’ would be organised through a new type of human community that Fourier terms a ‘phalanstery’. Each phalanstery would be comprised of around a hundred families. These families would live and work within and around a luxurious, collective palace, with spaces for every social function, and variations in accommodation according to wealth (though thoroughly opulent throughout). These phalansteries would cover the entire globe, ideally under the aegis of a single monarchical government, in order to ensure universal peace, with its capital in Constantinople. Local and more extended production and other social necessities would be organised through stock exchanges where representatives of different phalansteries and passionate series invest capital and organise work projects.⁶³ As contemporary workshops are ‘so disorderly, so disgusting, as to inspire horror for industry’, the phalansteries would be provided with beautifully constructed and well-furnished luxury

workshops.⁶⁴ As such, the architectural surroundings, the material conditions, of production are, for Fourier, just as important as brevity, ease and variation; everything in Harmony must conspire to make the labour as attractive as possible in order to bring people to it spontaneously and with the greatest joy, as though society were organising production as one great party.⁶⁵ Crucially, and without abolishing ‘value’ and therefore criticising ‘abstract labour’, Fourier states that, instead of a wage, each man, woman and child would be compensated for their labour, capital and talent in the form of a dividend for their involvement in whatever productive endeavour they have taken part or invested in.⁶⁶

Fifthly, and finally, Fourier asserts that ‘attractive labour’ is not possible unless it is freely chosen. Wage labourers do not have a choice. They are forced, due to the existence of the market, to work in order to survive. The Harmonian, however, is completely free of these pressures as he or she is endowed with an inalienable ‘right to work’. Fourier does not mean a ‘right to work’ in the legislative sense—that is, a right to a salaried job—rather he is referring to the basic rights enjoyed by the ‘savage’ referred to above: direct access to the means of providing for one’s own food, clothing and shelter. Moreover, each individual in society is provided with a ‘minimum’ that allows people to purchase the basic necessities. It is only on the basis of these rights that freedom from ‘repugnant labour’ is possible: ‘The minimum [...] is the only way to liberty, the sine qua non condition.’⁶⁷ Effectively, in the philosophy of Fourier, these rights serve as the ‘compensation’ that society must provide for removing the human from his ‘natural’, ‘Edenic’, state:

We will only have the equivalent of the [natural rights of man] in a social order where the poor man can say to his compatriots, to the phalanstery where he was born: ‘I was born upon this earth. I demand access to all of the labours that are undertaken upon it and the guarantee of enjoying the fruits of my labour. I demand the instruments necessary for the exercise of this labour be given to me, and subsistence as compensation for the right of theft that simple nature gave me.’ Every Harmonian, however ruined he may be, will always have the right to this way of speaking in his home country and his request will find a warm welcome there.⁶⁸

Fourier is clear that there is no condition, save the worst crimes, under which any person can be ruined or meaningfully deprived of basic access to what they need to flourish and to take part fully in society. There is no shame in unemployment and poverty—they are even impossible—as

production and reproduction are integrated aspects of life and serve concrete functions. The individual is completely free to choose to work or to not work. Fourier is certain, however, that people will choose to work because it has become a pleasurable activity that, like hunting for the hunter-gatherer, is not dissociated from recreation. These ideas obviously find echoes in contemporary calls for a basic income which it is, likewise, imagined would allow people to engage in creative pursuits, take more risks as entrepreneurs and only engage in those jobs that they find fulfilling. Like Fourier, however, these proposals do not address the more fundamental problem of abstract labour, seeing only the empirical problem of the labour market. Moreover, even here, in the concept of freedom from such constraints, Fourier cannot help but couch his ideas within the labour abstraction, as a 'right to work'.

While many of Fourier's concrete proposals are undoubtedly absurd, there is no doubt that one of his great achievements is to have intuited, in however outlandish a fashion, the fact that the division between work and play, or productive activity and recreation, is one of the more oppressive features of capitalist society. Arguably, the central point of the theory of 'attractive labour' is that work takes on the empirical characteristics of play: creativity, pleasure, enjoyment. The very meaning of 'recreation' itself is turned on its head. It is attractive industry that people look forward to and not leisure time. Leisure, as far as it is distinguished from work, is rather a matter of physical recuperation: 'In such an order, the charm is such that, thanks to its sheer intensity, there is need of some respite, some moments of calm, such as the library. [...] The civilised order establishes recreation in order to unwind from a labour that is hateful; the societal order [Harmony] organises only a moderation of pleasure.'⁶⁹ Nevertheless, the fact that Fourier seeks to overcome the distinction between work and play does not mean that he fully criticises the category of labour. The identification of labour with pain confuses the pre-modern and modern meanings of the term. Work, in capitalism, is much more than simple toil that can be contrasted with leisure. Such an approach does not touch upon the place of labour within the valorisation of value. It remains uncritically attached to the assumption that labour as such exists to provide humanity with concrete wealth. Fourier, although he seeks to overcome the work-leisure schema by identifying labour with pleasure, is no exception to the rule and, as we will now see, his critique of labour also reaffirms the productivist logic of valorisation.

PRODUCTIVITY, CAPITAL AND CLASS

The minimum, Fourier argues, is made possible primarily by what he considers to be one of the main and universally attractive advantages of ‘attractive labour’: an immense overall increase in human productivity.⁷⁰ Fourier, throughout his work, provides readers with present-day comparisons between the poor quality of ‘fragmentary’ labour and the ‘prodigious’ character of ‘attractive labour’. One example that Fourier refers to on several occasions occurred in Liège when around 80 workers in Beaujonc were trapped underground by water. A team of miners worked day and night to free their comrades and refused any monetary compensation. Fourier notes that people said that what these miners achieved in just 4 days was ‘unbelievable’ and would have taken them 20 days if they had worked as they normally do for a wage.⁷¹ It is on the basis of such observations that Fourier claims ‘attractive labour’ would greatly increase the material wealth of society: ‘It is certain that the societal regime will gain through doing nothing, or by doing very little, ten times more than civilised man gains through forced labour.’⁷² Fourier is hardly consistent in his claims about the size of these increases in productivity, claiming everything from two- to ten-, or more, fold growth. He insists, nonetheless, that if a labour is attractive, the producer will produce a far greater amount and create a better-quality product in less time.

It is here that we start to see the side of Fourier that clearly enters into an affirmative understanding of labour as such as the production of concrete wealth and of a universal need of ‘time saving’. God, Fourier states on several occasions, is the ‘supreme economiser’.⁷³ He has endowed human beings with the capacity for attractive labour in order to reduce the amount of energy expended in production. There are many forms of ‘time saving’ that could be realised through a more rational organisation of production, transport and exchange, and the reduction of waste. Harmonians are so devoted to production that they barely have any time to wash and dress, let alone sleep (though Fourier assures us this is as a result of ‘pleasure’ rather than coercion):

Ten minutes suffice. Harmonians perform their *toilette* as swiftly as they do everything else. The suits are brilliant, varied, but comfortable and easy to put on. There is not a moment to lose. Every minute counts, not out of duty or discipline, but because people have a chain of pleasures to follow during the day and they do not want to miss any of them. As a result, Harmonians, men, women, and children, are prodigiously active.⁷⁴

As these fantasies make clear, Fourier desires, in many respects, exactly what political economists desire, a more rational and productive organisation of society, such that the human being is reduced to a kind of frenetic combustion engine, hardly, for one moment, unattached from labour and its exigencies. Indeed, in a telling passage, Fourier states that ‘the distinction between producers and consumers that exists in the civilised world will finish. In Harmony, there will only be producers’.⁷⁵ There will, as such, be no unproductive moments in Harmony. Even leisure continues to function, as in present-day capitalism, as a means of realising greater ‘productivity’.

Fourier also has in mind the idea that there will not be a separate ‘unproductive’ class, the idle rich, as these too will wish to take part in the labours of society. As we saw above, Fourier believes that only when the rich love work will the dream of ‘attractive labour’ have been realised. He imagines, for example, a young Louis XVI choosing to become a worker and patron, with his great fortune, of the Trianon ironworks, for which he has a fascination, even buying his favourite passionate series special uniforms.⁷⁶ The bringing of the rich, and the aristocracy, to labour is an important moment also because it will, Fourier argues, create lines of friendship between the rich and poor, the plebeian and the aristocrat. The example of Louis XVI is telling as Fourier clearly feels that, had society had his own plan in place at the time, the huge debts and class resentment that led to the horrors of the French Revolution, including the execution of King Louis, would not have occurred. Despite his dismissal of discourses of equality (rich and poor continue to exist), Fourier clearly imagines Harmony as a certain kind of ‘Republic of Labour’ to which the ruling class are expected to pertain, albeit spontaneously and with joy, as much as the lowest member of society (a condition familiar, to present-day rulers who, likewise, are now expected to work, though not out of ‘attraction’). The poor, in turn, will become as ‘polite’ or well-mannered as today’s aristocracy, making them more attractive companions to the rich.⁷⁷

Fourier argues that these increases in productivity—and not, as in most socialist thought, wealth redistribution from rich to poor—will solve the problem of poverty. Everyone will experience a dramatic increase in material wealth even though wealth inequalities will continue to exist. The poor will eat food and drink wine as fine as that of present-day kings (every phalanstery, moreover, is blessed with a wine-tasting committee to ensure only the best quality vintages are available), while kings will enjoy gastronomic pleasures that far exceed those currently on offer to them.⁷⁸

Indeed, although he imagines Harmony as a kind of Republic of Labour, Fourier equally imagines it as a Republic of Capital, with everyone in society, from the poorest to the richest, able to invest in the many schemes of industrial development that the phalansteries would engage in. Fourier constantly insists that present-day capitalists and the rich would make more money and material wealth from his system of ‘passionate attraction’ than they currently do under the liberal economic systems of contemporary civilisation. He even goes so far as to say that it would be reasonable to expect a 50 or 60 per cent rate of return on investments.⁷⁹ There is, as such, no criticism in the work of Fourier of the category of value, and therefore of abstract labour, which renders null and void all of his many proposals for the concrete transformation of our metabolism with nature, as none of these are possible while the ‘automatic subject’, or the dictatorship of the economy, continues to shape the whole of social life. Fourier only speaks of value in terms of ‘REAL value’, the ‘tripling of real income’, that is, not of monetary value, but a kind of deflation, where money can simply purchase more than it did previously.⁸⁰ Although Fourier thinks primarily in terms of ‘concrete’ wealth, he cannot detach any conception of production from the valorisation of value and does not criticise the absurdly tautological character of (abstract) labour. Everyone gets to make a fortune in Harmony through capital investment (another concept that has, in our own time, become mainstream government policy).⁸¹ Fourier therefore feels his system is superior in large part because it will provide greater productivity. The main difference from bourgeois political economy is that the increase in wealth derives from the invisible hand of ‘passionate attraction’, rather than the invisible hand of the market.

PARASITISM, COLONIALISM AND THE STATE

These positivistic and productivist conceptions of labour lead us to what are inarguably the most objectionable aspects of Fourier’s thought. Fourier understands production as a positive and transhistorical form that creates the concrete wealth of a society. As such, although he plans to transform labour, in particular, through making it more attractive, he does not grasp its underlying fetishistic character as a form of abstract domination. Fourier therefore theorises that the problems of modern society are rooted primarily in neither, as in traditional Marxism, class exploitation, nor in any other, more fundamental, logic. Instead, Fourier presents us with a fore-shortened critique or understanding of the causes of the negative effects of

capitalism that is identified with empirical persons or sectors of society that are deemed to be ‘parasitical’ as a result of being unproductive of capital, destructive to concrete wealth or engaged in pure consumption without work. Indeed, for Fourier, although he recognises the need to provide for the disabled, a person does not fully pertain to the social body unless they are actively engaged in work. Every person or institution that does not work he terms parasites. These include, he states, about three quarters of the population: most women, the army, the commercial sector, servants, the unemployed and so on. Here Fourier uncritically embraces the idea of the separation of society into ‘productive’ and ‘unproductive’ persons. Indeed, there is little sense in how Fourier uses the category of ‘parasite’ beyond the general notion that the persons in question do not sufficiently contribute to the creation of concrete wealth. Fourier, despite his evident sympathy for a person’s refusal to work under present conditions, therefore sees laziness as a highly negative aspect of modern society that his theory seeks to overcome.

The central target of his ire, however, is above all the commercial and financial sectors that, outside ‘repugnant’ industry, are the main object of his critique of contemporary society. Fourier criticises liberals for allowing merchants complete free reign to engage in stock jobbing—that is, artificially raising prices of goods through holding on to them until prices are high—and for legalising bankruptcy. Commerce, for Fourier, is simply a matter of making money from repeated falsehoods. One of the main criticisms that Fourier levies against the ‘civilisation’ of his own time, as the Industrial Revolution was ramping up, was that governments seem completely helpless before the agents of the market. Commerce is variously characterised as a ‘snake’, a vampire, a ‘minotaur absorbing the sweat of peoples’ and a form of piracy.⁸² Empires are, as such, at the mercy of a ‘parasitical’ class. Fourier is evidently reflecting a growing recognition of the domination of social life by the economy, but as we see here, it expresses itself through a positive conception of production and a negative conception of the spheres of circulation and exchange. The negative effects of the value form—identified exclusively with these latter aspects of the economy that are seen as ‘parasitical’—are, in turn, projected onto actual persons, in this case, merchants, bankers and Jews.

We can argue, on this basis, that Fourier is one of the forerunners of modern Antisemitism. Those who have wished to present Fourier as an unabashed critic of labour have generally passed over his Antisemitic discourse, as though it were a historical accident, unconnected from his

understanding of production. However, as we can see above, his Antisemitism is intimately tied up with his productivism and his positive conception of the concrete side of labour. Despite many fundamental insights, Fourier, in the greater part of his work, seeks only an 'adjectival' change. He does not criticise labour as a form of abstract domination, nor its universality. He wants only to turn 'repugnant' labour into 'attractive' labour. Fourier can only conceive of the negative side of social reproduction in capitalism as, on the one hand, poor management and, on the other, as a conspiracy by those who he understands to exist outside of the social body proper. Labour persists as the 'concrete' positive pole of social reproduction, and everything outside it is the negative, 'abstract', side. The Jewish people, who, due to their historical persecution and recent emancipation in France, were both traditional and topical objects of suspicion, become, in Fourier, the embodiment of a worldwide conspiracy identified with banking and commercial trade. 'The Jews', Fourier states, 'are, by the principal of commerce, the spies of all nations',⁸³ 'Jews only employ other Jews, people who are the enemies of all nations and never reveal any pre-meditated act of dishonesty committed by one of their own.'⁸⁴ Fourier regrets the emancipation of the Jews by Napoleon and fears that, if the French were to let the Jews spread throughout France, the nation would become nothing but a 'vast synagogue' as they plan to buy up everything through usury.⁸⁵ The 'danger' represented by the Jews, Fourier states, 'is one of a thousand symptoms that attests to social degradation'.⁸⁶ Fourier, in an even more bizarre Antisemitic statement, also claims that the Rothschilds ought to embrace his system of Harmony as it would make them more money.⁸⁷ It would not be unfair then to say that while Fourier may have contributed to the development of an anti-work discourse in France, he was equally, and in part due to his positivistic conception of production, one of the forerunners of many of the core features of modern Antisemitism. These observations alone should be enough to demonstrate just how foreshortened and dangerous aspects of his critique are, and they should not simply be passed over in discussion of his approach to labour.

Another racialised aspect of Fourier is his support for colonialism. Fourier, because he understands labour as a positive universal form, proposes 'attractive labour' not only as a solution to the problems of the Industrial Revolution but also as a model for global development. Fourier argues that the Harmonian model would actually help to advance European colonial interests. Currently, Fourier states, those with colonial ambitions have to force their customs on colonial subjects through violence.⁸⁸

Attractive labour would, in contrast, inspire all the indigenous peoples of the world to become 'productive' citizens. Fourier does not want to leave anyone, in particular 'savages', outside of his abstract universal system of attractive labour. He even goes into great detail about how the world could be divided up on the basis of his system. Australia, for example, would form the basis for 15 Harmonian empires the size of France.⁸⁹ Fourier bemoans the fact that indigenous peoples 'go against nature by refusing agricultural industry, which is the destiny of man' and condemns their 'inertia'.⁹⁰ Fourier, in other words, wants to put the 'savages' to work. The only thing that separates his ideas from mainstream bourgeois ideology, in this case, is that he believes these indigenous populations will spontaneously adopt his system simply on the basis of seeing it practised among Europeans. The whole of Africa, he states, will, as a result, adopt the Harmonian system, resulting in a dramatic drop in the prices of colonial commodities, such as coffee and sugar.⁹¹ Furthermore, Fourier calms the fears of those Europeans who worry that the resulting autonomy for Africans would mean that the continent's resources would no longer be available for exploitation by suggesting that they will be so grateful to their European 'benefactors' that they will let them exploit their mines for free.⁹²

This idea that the colonial expansion of an ideal labour form could occur through spontaneous adoption leads Fourier to some bizarre positions on slavery. Fourier rejects liberal attempts, such as those of Wilberforce and others, to abolish slavery within the context of present-day society. He argues, on the one hand, that simply freeing slaves within present conditions would leave them at the mercy of the wage labour system (another kind of slavery) and, on the other hand, that it would 'compromise the interests of slave owners'(!).⁹³ He states that even to compensate slave owners for the emancipation of their slaves would be to 'throw [money] out the window'.⁹⁴ Fourier takes the position instead that slave owners would spontaneously and happily free all of their slaves once they realise that they would become far wealthier through the system of attractive labour. Fourier is, moreover, quite serious. Although he sees slavery as something that ideally needs to be abolished, he adopts the perspective of the coloniser and the slave owner, not that of the slave. Fourier regrets the fact, for example, that slaves cannot be made to work: 'We feel the need more and more as we cannot make the blacks of Saint-Domingo perform agricultural labour, despite the rewards, concessions to freedom, the advancement of means, no more the blacks of Brazil, despite the attempts of a colony that is as judicious as it is generous.'⁹⁵ The 'generosity'

it seems Fourier was referring to was the freeing of some slaves, which, he argues, only led to violent uprisings that it was ‘necessary’ to put down with ‘massacres’.⁹⁶ It is certainly the case that Fourier wants to avoid violence and to establish a new kind of society that is not oppressive. However, by adopting the perspective that ‘productivity’ and ‘commodity’ production is in itself the positive pole of a universal human society, he finishes by sharing the perspectives of some of the worst aspects of bourgeois political economy.

Fourier equally has a highly positive conception of the state. He refers to the representatives of the British Empire, for example, as the ‘educating angels’ that mediate between Civilisation and Barbarism.⁹⁷ Fourier dreams of the British using their monopoly on world trade to impose his new world system. He speaks very positively of Hobbes,⁹⁸ as only a single global government endowed with overwhelming force could ensure universal peace and harmony. In true theological style, Fourier believes that it is the will of God that the Earth should come to resemble the Heavens, with a single imperial ruler imposing the conditions for his ideal society. Indeed, the long-running criticism that Fourier provides us only with a still image of a perfect society, without any ideas as to how to realise it, is patently false. His oeuvre is brimming with suggestions. These turn, for the most part, on convincing a rich patron, ideally a monarch or head of state, to organise a single phalanstery as a proof of concept. The experiment, he believes, would act as a lightning rod, inspiring, in the manner of a chain reaction, the whole of humanity to adopt spontaneously his system of attractive industry. These concerns explain, for the most part, the emphasis that Fourier places on the financial benefits of his system. His work does not address the subaltern masses as it does any potential philosopher kings who could realise his ideas. Fourier even regrets the fact that he so often has to emphasise the ‘mercantile’ benefits of his system, but, he believes, this is the aspect of his work most likely to attract interest in the present day.

These perspectives, which seek a transformative authority that knows no bounds to the labour form, express themselves equally in a kind of productivist Prometheanism. There have been attempts to read Fourier as a fundamentally ecological thinker. There is some basis for this position in that he regrets the damage that modern-day industry has done to some aspects of the natural world, such as deforestation. However, one of the few things that people know about Fourier is that he suggests all sorts of bizarre results and plans for the system of attractive industry. A key one is his proposals for immense ‘industrial armies’ that would take the place of

the ‘destructive armies’ of the present-day military.⁹⁹ With war a thing of the past, these armies would allow people, both men and women, the ability to go on ‘campaign’ and to earn honour through productive works. Fourier imagines that, through cultivation, practically the whole planet would become equally viable for agriculture. The Sahara Desert would be irrigated.¹⁰⁰ There would be such an overabundance of fruit that it would have to be thrown into the sea which would turn its waters into a type of lemonade.¹⁰¹ Likewise, Fourier demonstrates a certain utilitarianism when he speaks of the fact that whole dangerous species would be wiped from the face of the Earth, to be replaced by prodigious new beasts, including ‘anti-lions’ that would allow people to travel from place to place at unimaginable speeds. The notion of industrial armies could be read as a satire of the destructiveness of the military. However, it was probably intended quite seriously, as an expression of the need to employ untapped human energy ‘productively’. Fourier, while he recognises in some parts of his work that civilisation has had a negative effect on the environment, at the same time, enters into a certain Cartesian mindset, one that wishes to cross all boundaries and consciously dominate the entire natural world.

PASSIONATE DOMESTICITY

Fourier in many respects defines himself as a critic of patriarchal society.¹⁰² He consistently takes aim at the fact that contemporary society seems to be ‘disposed entirely for the convenience of a single sex’.¹⁰³ In the face of mainstream opinion, he claims that ‘the greatest scoundrels and the greatest imbeciles on earth have been *père de famille* [patriarchs]’.¹⁰⁴ Fourier is, moreover, one of the few authors examined in this book to provide any sustained critique of the situation of ‘domestic labour’. He criticises contemporary thinkers for reducing the role of women in society solely to that of domestic servants and housewives. He points out that, as far as he can tell, the vast majority of women do not enjoy domestic labour. Philosophers, rather than condemning women for not conforming to their ideals of womanhood, should rather change their views of society: ‘Let us conclude that women are fine as they are, that three quarters of them are right to disdain housework.’¹⁰⁵ The Harmonian system, as such, aims to ‘deliver’ women ‘from the boredom of housekeeping’.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, Fourier also criticises the idea that women who reject, or do not take well to, the role of motherhood should be cast as immoral or bad mothers. Rather, it is a sign that God would prefer them to engage fully in the productive life

of society. Although Fourier still believes that it is women, albeit only a quarter of them, who are naturally suited to motherhood and domestic labour, women in Harmony for the most part seem to exercise, on an equal basis, all of the same leadership roles and productive functions as men. As Fourier says, '[i]n the series, women always enjoy full liberty in industry and the right to benefit individually.'¹⁰⁷ Fourier does therefore criticise the structural subordination of 'women' into 'unproductive' spheres. Fourier states that 'the industrial character of women is generally falsified in civilisation and people will be surprised by their industrial preferences when they see them freely exercising in a different social order [...] their full capacity to give themselves over to their industrial tastes'.¹⁰⁸ Fourier, as we saw above, also proposes universal childcare in order to facilitate the access of women to the sphere of production.

Fourier holds that the reproductive sphere in Civilisation would in Harmony be transformed into 'passionate domesticity'.¹⁰⁹ The most utopian expression of which would be that each phalanstery would possess a pool of collective domestic servants. These servants would exercise all of the traditional functions of the domestic sphere—washing, cleaning and so on—but comprise only those who have a natural inclination for this kind of activity. Naturally, reproduction would be highly rationalised also. Fourier imagines, for example, a contraption that would allow one woman to rock dozens of babies in their cribs at once, while their mothers and fathers are at work.¹¹⁰ Fourier falls into the trap, however, of continuing the logic of value-dissociation even within Harmony. He wishes women to become an integral part of 'industry' not only because of the oppression that they face in the domestic sphere, but also, and even primarily, because women, in civilisation, are an untapped source of labour power. The accession of women into labour increases the overall productivity of society. 'Production', as such, continues to exist as an abstract sphere that is superior in terms of 'freedom' and importance to the social body. Furthermore, Fourier is not a perfect feminist, even if he was far in advance of many of his contemporaries. In his oeuvre, women are still the 'weaker' sex and, of course, it is mainly women, and not men, who have a penchant for childcare, even if it is a dramatically reduced number.

Finally, Fourier schematises a very different role for children in Harmonian society than the one that they currently occupy. Fourier notes that children are particularly rebellious against work in civilisation.¹¹¹ He criticises the fact that children are separated from the rest of society for most of the day and that, rather than engaging in a productive function,

they are forced to study. In place of contemporary forms of education, Fourier suggests that children could learn through a perpetual apprenticeship, based on imitation, for those manual and intellectual tasks for which they have an 'instinctual vocation'.¹¹² He provides some very quaint descriptions of children engaging in 'attractive labour', work-playing, in little workshops with tiny tools. Fourier also observes that children love filth, so he suggests that they could form bands devoted to the dirtiest labours. Even the childish penchant for destruction could be put to good use. He is, moreover, clearly horrified at the way in which children are treated in the new industries. It should be noted, however, that here also Fourier betrays his positive conception of production for its own sake. Children, in contemporary civilisation, are, like women and the unemployed, functional 'parasites'. His utopia puts children to work, even if it is 'attractive work', from the earliest age possible. The aim is always, as in political economy, to realise the most rational and utilitarian expenditure of the energy contained in the social body.

Fourier deserves a place in this book as the most imaginative early French critic of industrial labour. He intuits, albeit in a fanciful fashion, that much of the unattractive quality of labour in capitalism is not necessarily inherent to the task at hand, but rather socially produced. Material production could, as such, be transformed through a new form of social organisation. It could be made 'attractive'. We could therefore read Fourier, in this aspect of his work at least, as a critic of the concrete, empirical side of abstract labour. His image of a different kind of society, one based on attraction, is a visionary, poetical and even lyrical portrait of a world where the distinction between work and play has been overcome. It was, above all, these aspects that made Fourier a touchstone of avant-garde artistic radicalism in the twentieth century. However, there are several fundamental caveats. Those readings that emphasise Fourier as a visionary madman, a poet and a critic of work have, generally speaking, downplayed or ignored the more problematical—and, quantitatively speaking, preponderant—aspects of his thought. We might call this his positivistic side that situates him squarely in the project of the Enlightenment. Fourier actively adopts and promotes, in large parts of his writing, many aspects of the perspective of the valorisation of value, in particular, the need to increase productivity for its own sake. His critique of capitalism, as it does not touch the deeper categorical level of abstract labour, is a dangerously foreshortened one. His Antisemitism, his racist views of non-European societies and his arguments in favour of colonialism

arise out of a consciousness that is unable to perceive the category of labour *sans phrase* in anything other than a positive light. The central problem with Fourier was never, as Marxists assert, that he was too ‘unscientific’ or that he did not identify the proletariat as the subject of history. Rather, it was that, while he criticised certain empirical characteristics that the labour form took on in his own time, he only ever lightly brushed up against the deeper ontology of labour.

NOTES

1. See ‘Le retour de Charles Fourier’, *Internationale situationniste (IS), édition augmentée* (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 1997) p. 665.
2. Collectif Aéroporté, aeroporte.unblog.fr
3. Philippe Dagen, ‘La grosse pomme politique de Franck Scurti’, *Le Monde*, 24/01/2011.
4. See Henri Desroche, *La Société festive, du fouriérisme écrit aux fouriérismes pratiqués* (Paris, Seuil, 1975).
5. In *The German Ideology* (1846), Marx and Engels defend Fourier against the German critic Karl Grün. They criticise Grün for ignoring Fourier’s ‘critical side’ and ‘his most important contribution’, which they identify with his critique of ‘present-day agriculture and industry’. Moreover, they draw attention to the important distinction in his work between ‘repugnant’ and ‘attractive’ labour. *Marx and Engels Complete Works (MECW)*, vols. 1–50 (London: Lawrence & Wishart 1975–2004), vol. 5, pp. 510–519. In the *Grundrisse*, however, Marx explicitly states: ‘Labour cannot become play, as Fourier would like.’ Nevertheless, Marx also states here that ‘it remains his great contribution to have expressed the suspension not of distribution, but of the mode of production itself, in a higher form, as the ultimate object’ (Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 712). In other words, Marx recognises that the importance of Fourier is that he is primarily a critic of production itself and not simply of the manner in which its fruits are divided up. Much later, in 1880, Engels describes Fourier as ‘one of the greatest satirists of all time’ and identifies his critique of patriarchy as one of his major contributions (Friedrich Engels, trans. Edward Aveling, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* [1880], *MECW*, vol. 24, p. 292).
6. See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, ‘Critical-Utopian Socialism and Communism’ in *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 2002), pp. 253–256.
7. In 1972, the French Marxist sociologist Henri Lefebvre—a major influence on the Situationists—organised a conference that focused on the

- apparent contemporaneity of Fourier. A book based on the conference proceeding was published by Editions Anthropos, which, in the 1960s, also released reproductions of Fourier's complete works. See Henri Lefebvre, ed., *Actualité de Fourier* (Paris: Anthropos, 1975).
8. For a radical ecological reading of Fourier, see, for example, Serge Audier, *La Société écologique et ses ennemis, pour une histoire alternative de l'émancipation* (Paris, Découverte, 2017). These kinds of reading, as we will see, tend to overlook the productivist logic of much of Fourier's thought.
 9. See, for example, Charles Fourier, *Œuvres complètes de Charles Fourier*, vols. 1–12 (Paris: Anthropos, 1966–1968), *False Industry* (1835), vol. 8, p. 7.
 10. *Ibid.*, p. 143.
 11. Charles Fourier, *The Theory of Universal Unity* (1822), *Œuvres*, vol. 3, p. 148.
 12. See, for example, Charles Fourier, *Theory of the Four Movements* (1846), *Œuvres*, vol. 1, p. 12.
 13. Fourier, *Unity*, *Œuvres*, vol. 4, pp. 554–555.
 14. Fourier, *Movements*, *Œuvres*, vol. 1, pp. 18–19.
 15. Fourier, *Unity*, *Œuvres*, vol. 3, p. 134.
 16. *Ibid.*, p. 185, and *Movements*, vol. 1, p. 193.
 17. Fourier, *Unity*, *Œuvres*, vol. 3, pp. 155–156.
 18. *Ibid.*, p. 170.
 19. Such questions were not purely hypothetical in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. There are many accounts of early settlers in the Americas voting with their feet when faced with a choice between remaining under the modern capitalist regime and escaping to live with Native Americans. See, for example, James Axtell, 'The White Indians of Colonial America' in eds. Peter Mancall and James Merrell, *American Encounters: Natives and Newcomers from European Contact to Indian Removal* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 324–350.

The historical use of the 'noble savage' trope, which employs a patronising and racist idealisation of indigenous peoples as leading a 'simpler' life, may have served as means of explaining away many of the real advantages of non-capitalist societies. Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790), for example, notes that 'No European who has tasted the Savage Life can afterwards bear to live in our societies. [...] The Care and Labour of providing for Artificial and fashionable Wants [...] contrive to disgust them with what we call civil society'. Moreover, while many Europeans voluntarily defected, the reverse was much less common: 'When an Indian child has been brought up among us, taught our language and habituated to our customs, yet if he goes to see his relations and make one Indian

ramble with them, there is no persuading him ever to return' (cited in *ibid.*, p. 329). Franklin interprets these defections essentially as a choice to lead a less 'artificial' life. However, the attraction of non-capitalist societies was not that they were less complex or simpler, rather it was that they were not dominated by the tyranny of the economy as a separate sphere of social life. As one French observer, a naturalised American named Jean de Crèvecoeur (1735–1813), noted of these defections in 1782, 'There must be in their social bond something singularly captivating and far superior to anything boasted among us, for thousands of Europeans are Indians, and we have no examples of even one of those Aborigines having from choice become Europeans!', *Letters from an American Farmer and Other Essays*, p. 161.

It is possible to accept eyewitness accounts of these defections without accepting the interpretations placed upon them by European observers. In rejecting the theme of the 'noble savage', we do not have to fall into the equally absurd fallacy of pretending that all forms of society are equally conducive to human happiness or that they are essentially the same, differentiated only by technology, institutions and culture (in a limited sense). To do so—to pretend that the fetishism of 'abstract labour' exists everywhere and at all times—is the worst kind of 'Eurocentrism' as it dismisses the particularity and achievements of these societies in the name of a false abstract universality based on the categories of capitalist socialisation.

20. Fourier, *Unity, Œuvres*, vol. 2, p. xxxvj.
21. Fourier, *Unity, Œuvres*, vol. 4, p. 348.
22. See, Fourier, *False Industry, Œuvres*, vol. 8, p. 59.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*
25. Fourier, *Unity, Œuvres*, vol. 3, p. 249.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 240–241.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 182–183.
28. Fourier, *False Industry, Œuvres*, vol. 8, p. 59.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*
31. Fourier, *Unity, Œuvres*, vol. 3, p. 250
32. Fourier, *Unity, Œuvres*, vol. 5, p. 128.
33. Charles Fourier, *The New Industrial and Societal World* (1845), *Œuvres*, vol. 6, p. 28.
34. Fourier discusses the empirical example of the UK and France. For the UK, see *ibid.*, p. 375. In France, 'French workers are so poor that, in the highly industrialised provinces, such as Picardy, between Amiens, Cambrai and Saint-Guerin, the peasants, under their mud huts, have no beds and they make a mattress out of dry leaves, which, during winter, transform into a manure full of worms, such that, upon waking, fathers and children pull worms from their flesh.' *Ibid.*, pp. 30–31

35. Fourier, *False Industry*, *Œuvres*, vol. 8, p. 171.
36. *Ibid.*, sec. 3, p. 349.
37. Fourier, *New Industrial*, *Œuvres*, vol. 6, pp. 80–81.
38. Fourier, *False Industry*, *Œuvres*, vol. 8, p. 409.
39. Fourier, *Unity*, *Œuvres*, vol. 3, p. 14.
40. *Ibid.*, pp. 249. Fourier uses the term ‘peuple civilisé’ in the original and, as such, seems to be specifically referring to the popular classes.
41. Fourier, *False Industry*, *Œuvres*, vol. 8, p. 366.
42. *Ibid.* The term *alternante* refers to a passion identified by Fourier, and discussed in the same passage, that embodies a need for constant variety in the labour process. It should also be noted that *ennui* can connote boredom, depression and annoyance.
43. Fourier, *Unity*, *Œuvres*, vol. 4, pp. 520.
44. *Ibid.*
45. Fourier, *Unity*, *Œuvres*, vol. 3, p. 14.
46. Fourier, *Unity*, *Œuvres*, vol. 4, p. 408.
47. Fourier, *Unity*, *Œuvres*, vol. 2, pp. 174.
48. ‘Fourier is an authentic precursor of Freud and Wilhelm Reich. He speaks to the ethic of desire and non-repression that is celebrated today, notably by the Situationist International.’ André Vergez, ‘L’Immoralisme religieux de Charles Fourier’ in *Actualité de Fourier*, p. 21.
49. Fourier, *New Industrial*, *Œuvres*, vol. 6, p. 49.
50. See Robert Kurz, ‘Private Laster als öffentliche Vorteile’, *Schwarzbuch Kapitalismus, Ein Abgesang auf die Marktwirtschaft* (Frankfurt: Eichborn Verlag, 1999), pp. 25–29.
51. Roland Barthes, trans. Richard Miller, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 114.
52. Fourier, *Unity*, *Œuvres*, vol. 2, pp. 147, 149.
53. It is possible these ideas influenced the ideas of Marx in *The German Ideology*: ‘whereas in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic.’ *MECW*, vol. 5, p. 47.
54. Fourier, *Unity*, *Œuvres*, vol. 2, pp. 101–103, and vol. 4, pp. 168–169.
55. Fourier, *Unity*, *Œuvres*, vol. 3, p. 182.
56. Fourier, although he does devote most of his discussion to manual labour, particularly agriculture, also has a special place in his schema for the arts and sciences. See, for example, Fourier, *Four Movements*, *Œuvres*, vol. 1, pp. 153–154.
57. Fourier, *Unity*, *Œuvres*, vol. 3, p. 26.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

59. Ibid.
60. See, for example, Fourier, *Movements, Œuvres*, vol. 1, pp. 119, 157.
61. Fourier, *Unity, Œuvres*, vol. 2, p. 143.
62. Fourier, *False Industry, Œuvres*, vol. 8, pp. 358–359.
63. Fourier, *Movements, Œuvres*, vol. 1, pp. 171–172.
64. Ibid., pp. 177–178.
65. Fourier literally puts it in these terms: ‘the transformation of the most repulsive labours into parties’, *ibid.*, p. 177.
66. A summary of how Fourier imagined this would function in practice can be found in Jonathan Beecher’s excellent biography, ‘Work in Harmony’, *Charles Fourier: The Visionary and His World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 274–296.
67. Fourier, *Unity, Œuvres*, vol. 3, p. 187.
68. Fourier, *Unity, Œuvres*, vol. 3, pp. 179–180.
69. Fourier, *Unity, Œuvres*, vol. 2, p. 152.
70. See, for example, Fourier, *Unity, Œuvres*, vol. 4, p. 173.
71. Ibid., pp. 374–375.
72. Fourier, *New Industrial, Œuvres*, vol. 6, pp. 16–17.
73. Fourier, *False Industry, Œuvres*, vol. 8, p. 119.
74. Fourier, *Unity, Œuvres*, vol. 4, p. 381.
75. Ibid., p. 546.
76. Ibid., p. 545.
77. Fourier, *False Industry, Œuvres*, vol. 8, pp. 371–372.
78. See, for example, Fourier, *Movement, Œuvres*, vol. 1, pp. 168–169.
79. Fourier, *Unity, Œuvres*, vol. 4, p. 163.
80. Fourier, *Unity, Œuvres*, vol. 3, p. 1.
81. Fourier, *False Industry, Œuvres*, vol. 8, p. 421.
82. Fourier, *Œuvres*, vol. 3, pp. 223–224; vol. 2, p. 124; vol. 1, p. 228.
83. Fourier, *Œuvres*, vol. 5, p. 424.
84. Fourier, *Œuvres*, vol. 1, p. 233.
85. Ibid., pp. 252–253.
86. Ibid., p. 253.
87. Fourier, *Œuvres*, vol. 9, p. 521.
88. Fourier, *Œuvres*, vol. 1, pp. 277–278.
89. Fourier, *Œuvres*, vol. 3, p. 374.
90. Fourier, *Œuvres*, vol. 2, pp. 49–50.
91. Fourier, *Œuvres*, vol. 3, p. 45.
92. Ibid., pp. 65–66.
93. Fourier, *Œuvres*, vol. 6, pp. 12–13.
94. Fourier, *Œuvres*, vol. 8, p. 10.
95. Fourier, *Œuvres*, vol. 6, pp. xi–xij.
96. Fourier, *Œuvres*, vol. 8, p. 10.

97. Fourier, *Œuvres*, vol. 1, p. 210.
98. *Ibid.*, p. 284.
99. See, for example, 'Politique galante pour la levée des armées', *ibid.*, pp. 172–182.
100. *Ibid.*, pp. 176–177.
101. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
102. Fourier has often erroneously been described as the author of the term 'feminism'. However, although certain aspects of feminism appear in his work, the term itself does not.
103. Fourier, *Œuvres*, vol. 4, p. 154.
104. Fourier, *Œuvres*, vol. 1, p. 201.
105. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
106. Fourier, *Œuvres*, vol. 4, p. 154.
107. Fourier, *Œuvres*, vol. 2, p. 205.
108. Fourier, *Œuvres*, vol. 4, pp. 153–155.
109. Fourier, *Œuvres*, vol. 2, p. 155.
110. Fourier, *Œuvres*, vol. 5, pp. 50–52.
111. *Ibid.*, pp. 63–64.
112. *Ibid.*, p. 3.



Paul Lafargue, Early French Marxism and the Right to Laziness

On 13 August 1866, Karl Marx wrote a strongly worded letter to a young Creole medical student who had been courting his daughter, Laura, over the course of the summer months. Marx was concerned, or so he stated, that the young gentleman had been overly forward for the ‘latitude’ of London. The two of them had been on far too intimate terms at home and they had been making a public spectacle of themselves riding up and down Hampstead Heath together. More importantly, however, Marx was worried about the young man’s ‘economic situation’. Not only, Marx observed, did the gentleman speak English extremely poorly and show no signs of making any effort to improve it, he had already been indefinitely suspended from his university in France for upsetting local authorities with his rebellious activities. Moreover, as far as Marx could discern, the young man did not cut the figure of a hard and assiduous worker. ‘Observation’, Marx wrote, ‘has convinced me that you are not by nature diligent, despite bouts of feverish activity and good intentions.’¹ And, in a private letter to Engels, Marx confided: ‘He has a heart of gold but is an *enfant gâté* and too much a child of nature.’² Marx told the young man that, until his ‘economic situation’ had been cleared up, there could be no question of an engagement, as he required assurances that his daughter would not be condemned to the poverty and widowhood to the revolution that Marx had inflicted upon his own wife.

The young gentleman in question was Paul Lafargue, who, after suitable guarantees from his parents, and the completion of his medical

degree, married Laura Marx in the spring of 1868. Marx, as his private correspondence makes clear, was very fond of Lafargue. However, his initial worries about the match proved well founded. By 1879–1880, when he was to author his most lasting work, Lafargue had given up on his medical career and was working in the, self-described, ‘manual craft’ of photolithography and etching in the kitchen of the home he shared with his wife Laura on Camden Road. (Lafargue was thankfully able to supplement his income, like Marx himself, due to the largesse of the family friend ‘Fred’ Engels.)³ Despite his many ‘bouts of feverish activity’—writing, translating, organising the proletarian revolution and so on—Lafargue was evidently not a great proponent, in his own life, of the Protestant work ethic and the attitude of ‘getting on’ that had come to dominate the industrial regions of nineteenth-century Europe and America. The picture that his biography paints is of a man for whom work was never more than a necessary evil, a means to an end and never an end in itself. It was a personality trait that would find expression in his most enduring ‘work’.

Lafargue is best known today as the author of *The Right to Laziness*. Written in exile in London, the text was first published in serial form in the French socialist newspaper *L’Égalité* and later republished as a brochure, after a stint in prison in France, in 1883. Lafargue was born in Cuba in 1842 with mixed ancestry—black African, Jewish and Caribbean Indian—a fact about which he was extremely proud. He often stated, for example, that he had the blood of the three most oppressed peoples in his veins.⁴ His father and mother were relatively well-to-do bourgeois with property in the Americas and, in later life, came to live in Bordeaux (where Paul and Laura Lafargue found themselves during the events of the Paris Commune of 1871). Lafargue studied medicine in Lyon but was suspended after taking part in student protests. It was thanks to this incident that he found himself in London in 1866 where he sought to finish his medical training. He would go on to be one of the leading figures of the Guesdist socialist faction in France and helped to found the first French Marxist party. Lafargue was a strong proponent of women’s rights and, in 1891, ran successfully as a candidate for the legislature to represent Lille. He was, until his death in 1911, one of the main popularisers of Marx’s thought in French.

Lafargue, although a definite disciple of Marx, was a great admirer of Fourier and had been profoundly influenced by his work. However, critical conceptions of modernity had moved on a great deal since the heyday of Utopian Socialism. The wave of revolutions that swept Europe in 1848 and the rise of distinctly, and self-consciously, proletarian unrest had brought forward the idea of the ‘Worker’ as a dynamic agent of change. The prole-

tariat now competed with the more amorphous ‘people’ of bourgeois political theory for the title of the revolutionary ‘subject’. France, however, remained quite far behind other regions of Europe in terms of industrialisation. Belgium, for example, in the 1880s, boasted four times as many steam engines per head of population compared to France. The French nation remained, as such, largely an agricultural one with the exception of important pockets of heavy industry, in particular, close to the Belgian border and in the capital. Nevertheless, the French proletariat had begun to flex its muscles dramatically in several key moments. First, in 1834, Lyonnais silk weavers rose up in violent protest against wage decreases. The insurgency was only put down after a bloody confrontation with authorities that resulted in thousands of deportations and prison sentences. Secondly, the ‘June days’ of 1848, where Parisian workers had stormed the new Republican legislature in order to demand the ‘right to work’ and the reopening of national workshops that provided them with a wage. Thirdly, and most important of all, was the Paris Commune of 1871, where the working-class population had sought to form its own federal system of government, only to be brutally suppressed in the Bloody Week, where more than 10,000 Parisians were killed, and many more deported or forced into exile, by the forces of the Third Republic. Lafargue, writing *The Right to Laziness* in 1879, with amnesty in the air, and *Capital* already over a decade old, was therefore at a significant socio-economic, political and intellectual remove from the world of Charles Fourier.

There is, unfortunately, no evidence in Marx’s correspondence of what he thought of *The Right to Laziness*.⁵ We do know, however, that it remains one of the most popular early Marxist texts. It seems to have circulated widely in anti-capitalist circles in the late nineteenth century. It was, for example, translated into Russian before *The Communist Manifesto* and is second only to the latter in the number of international translations that it has received.⁶ It has also remained in constant print since its initial publication in both popular and critical editions. Although it failed to have much of a significant impact on what would later become orthodox Marxism, the text was a major influence on different Anarchist currents and on the artistic avant-garde of the twentieth century. Modern interpretations of *The Right to Laziness* generally do focus on the radical anti-work character of the text (perhaps in large part because it is so surprising, given the later development of Marxism, that someone so intellectually close to Marx himself produced such an all-out attack on the Protestant work ethic).⁷ Claire White, for example, states that ‘[Lafargue] attacks the very founda-

tions of work itself'.⁸ She argues that the text cannot simply be read as a call for greater leisure time for workers, but rather, in focusing on idleness, Lafargue 'seeks to gesture towards a sort of activity that lies outside of the divisions of labour and leisure'.⁹ Kristin Ross, in her reading of Lafargue, provides a similar argument: 'Laziness constitutes [for Lafargue and Arthur Rimbaud] a kind of third term outside the programmed dyad of labour and leisure.'¹⁰ Ross, moreover, argues that critical thrust of *The Right to Laziness* is its refusal to contribute to the construction of the image of the 'good worker'.¹¹ As such, the text can be read as a reaction against recent histories of the Commune that, in order to undermine right-wing attacks on Communards as 'prostitutes, pétroleuses, drunkards and vagabonds who set Paris aflame', sought to present the Parisian worker as a model citizen, 'who wanted nothing more than to devote himself fifteen hours a day to his *métier*'.¹² 'The threat to the existing order', writes Ross, 'comes not from some untainted working class but from a challenge to the boundaries *between* labour and leisure, producer and consumer, worker and bourgeois, worker and intellectual.'¹³ It is perhaps no surprise, given its cult status, that *The Right to Laziness* has become shorthand in French culture for an oppositional attitude to the cult of work. We already saw in the first chapter of the book, for example, that, for the neo-liberal right, he continues to be an object of ire. Moreover, the name Lafargue, or at least the title of his most well-known work, frequently appears in debates about the future of labour from a left-wing perspective. Many contemporary references to Lafargue, however, are, like those to Fourier, often quite superficial. The exact nature of his critique, its core strengths and weakness—the extent to which it remains within, or escapes, the confines of a purely 'phenomenological', and therefore 'affirmative', critique of labour—remains poorly understood.

A REFUTATION OF THE RIGHT TO WORK

The original impetus behind the creation of *The Right to Laziness* is a central component for understanding its core arguments. The key is to be found in the original subtitle of the text: 'a refutation of the right to work of 1848'. The subtitle has often been overlooked and can be left out altogether in many modern editions. Where it is mentioned in the critical literature, it is generally understood to refer to a book of the same name published in that same year of 1848 by the French socialist Louis Blanc. Sometimes the text has even been referred to as a 'satire' of Blanc. However, nowhere in

The Right to Laziness itself is there any direct reference to Blanc or the contents of his work. Rather, to understand the link we need to examine the context in which it originally appeared, that is, its serialisation in the French socialist newspaper *L'Egalité* in the second half of 1880. Lafargue, in the original run, actually emphasises these links by dedicating the text to 'my collaborators at *L'Egalité*'.¹⁴ He may have had in mind his friend Jules Guesde, the future head of the Parti ouvrier, but it was also a partisan announcement that draws attention to the fact that the text is a contribution to the polemics that the paper had been engaged in that same year.¹⁵

The Right to Laziness follows a year of articles and features in *L'Egalité* that memorialise and analyse the legacy and importance of the Paris Commune as its ten-year anniversary approached. Many of these articles and editorials, some of which may have been authored anonymously by Lafargue himself, are focused upon a historical analysis of the differences in workers' demands between the 'June days' of 1848 and those of the Communards in 1871. In April of 1848, thousands of Parisian workers had stormed the constituent assembly in order to demand that the 'right to work' be enshrined in the constitution of the Second Republic. The 'right to work' was to be maintained through state-run national workshops, existing alongside the private sector, that would provide the unemployed with a living wage. The right was therefore included in an early draft of the new constitution. However, it quickly became a central issue around which moderate and conservative forces within the assembly could rally against socialism. Adolph Thiers (who would decades later order the bloody suppression of the Commune) led the charge. He argued that the 'right to work' contradicted the more essential 'right to property'. The state, at best, might be able to provide a 'right to assistance', that is, charity for the unemployed. The 'right to work' was expunged from the final version of the constitution and, in June, the government closed the workshops. The closures led to a large uprising, the 'June days', that was eventually put down with thousands killed, injured or deported. Blanc, who had represented the socialist faction in government, wrote a scathing attack on Thiers in response to the closures. Blanc argued that it was a humiliation to expect men who could work to take charity and claimed that the 'right to property' was itself founded upon the 'right to work'. Blanc, in one of his more fanciful passages, claims that many capitalists had written to him begging for the state to take over the running of their factories in exchange for a managerial role. Blanc therefore presented the 'right to work' as a policy that would benefit workers and property owners respectively.¹⁶

L'Egalité recognises the historical importance of the proletarian uprisings of 1848 but argues that the call for a 'right to work' falls short of a truly radical revolutionary demand. The paper argues that the Paris Commune had surpassed these earlier proletarian movements because, in place of the 'right to work', the Communards had demanded the 'right to capital', where 'capital' was understood to mean the 'means of production'.¹⁷ In other words, the Communards had demanded real autonomy—from the market, private property and the state—in terms of how production was to be organised. The revolutionaries of 1848, in contrast, had only demanded more work within the confines of the prevailing system. Moreover, *L'Egalité* believed that Blanc had proved himself a traitor to the proletariat. He was, in 1880, still an elected member of the legislature of the Third Republic and had been a willing participant in the government decision to suppress the Commune a decade earlier in the Bloody Week. He himself and his ideas therefore represented an obstacle to the further development of the revolutionary workers' movement. In a short article, 'A Letter by M. Louis Blanc', published that year, the paper tore into the old socialist. It accused him of expressing false concern for workers. On the one hand, he claimed to be their ally, but on the other, he rejected any action that would help them. Blanc had managed to make himself 'highly regarded by the working class without ever earning himself the ire of its exploiters'.¹⁸ Lafargue chose to write 'a refutation of the right to work of 1848' in 1880 because of these preceding discussions in *L'Egalité*. The revolutionary demands of the working class needed to evolve beyond paternalism to some kind of self-determination. The importance of the Commune was that it had foreshadowed such a demand. Blanc, on the other hand, in his call for the 'right to work', was simply asking proletarians to reaffirm many of the same core beliefs about the relationship between work and workers as liberals and conservatives.

The question remains, however, of how Lafargue takes the leap from the 'right to work' (1848) to the 'right to capital' (1871) to the 'right to laziness' (1880). It should be underlined that the French term, *le droit au travail* [the right to work], refers to the noun and not the verb. It could therefore be translated perhaps more accurately as the 'right to a job'. There is no ambiguity in French, as in English, between the infinitive verb form, the 'right to work'—the freedom to engage in the activity whenever it is offered—and the noun, the 'right to work'—the right to a state-guaranteed position regardless of economic circumstances. In the United States today, for example, the phrase, the 'right to work', refers to anti-

strike laws. There are similar issues when we consider how to translate the title of Lafargue's text *Le Droit à la paresse*, which also refers to the noun. Most English translations choose the 'right to be lazy', which is not incorrect and is certainly provocative. However, a more literal translation, and the one I have chosen to employ, is the 'right to laziness'. It is, as such, an explicit reference to the discussion within *L'Egalité* about the merits of the previous demands of French workers and not only a philosophical statement in favour of the 'good life'. Lafargue, that is to say, is formulating a new 'demand' for the French workers' movement; a demand for a world beyond the 'work society' that arguably did not find a mass movement until May '68, perhaps not even then, and certainly not in the forms of vulgar Marxism that proliferated after the death of Marx in 1883. Lafargue, in demanding a right to laziness, that is, to a 'non-work' that from the productivist perspective of capitalism can only be seen as laziness, points beyond a simple critique of capitalism as exploitation and towards something more profound.

A DANGEROUS DOGMA

The concept of the 'work ethic', or *valeur travail* in French, does not seem to be widespread until the first half of the twentieth century at the earliest.¹⁹ Nineteenth-century critics of work therefore required a different terminology to describe the phenomenon. We saw in the previous chapter, for example, that Fourier refers to the 'love of work'. Lafargue, who, unlike Fourier, was a committed atheist, uses similar language but also evokes the work ethic in the terms of a religious catechism or 'dangerous dogma'.²⁰ His critique of work could, as a result, be understood as a continuation of the Enlightenment tradition of criticising the irrationality of religion. Indeed, Lafargue criticises the bourgeoisie of his own time for returning to religion in order to sanctify the work ethic, whereas, in the early modern period, they were the most inveterate atheists.²¹ Lafargue opens *The Right to Laziness* with part of a speech by Adolphe Theirs from 1849 that underlines the link between the Christianity of the bourgeoisie and the cult of labour: 'I wish to make the influence of the clergy all-powerful because I count upon it to propagate that good philosophy which teaches man that he is here below to suffer, and not that other philosophy which on the contrary bids man to enjoy.'²² The bourgeoisie, as such, 'preaches abstinence to the wage workers' and wants them to believe that the world should be a 'vale of tears for the labourer'.²³ Lafargue, how-

ever, in true satirical style, uses the Bible itself in order to make the case that, by modern standards, the very God to whom Thiers is referring would be considered lazy:

Jesus, in his sermon on the Mount, preached idleness: ‘Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they toil not, neither do they spin: and yet I say unto you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.’ Jehovah the bearded and angry god, gave his worshipers the supreme example of ideal laziness; after six days of work, he rests for all eternity.²⁴

Lafargue cleverly marshals here the very theology that, in its modern capitalist form, is used to justify labour. He demonstrates that, in contradiction to the Christianity of the Industrial Revolution, pre-modern religion sanctified rest, not toil, above all things. Not only is his point very funny, it exposes the hypocritical, and pseudo-theological, nature of a modern morality that refers to Scripture in order to promote submission to production for its own sake. Lafargue suggests, in other words, that contemporary Christians preach a gospel that bears no resemblance to the words of their messiah and, if anything, contradicts them:

Instead of opposing this mental aberration, the priests, the economists and the moralists have cast a sacred halo over work. Blind and finite men, they have wished to be wiser than their God: weak and contemptible men, they have presumed to rehabilitate what their God had cursed. I, who do not profess to be a Christian, an economist or a moralist, I appeal from their judgement to that of their God; from the preaching of their religious, economics or free thought ethics, to the frightful consequences of work in capitalist society.²⁵

The work ethic, as such, is not a transhistorical norm, but rather a social more particular to capitalist modernity. Reference to the pre-modern past, and specifically to religion, does not support the view that life should be a ‘vale of tears’ for the labourer, but rather that labour, work for work’s sake, is ‘cursed’. According to Lafargue, the attempt to ‘rehabilitate’ labour is ironically a kind of blasphemy. The Christianity of Thiers bears no resemblance to that of Jesus. The fact that Lafargue draws attention to the differences between pre-modern and modern attitudes to ‘labour’ is one of the most original aspects of his argument and one that we will return to later. What is important here is to emphasise that Lafargue seeks to demonstrate that it is ‘work’, and not ‘God’, that is the true object of worship in contemporary capitalist society.

Having dethroned the Judeo-Christian God of the Middle Ages from his seat in heaven, the bourgeoisie, once in power, erect Labour in his place. Lafargue, as such, casts himself as a kind of atheist of ‘Work’. Moreover, Lafargue, as we saw in the previous chapter, follows in the footsteps of Fourier when he draws upon Scripture to condemn those who sanctify labour in the name of religion. Both authors recognise that ‘labour’ was a cursed activity in the eyes of most pre-modern or non-capitalist peoples.²⁶

Lafargue argues that work, and the way in which it is promoted in capitalism, functions in large part as a mechanism of class control. As evidence, he provides several examples where the ruling class has explicitly shown its hand. Lafargue quotes, for example, Napoleon in 1807: ‘The more my people work, the less vices they will have. [...] I am the authority [...] and I should be disposed to order that on Sunday after the hour of service be past, the shops be opened and the laborers return to work.’²⁷ Note that Napoleon only allows his workers a break to attend church before they have to go back to work! Lafargue also quotes at length from an anonymous English text, *An Essay on Trade and Commerce* (1770), in which the author complains that industrial labourers wish to be free and independent: ‘The cure will not be complete until our industrial labourers are contented to work six days for the same sum which they now earn in four.’²⁸ Workhouses, the author argues, should become ‘houses of terror’ in which the poor are forced to work 12 hours a day.²⁹ Lafargue notes with irony, however, that nineteenth-century industry has managed to surpass even the dreams of eighteenth-century philanthropists: ‘Modern factories have become ideal houses of correction in which the toiling masses are imprisoned, in which they are condemned to work twelve or fourteen hours, not the men only but also women and children.’³⁰ The aim of these work regimes, Lafargue suggests, is precisely to ‘root out laziness and curb the sentiments of pride and independence that arise from it’.³¹ He draws attention, for example, to a M. Scrive who, at a charity event in Brussels in 1857, proudly announced that he had invented different techniques—such as singing and counting—to distract children as young as 12 to make them accept a full day of hard factory labour.³² Lafargue therefore attributes the primary origins of the work ethic to the development of a set of social norms and managerial practices, an ideology, designed for and by the bourgeoisie to quash any feelings of independence that might lead to rebellion against the regime of capitalist accumulation. The work is to be so exhausting, and the life outside it so austere, as to prevent the development of any human feeling or agency that could lie outside it.

Lafargue equally draws on his medical background and interest in contemporary biological theories in order to paint a hellish picture of a world devoted to labour.³³ He speaks in horror of ‘the sight of organic degradation engendered by the depraved passion for work’.³⁴ He notes that ‘overwork [is] destructive of the organism’ and asserts that the ‘love of work’ can lead ‘even to the exhaustion of the vital force of the individual and his progeny’.³⁵ Lafargue, in this vein, refers to a Dr. Beddoe in order to make some pseudo-scientific claims about human biology: ‘It is only when a race reaches its maximum of physical development, that it arrives at its highest point of energy and moral vigour.’³⁶ Work, Lafargue states, has the opposite effect: ‘In capitalist society work is the cause of all intellectual degeneracy, of all organic deformity.’³⁷ We could not be further here from Enlightenment notions of labour as a healthy, rational and free play of human faculties. Lafargue, in his role of physician, is arguing, in not so many words, that work has the quality of a serious illness or degenerative disease. Consider, for example, his description of colonisation: ‘Look at the noble savage whom the missionaries of trade and the traders of religion have not yet corrupted with Christianity, syphilis and the dogma of work.’³⁸ Lafargue suggests here that religion and labour ‘corrupt’ an otherwise healthy body in the manner of a virulent venereal malady. It might even be that Lafargue believes that the modern labour regime is something worse than any sickness found in nature: ‘Far better were it to scatter pestilence and to poison the springs than to erect a capitalist factory in the midst of a rural population.’³⁹ He neatly summarises his medical and philosophical opinion thus: ‘Introduce factory work, and farewell joy, health and liberty; farewell to all that makes life beautiful and worth living.’⁴⁰ Work, at least as it currently exists, is presented therefore as an inherently unsanitary form of social life. Lafargue argues that the cure is no less than the ‘right to laziness’ itself: the regulation and limitation of work to ‘a maximum of three hours a day’. This, says Lafargue, is the job of communist ‘physiologists’ and ‘hygienists’ to undertake.⁴¹ First, however, it is necessary ‘to convince the proletariat that the ethics inoculated into it is wicked, that the unbridled work to which it has itself up for the last hundred years is the most terrible scourge that has ever struck humanity’.⁴²

THE DUST OF PAST CENTURIES

Perhaps the most original aspect of *The Right to Laziness*, as we noted above, is the fact that Lafargue rejects the notion of a transhistorical work ethic or normative conception of labour. He takes explicit issue with the way in which many writers, politicians and thinkers present an entirely

negative image of a pre-modern Europe steeped in pain and poverty in order to cast contemporary capitalism in a positive light: ‘They rummaged in the dust of past centuries to bring back feudal miseries to serve as a sombre contrast to the delights of the present times.’⁴³ Lafargue targets, in particular, Auguste Comte (‘painfully confused’), Victor Hugo (‘quackishly romantic’) and Paul de Kock (‘artlessly grotesque’).⁴⁴ Lafargue, in order to counter these narratives, constructs an alternative, and far rosier, picture of the pre-modern world. He notes, for example, the large amount of non-work time enjoyed by pre-modern communities: ‘Under the old regime, the laws of the church guaranteed the labourer ninety rest days, fifty-two Sundays and thirty-eight holidays, during which he was strictly forbidden to work.’⁴⁵ A fact that would assuredly make almost any worker today green with envy. Lafargue, like Fourier before him, equally rejects the notion that capitalism has brought about greater material abundance for all by evoking the pleasures of the medieval world:

Because the producers of that time worked but five days out of seven, are we to believe the stories told by lying economists that they lived on nothing but air and fresh water? Not so, they had leisure to taste the joys of earth, to make love and to frolic, to banquet joyously in honour of the jovial god of idleness. Gloomy England, immersed in Protestantism, was then called ‘Merrie England’. Rabelais, Quevedo, Cervantes, and the unknown authors of the romances make our mouths water with their pictures of those monumental feasts with which the men of that time regaled themselves between two battles and two devastations, in which everything ‘went by the barrel’. Jordaens and the Flemish school have told the story of these feasts in their delightful pictures. Where, O, where, are the sublime gargantuan stomachs of those days [...]:⁴⁶

In contrast to the gloomy gothic horrors in which late-medieval England was often painted in the earlier part of the nineteenth century, and the many myths about that world which persist to this day, Lafargue here paints a picture of a pre-capitalist past in the bright and vivid colours of a Millais or Rossetti. It is not unlikely that Lafargue was influenced by the medievalism of Ruskin, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (founded in 1848) and William Morris’s burgeoning Arts and Crafts Movement. Lafargue was, after all, working around 1880 ostensibly as an artist in London and it is unlikely that he was unaware of the medieval revival in England.⁴⁷

Lafargue reaches back further in time, to Ancient Greece and Rome, in order to develop a more complete picture of the pre-modern past. He claims that ‘the philosophers of antiquity taught contempt for work’ and

provides a number of detailed examples to prove his point.⁴⁸ Herodotus, for example, notes that contempt for labour is widespread among effectively all of the ancient civilisations, from the Egyptians and Persians to the Thracians and Greeks.⁴⁹ Plato argues that tradesmen are ‘mercenaries’ that are ‘degraded’ by their activities and should be excluded from political rights. He also states that any ‘citizen who shall have degraded himself by the commerce of the shop shall be prosecuted’ and ‘condemned to a year in prison’.⁵⁰ Xenophon argues that manual labourers are unable to gain positions in public office because their minds are affected by sitting down to work all day.⁵¹ Cicero, like Plato, states: ‘We must regard as something base and vile the trade of those who sell their toil and industry, for whoever gives his labour for money sells himself and puts himself in the tank of slaves.’⁵² Equally, Lafargue states that ‘[t]he Romans recognised but two noble and free professions, agriculture and arms’.⁵³ Lafargue is not, by providing these examples, necessarily making some kind of apologia for the pre-modern world (though he does suggest that slavery was necessary at the time due to a lack of technological development).⁵⁴ Rather, the point for him is that not all human beings in all times and all places have made ‘laborious’ activity a cult of worship. Lafargue readily admits that the leisure to maintain ‘warriors and citizens’ rested upon slavery, but he asks, ‘to what men does the capitalist slavery give leisure?’⁵⁵

Lafargue, in his history of the work ethic, assigns Protestantism, in particular, with a special role in the development of modern attitudes to work. He argues that the ‘great crime of Catholicism’ from the point of view of capitalism was precisely the proscriptions that its holy days placed upon the extension of working hours and the development of the working week. He notes, ‘[t]he hatred against holidays does not appear until the modern industrial and commercial bourgeoisie takes definite form, between the 15th and 16th centuries.’⁵⁶ Lafargue refers his readers to a letter from the Pope to Henry IV of France. The king had requested papal assent to reduce the number of holy days. The pope refuses the request on the explicit basis that the suppression of feast days represents a form of heresy.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, in 1666, the archbishop of Paris suppressed no less than 17 of them in his own parish.⁵⁸ Lafargue assigns these changes in religious attitudes to the rise of capitalism:

Protestantism, which was the Christian religion adapted to the new industrial and commercial needs of the bourgeoisie, was less solicitous for the people’s rest. It dethroned the saints in heaven in order to abolish their feast days on earth.⁵⁹

Lafargue effectively describes in these passages an aspect of the ‘primitive accumulation of capital’ that is often overlooked. A great deal of contemporary political-economic and historical thought rests upon the false assumption that medieval peasants did nothing but ‘work’, that is, barely provide for themselves through apparently endless, back-breaking labour, noon ‘til night, all year round. Lafargue, in contrast, emphasises that the historical record shows quite the opposite: the ‘pilfer[ing] of the feast days of the people’ by the ‘Jesuitical and rapacious bourgeoisie’.⁶⁰ He points out, for example, that the bourgeois revolutionaries of 1789 replaced the seven-day week with a ten-day one meaning that workers effectively only had one day off in ten instead of the traditional one in seven. Capitalism, Lafargue is clear, is not synonymous with greater material abundance, nor with greater corporeal freedom from toil.

To this extent, Lafargue rejects the discourse of ‘Progress’, which he describes as ‘the eldest son of Work’,⁶¹ as it has suppressed both the positive, pre-modern, attitude to idleness and the actual amount of time that can be devoted to it. Lafargue celebrates, for example, the lack of industrial development found in Spain. Spaniards, thanks to a lack of industry, have not yet adopted the positive conception of labour that has come to be the norm in more industrialised parts of Europe such as Great Britain: ‘For the Spaniard, in whom the primitive animal has not been atrophied, work is the worst sort of slavery.’⁶² Lafargue, always the physician, also cites the Spanish proverb, *Descanzar es salud*, ‘Rest is healthy.’⁶³ These historical and anti-industrial arguments are undoubtedly the most original, and arguably some of the strongest, aspects of *The Right to Laziness*. However, as we will see, they are complicated by a decidedly positive conception of technological development—and what we would today call automation—as the solution to the problem of work.

SHAME ON THE PROLETARIANS

Lafargue is in most respects a thinker who follows closely the exoteric side of Marx. The proletariat is for him, as for other classical Marxists, the ‘subject’ of history that is, thanks to its negative identity as the exploited, destined to seize the means of production and abolish class society. He is, in this sense, therefore very much a ‘traditional Marxist’. However, one of the most surprising and powerful lines of attack in this particular text is aimed squarely at the proletariat itself or, at the very least, the proletarian movement in France. Lafargue brings together a critique of the positive

identification of the worker with work and a parodic reversal of bourgeois moralising over the supposed ‘vices’ of the lower class. These criticisms of the working-class subject are, as we might expect from the overall tone, a mixture of the deadly serious and the deeply satirical. First, Lafargue recognises and focuses in on the contradiction between the messianic role that the proletariat is supposed to play in the historical materialist schema and the reality of the real-existing working class:

the proletariat, the great class embracing all the producers of civilised nations, the class which in freeing itself will free humanity from servile toil and will make of the human animal a free being, — the proletariat, betraying its instincts, despising its historic mission, has let itself be perverted by the dogma of work. Rude and terrible has been its punishment. All its individual and social woes are born of its passion for work. [...] And if the miseries of compulsory work and the tortures of hunger have descended upon the proletariat more in number than the locusts of the Bible, it is because the proletariat has invited them.⁶⁴

Here Lafargue casts himself in the role of a biblical prophet, declaiming against his people for engaging in immorality and failing to fulfil the will of Providence. The ills that assail them, the reality of modern factory labour and the poverty that comes in its wake, are the result of a divine judgement on the sin embodied in its adoption of the worship of the false idol of labour. Lafargue, much as Isaiah spoke to the Israelites of their exile in Babylon, seems to suggest that History sends the modern labour regime as a plague upon the proletariat for breaking its laws. The proletarian is exiled from his true home of idleness and leisure—the land of milk and honey—that is the will of History. Equally, Lafargue presents here a quasi-gnostic, or vitalist, conception of the origins of anti-work feeling. The proletariat, in accepting labour, lives against its ‘instincts’ and denies its ‘free’, ‘animal’, destiny. Work, in its modern form at least, is, as such, a perversion of the human organism that should excite the natural defences or an auto-immune response. The positive identification of the worker with the ‘dogma of work’ is no less than a ‘perversion’ of its essential being, which should revolt against it.

Lafargue, moreover, is not only concerned with the fact that the proletariat seems to accept work. He also appears to criticise those workers who adopt labour as a positive ground of identity and, as such, contribute to the development of the work ethic as a social norm. He notes, for example, that the Lyonnais weavers who rose up in rebellion against low wages in

1831 adopted the slogan, 'He who will not work, Neither shall he Eat', a phrase that could have come directly out of the mouth of a member of the capitalist class.⁶⁵ Likewise, Lafargue points out that the Communards, in 1871, referred to their movement as, 'The Revolution of Work'.⁶⁶ We could interpret these moments in two ways as the exact meaning seems somewhat ambiguous in the text. On the one hand, it is possible that Lafargue is himself simply adopting the discourse that casts the bourgeoisie as non-productive 'parasites'. It is, after all, a mode of discourse that he employs elsewhere. On the other hand, a more interesting reading would be that Lafargue is saying, or at least hinting, that it is contradictory for an anti-capitalist movement to base its identity upon a positive conception of labour, to adopt 'Work' as its moniker, when labour as such ought to be the object of its criticism. This latter reading is to some extent supported by the fact that he says it is a 'mistake' to seek to impose 'ten hours of forge and factory' labour upon capitalists: 'Work ought to be forbidden and not imposed.'⁶⁷ Capitalists should, in a communist society, have to prove that they will 'continue to live as perfect vagabonds in spite of the general mania for work' and, if instead they still cling to it, there are 'plenty of disgusting occupations in which to place them'.⁶⁸ Lafargue is, of course, being satirical (he suggests that such a programme would make capitalists rally to socialism), but, intentionally or otherwise, there is a point here. A social movement that seeks to impose the modern labour regime on others is hardly the bearer of the torch of freedom. Moreover, Lafargue also appears to criticise workers for having played a role in the propagation of modern industrial labour and the work ethic in the form of the 'right to work':

And to think that the sons of the heroes of the Terror have allowed themselves to be degraded by the religion of work, to the point of accepting, since 1848, as a revolutionary conquest, the law limiting factory labour to twelve hours. They proclaim as a revolutionary principle the Right to Work. Shame on the French proletariat! Only slaves would have been capable of such baseness. A Greek of heroic times would have required twenty years of capitalist civilisation before he could have conceived of such vileness. [...] This work, which in June 1848 the labourers demanded with arms in their hands, this they have imposed on their families; they have delivered up to the barons of industry their wives and children. With their own hands, they have demolished their hearths. With their own hands, they have dried up the milk of their wives. The unhappy women carrying and nursing their babes have been obliged to go into the mines and factories to bend their backs and exhaust their nerves. With their own hands, they have broken the life and the vigour of their children. Shame on the proletarians!⁶⁹

Lafargue casts an image of the French worker as a pathetic character that has betrayed both his masculinity—his basic role of protecting his family—and his human dignity—his capacity for agency, his ability to refuse, in the face of the imposition of degradation.⁷⁰ The French proletarian, in other words, is not the hero that he casts himself to be, nor that he should be. He is not superior to his ancestors, but rather inferior, lacking in moral character, heroism and good sense: ‘The proletarians have abolished wise laws which limited the labour of the artisans of the ancient guilds; they have suppressed the holidays.’⁷¹ The proletarian is abased not only by the work itself but by his lack of revolt against it and even his acceptance of its logic. Lafargue undertakes a significant reversal here of the normative ideology that surrounds work in modernity. Work is usually presented precisely as a source of masculine pride and human dignity. Here, however, work appears as the exact opposite: emasculating and degrading. It is, Lafargue argues, shameful that the proletariat does not refuse work, at least *this* work, with every ounce of its being. Instead, it perceives its *real* degradation as an *apparent* source of elevation. Lafargue therefore describes the ‘love of work’ among the proletariat as a ‘strange delusion’, a ‘mental aberration’, and a ‘vice’ that has ‘brutalised’ them.⁷² Lafargue, as such, aims to shame the French working class into fulfilling its role as the revolutionary subject that abolishes this abasement.

Lafargue takes the same argument in a more satirical direction elsewhere in the text. Specifically, he employs hyperbolic language in order to satirise the paternalistic hand-wringing of bourgeois moralists over the supposed dissolution or debauchery of the French lower classes. Lafargue casts the workers’ ‘love of work’ as a ‘furious passion’ and a diabolical obsession that seems to know no bounds.⁷³ In a manner that apes bourgeois moral panics over alcoholism and sexual licentiousness, he paints an absurdist caricature of the modern worker as an addict who needs his fix:

The labourers encumber the market in countless numbers imploring: Work! Work! Their super abundance ought to compel them to bridle their passion; on the contrary, it carries it to the point of paroxysm. Let a chance for work present itself, thither they rush; then they demand twelve, fourteen hours to glut their appetite for work, and the next day they are again thrown out on the pavement with no more food for their vice. Every year in all industries lockouts occur with the regularity of the seasons.⁷⁴

Lafargue is obviously not suggesting that the workers are genuinely addicted to labour. Rather, the joke is that the labour form forces people

to behave as though they were indeed addicts, that is, people who are addicted to a socially and individually destructive and unethical activity. It is the same comic reversal that Oscar Wilde would later achieve in his quip that ‘work is the curse of the drinking classes’.⁷⁵ In other words, where bourgeois moralists present work, as we saw in the case of Napoleon above, as a means of curtailing the irrationality and dissolution in society, Lafargue demonstrates that work itself is the essence of social irrationality and degeneracy in modern society. A specific absurdity referred to here is that overproduction and seasonal work in capitalism do not, as in pre-modern societies, lead to abundance, rest and a lighter load. Rather, they result in periods of strenuous activity for some, unemployment for others and mass unemployment at certain times of years and periods of economic crisis. Would it not be more rational, Lafargue asks, to spread the work that is available around and to create more work by extending the pleasures of consumption to the producers themselves?

ARISTOTLE’S DREAM

Lafargue is the only author in this book to have given the theme of economic crisis—the link between crisis and work—an important place in his argument. *The Right to Laziness* contains a whole section in fact on ‘the consequences of overproduction’. It should be noted that the text was originally written between 1879 and 1880, that is, in the midst of the Long Depression that hit the world economy in the late nineteenth century. The issue of crisis—and, with it, poverty, unemployment and an overall slowdown in growth—would therefore have been an empirically pressing one. Lafargue understands economic crisis as a crisis of overproduction. Capital is unable to realise sufficient profits due to the result of technological development coupled with insufficient consumer demand.⁷⁶ Moreover, and this is perhaps an original contribution, Lafargue draws a link between crisis and the work ethic. He notes that ‘the quantity of work required by society is necessarily limited by consumption and raw materials’.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, bourgeois political economy continues to assert that the only option to increase the wealth of workers and society as a whole is to go on performing and finding ever more work: ‘The economists go on repeating to the labourers, “Work, to increase social wealth”, and, “Work, always work, to create your own prosperity.”’⁷⁸ Lafargue also cites a certain Rev. Townshend: ‘Work, work, night and day.’⁷⁹ However, Lafargue notes, in a similar manner to Fourier, that many of these same economists

willingly admit that the lower classes usually enjoy a better quality of life in the least industrially developed countries: '[i]t is in poor nations that people are comfortable, in rich nations they are ordinarily poor.'⁸⁰ As such, Lafargue quotes another economist, '[t]he labourers themselves in co-operating toward the accumulation of productive capital contribute to the event which sooner or later must deprive them of a part of their wages.'⁸¹

Lafargue, with these arguments, is essentially pointing out the absurd contradiction that exists in capitalist society between concrete and abstract wealth. The poor Spanish peasant farmer—who produces only for himself, his family and a local market—is hardly affected by crises of overproduction. If he has a glut of produce, the concrete nature of his 'wealth' means that he can have a rest, take a holiday, hold a feast, rather than suffer 'unemployment' in the negative sense that it carries in industrially developed countries. Furthermore, in such countries, where there is a crisis of industrial production, the negative consequences are less harsh as workers can return to the land. In fully developed industrial societies, however, workers produce products that are destined, not necessarily for their own consumption, but for a consumer market at home and abroad. Production serves only to increase the amount of abstract social wealth: money into more money. When markets inevitably bottom out therefore, thanks to a lack of growth in demand or technological competition reducing the amount of labour necessary to meet that demand, it results in poverty and unemployment among workers. Moreover, workers in such countries no longer have the option of returning to the land as agriculture itself has become a large-scale industry and older forms of life have been lost. The more we work, the more we rely upon and demand labour as the basis of social life; the more we depend on modern industry, the more we increase the precariousness of our existence. Lafargue does not necessarily go into this amount of detail, but these are the kinds of issues that he is getting at when he points out that simply working more does not always result in a greater amount of concrete wealth for the mass of people in industrial societies.

Lafargue is particularly critical of the way in which contemporary society responds to these crises of overproduction. Capitalism, rather than giving everyone a rest and distributing the surplus, maintains the need for work and creates poverty by either destroying the product—dumping wheat in the sea, for example—or engaging in imperialist wars to open up or expand new markets abroad—'They force their government to annex Congo, to seize on Tonquin, to batter down the Chinese Wall with cannon shots to make an outlet for their cotton goods.'⁸² The response of

workers, Lafargue argues, is no less absurd: ‘Instead of taking advantage of periods of crisis, for a general distribution of their products and a universal holiday, the labourers, perishing with hunger, go and beat their heads against the doors of the workshops.’⁸³ Lafargue makes an excellent satirical point here. Imagine if every economic crisis was, instead of a terrible disaster, celebrated as a great social success: enough work has been done for now, humanity can take it easy for a decade or two. The absurdity of capitalism is that the abstract nature of its production, which causes these crises in the first place, would never be able to arrive at such a rational outcome of increased productivity. The goal of production is only greater amounts of value, not feasts and festivals, not rest. Lafargue, moreover, takes his satirical point one step further: ‘Because, lending ear to the fallacious words of the economists, the proletarians have given themselves up body and soul to the vice of work; they precipitate the whole of society into these crises of overproduction which convulse the social organism.’ Lafargue, of course, is not seriously suggesting that the workers’ lust for labour is the real ‘cause’ of these crises. Rather, he is turning the arguments of bourgeois political economists on their heads: work itself is the cause of poverty, not laziness! Lafargue wants workers to realise that it is not only exploitation, but the very absurdity of capitalist production that is at stake in their struggle.

The solution that Lafargue proposes, in opposition to the programme of a ‘right to work’, is to insist upon fighting for *less* work. His central tenet is that work ought to be limited to no more than three hours a day. Lafargue argues that such a demand is possible for a number of reasons. First, Lafargue, echoing Fourier, argues that all of the ‘non-productive’ members of society—capitalists, soldiers, artists, prostitutes, women not currently in work—represent a ‘colossal [...] waste of productive forces’.⁸⁴ If every one of these individuals were to lend a hand in the productive process, then the load would be much lighter on each member of society overall. Moreover, instead of the current situation, where periods of frantic activity follow long periods of unemployment, society could spread out working hours more evenly both among the population and throughout the year. Lafargue differs from Fourier in this respect as he is more interested in reducing the amount of time devoted to labour rather than increasing the material product and making it more attractive. Secondly, and perhaps in a more satirical vein, Lafargue argues that if workers were to demand fewer hours, capitalists would be forced to develop productive technology more quickly in order to stay competitive.⁸⁵ In a surprising

moment of historical reversal from our own perspective, he refers to the 'lazy' Americans, who incorporate all sorts of machinery into their agriculture, as an example for Europeans to follow.⁸⁶ Thirdly, Lafargue calls for an end to the austerity that is preached to workers. If workers were able to consume the luxuries that they produce for others, they would represent a massive new market that could solve the problem of overproduction. It is perhaps one of the weakest aspects of his critique as, within the confines of capitalism, it seems to be little more than a call for mass consumerism *avant la lettre*. Fourthly, and finally, Lafargue looks to technology to save man from the burden of labour. He channels Aristotle, who, he says, foresaw that 'if every tool could by itself execute its proper function, as the masterpieces of Daedalus moved themselves or as the tripods of Vulcan set themselves spontaneously at their sacred work' then labour would no longer be necessary.⁸⁷ In light of the productive technology developed within capitalism, Lafargue therefore claims that 'Aristotle's dream is our reality': 'The machine is the saviour of humanity, the god who shall redeem him from the *sordidae artes* and from working for hire, the god who shall give him leisure and liberty.'⁸⁸ Although Lafargue truly approaches a radical stance in pointing out the absurdity of a society that cannot translate technological 'progress' into a life of rest and plenty, he evidently falls into the trap of erecting another false idol in the place of work. He places his faith in the fetish of technology and not in a rupture with the labour form. Nevertheless, our exposition of his radical critique of labour could not end without agreeing with his fundamental characterisation of the Industrial Revolution: 'Our epoch has been called the century of work. It is in fact the century of pain, misery and corruption.'⁸⁹

Lafargue is perhaps most interesting from a historical perspective because he represents an early form of Marxism that was critical of the work ethic and the positive identification of workers with work. *The Right to Laziness* is, despite its short length, a gargantuan achievement of satire and provocation. Lafargue targets some of the core values of what would become orthodox Marxism and real-existing socialism. He rejects modern factory work, the pride of labour, the voluntary servitude embodied in the call for ever more jobs and, unlike Fourier, he is not interested in the maximum extraction of undifferentiated human energy for its own sake. It is almost unbelievable that an author that otherwise emphasises so thoroughly the exoteric side of Marxian thought, especially in later life, and who was one of its main 'vulgarisers' should have produced such a critique. It makes it all the more frustrating that we cannot find any reference

to what Marx himself thought of the text. It would be wrong, however, to suggest that Lafargue fully escapes the confines of a largely ‘phenomenological’—and, therefore, ‘affirmative’—critique of labour. Although he recognises the historical specificity of the work ethic, Lafargue maintains the rationalist conception of labour as natural necessity and universality. Moreover, he is, despite his criticisms of its role in the cultural valorisation and development of labour, firmly committed to the negative and revolutionary identity of the working class ‘subject’. His theory of crisis, as a theory of overproduction, is an important one, but foreshortened to the extent that it does not recognise the gradual fall in the overall mass of value as the fundamental problem that capitalism faces. The solutions that he proposes, a kind of forerunner of automation and mass consumerism (the terrible consequences of which, not least pollution and the barbarisation of culture, he could not have known), demonstrate some of the areas where his critique falls short of the essence of the labour fetish.

NOTES

1. Letter from Karl Marx to Paul Lafargue, 13 August 1866, *MECW*, v. 42, pp. 307–309.
2. Letter from Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 23 August 1866, *MECW*, v. 42, pp. 310–311.
3. Leslie Derfler, *Paul Lafargue and the Founding of French Marxism 1842–1882* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 153. Derfler provides a brilliant personal and political biography of Lafargue in two volumes.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
5. Derfler does note, however, that Lafargue took his title and some of his empirical information from a book found in Marx’s library: *The Right to Idleness and the Organisation of Servile Labour in the Greek and Roman Republics* by Louis Moreau-Christophe (1849). *Ibid.*, pp. 178, 183–184.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 181, and Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (London: Verso, 2008), p. 60.
7. Despite his otherwise excellent biography, Derfler provides quite a reductive reading of the text as an ‘essay on the working population’s need for leisure time’. Indeed, Derfler actively admonishes readings of the text that understand it as an attack on labour: ‘Rather than a denial of work or an affirmation of leisure as an end in itself, *The Right to Be Lazy* was a celebration of life, or rather of what life could be: not merely recuperation from labour, but the essence of life itself. Far from advocating a hedonist phi-

- losophy, it condemned only excessive and abusive labour.' He therefore passes over some of the more esoteric implications of the text. Derfler, *Lafargue*, pp. 177, 180–181.
8. Claire White, *Work and Leisure in Late 19th-Century French Literature and Visual Culture: Time, Politics and Class* (New York: Palgrave, 2014), p. 24.
 9. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
 10. Ross, *Social Space*, p. 61.
 11. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
 12. *Ibid.*
 13. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
 14. *L'Egalité* was the primary organ for the diffusion of Marxian ideas in France in the first few decades of the Third Republic, thanks in no small part to the didactic role played by Lafargue among French-speaking collectivists. Lafargue informally mediated between the Marx-Engels collaboration and the group around Guesde in France. He put forward many core Marxian arguments in the paper in both anonymous and named articles. Neither Marx nor Engels, however, had much direct contact with the editors of the paper. Nevertheless, although they felt no direct ownership over it, their correspondence makes clear that they felt it was the best of the French socialist newspapers.
 15. Perhaps one of the reasons the original dedication is so often overlooked is that, in the later complete edition published in 1883, Lafargue thanks the French government for putting him in prison and thereby allowing him the leisure time to edit the book.
 16. For a detailed account of these debates, see Arnaud Coutant, 'La réaction républicaine contre le socialisme: les droits sociaux', 1848, *Quand la république combattait la démocratie: recherche* (Paris: Mare et Martin, 2009), pp. 92–133.
 17. 'Le 18 mars', *L'Egalité*, 18/3/1880, pp. 1–2.
 18. 'Une lettre de M. Louis Blanc', *L'Egalité*, 28/1/1880, pp. 2–3.
 19. Confusingly, the term 'valeur-travail' can also be used in French, though less commonly, to refer to the labour theory of value.
 20. Paul Lafargue, trans. Charles Kerr, *The Right to Be Lazy and Other Studies* (Chicago: Kerr & Co., 1907), p. 9. This English translation renders the phrase as 'a disastrous dogma'. Lafargue was fond in his writing of referring to capitalism as a whole as a kind of religion. See, for example, his *The Religion of Capital* (1886) a satirical piece which purports to contain minutes from a meeting of capitalists on how to advance capitalism and includes liturgies and credos. It must be said, however, that this particular text has an unfortunate 'conspiracy theory' feel to it, even if it does take the form of a satire.
 21. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., p. 4.
24. Ibid., pp. 12–13.
25. Ibid., pp. 9–10.
26. This does not mean, however, that Fourier and Lafargue, any more than the thinkers and politicians that they criticise, properly understand that pre-modern ‘labour’ and modern ‘labour’ (i.e. abstract labour) are fundamentally different.
27. Lafargue, *Lazy*, p. 15.
28. Ibid., p. 14.
29. Ibid., p. 15.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid., pp. 15–16
33. Derfler notes that Lafargue was ‘writing as a physician’, *Lafargue*, p. 179. Ross, likewise, states that ‘much time is spent detailing the grotesque physicality and degradation of both worker and bourgeois resulting from the inscription on their bodies of the division of labour’, *Social Space*, p. 60); ‘Lafargue’s medical training can be seen in the precise anatomical vocabulary he uses to depict the bourgeoisie [...] in their absolute laziness’, *ibid.*, p. 61; White makes a similar point, ‘Lafargue’s dystopian vision is, then, rooted in a corporeal politics; he reveals how the body under modernity is inscribed with the marks of a strict division of labour, which is upheld by a political discourse complicit with capitalist ends’, *Work and Leisure*, pp. 25–26.
34. Lafargue, *Lazy*, p. 38.
35. Ibid., pp. 44, 9.
36. Ibid., p. 5.
37. Ibid., p. 10.
38. Ibid., p. 10.
39. Ibid., p. 22.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid., p. 30.
42. Ibid., pp. 29–30.
43. Ibid., p. 18.
44. Ibid. Lafargue was especially unimpressed with the personality cult around Hugo. See, Paul Lafargue, ‘La Légende de Victor Hugo’ (1885) in *Paresse et révolution, écrits 1880–1911* (Paris: Tallandier, 2009), pp. 156–210.
45. Ibid., p. 32.
46. Ibid., pp. 32–33.
47. Morris himself did not discover Marx until 1883 and his anti-work utopian novel *News from Nowhere* appeared a little under a decade later in 1890.

Morris was, however, certainly familiar with Lafargue in later life as he would go on to publish several translations of his work, though not *The Right to Laziness*, in issues of his socialist newspaper, *The Commonweal*. Morris would also become friendly with Engels and he would equally publish articles by Eleanor Marx. (Morris was apparently very pleased to see Engels reading the *Poetic Edda* when he came to visit him in Manchester.) Moreover, Morris shared a fascination with the writing of Fourier, especially around the theme of work. It would be strange, given the many connections and shared themes, if *The Right to Laziness* did not eventually exert some influence on Morris's own anti-work positions.

48. Lafargue, *Lazy*, p. 12.
49. *Ibid.*, pp. 57–58.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
51. *Ibid.*, pp. 59–60.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
55. *Ibid.*
56. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
57. *Ibid.*
58. *Ibid.*
59. *Ibid.*
60. *Ibid.*
61. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
62. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
63. *Ibid.*
64. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
65. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
66. *Ibid.*, pp. 38–39.
67. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
68. *Ibid.*, pp. 50–51.
69. *Ibid.*, pp. 16–17.
70. Though he is likely joking (or at least one would hope so), Lafargue praises cultures that practise euthanasia on the old and the infirm, and condemns workers, in light of such ‘proofs of affection’, for not putting an end to themselves and their families: ‘How degenerate are the modern proletarians to accept with patience the terrible miseries of factory labour!’ *Ibid.*, pp. 22–23.
71. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
72. *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 44.
73. *Ibid.*
74. *Ibid.*, pp. 43–44.

75. Cited in Oscar Wilde, *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. vii.
76. Derfler notes that the theory of crisis found in *The Right to Laziness* is similar to that of Rosa Luxembourg. Derfler, *Lafargue*, p. 179.
77. Lafargue, *Lazy*, p. 44.
78. Ibid., pp. 22–23.
79. Ibid., p. 23.
80. Destutt de Tracy cited in *ibid.*
81. Cherbuliez cited in *ibid.*
82. Lafargue, *Lazy*, pp. 27–28.
83. Ibid., p. 26.
84. Ibid., pp. 36–37. Lafargue, like Fourier, albeit to a far, far lesser extent, does frequently employ the discourse of ‘parasites’. Moreover, despite his ethnic background, there are whiffs of anti-Jewish bigotry in his references to the Rothschilds and in his conspiratorialist satirical writings such as *The Religion of Capitalism*.
85. Ibid. pp. 47–48.
86. Ibid., p. 48.
87. Ibid., p. 62.
88. Ibid.
89. Ibid., p. 17.



André Breton, the Artistic Avant-Garde and Surrealism's War on Work

In July 1925, the Surrealist group in Paris, under the leadership of André Breton, published a singularly bold declaration, on the bright orange cover of its journal, that read *The Surrealist Revolution* 'and a war on work'.¹ It was not the first, nor the last, uncompromising anti-work statement that Breton and the Surrealists as a whole would make. It was, however, one of its most provocative. It announced that Surrealism, as a revolutionary project, was intimately tied to an oppositional stance towards labour. It was, moreover, indicative of the sort of radical gesture that was guaranteed to provoke anger and confusion from the group's supposed allies in the French Communist Party (PCF). Breton notes that, among all of the many insults and threats thrown at the Surrealists over the years, there was, particularly among the Communists, always a clear desire to 're-educate' these errant artists through forced labour, as was the case in the USSR at that time.² In 1927, for example, Breton, as a card-carrying member of the PCF, attended his third meeting of a party cell of gas workers in Paris. The meeting turned into a violent scuffle as one of the workers, who had taken the presence of the poet as an affront, insulted him as a lazy 'do-nothing' and a 'reprobate'.³ The opinion of Communist intellectuals was very much the same: 'These young revolutionaries will have nothing to do with work. They go in for Hegel and Marx and the Revolution, but work is something to which they are not adapted. They are too busy studying pederasty and dreams.'⁴ It makes it all the more surprising therefore that a movement, such as Surrealism, which rejected

work, which wanted to negate positivism and rationalism, should have ever sought an alliance with the 'Republic of Labour'. Fittingly enough, it was arguably the publication in the group's second journal of a letter by Ferdinand Alquié, which criticised the USSR's celebration of work, that finally led to the expulsion of the Surrealists from the Party.⁵ Understanding these contradictions is, at least in part, the goal of this chapter.

The Surrealist critique of work poses special problems for critical analysis thanks to the characteristically poetical quality of the movement's output. One of its few direct statements about the nature of work, for example, takes the form of an answer to the 'Definitions' game. One Surrealist would write a question on one side of a piece of paper and another would answer the question on the other side without knowing what it was. Like other Surrealist games, the idea was to engage in the play of 'objective chance' that would provoke poetical meaning. In this case Breton, the questioner, asks 'What is work?', and Benjamin Péret (1899–1959), the answerer, responds, 'It is the execution of Louis XVI!'⁶ Although the game produced random results, the couplings that the Surrealists ultimately selected for publication were not. They chose those juxtapositions that provoked reflection and induced a certain state of mind. What therefore are we to make of such a cryptic statement? Work is a form of violence and a heinous act of cruelty? Work is a necessary evil? Work is a tyrannical ruler that deserves to be put to death? The historical act of the execution itself was a form of work? Work is, at once, the entirety of the event, the violent task, the actions, thoughts and feelings of the observers, the executioner and the king? All of these and none. We must accept a certain amount of ambiguity as, for the Surrealists, what was at stake was not strict theoretical definitions. These poetical qualities, as we will see, embody many of the greatest strengths and weaknesses of the Surrealist critique of work as it developed and came to be expressed in the art, philosophy and politics of the movement.

The Surrealist critique of work was also as much a lived practice of revolt as it was a matter of poetical creation in the traditional sense. The Parisian Surrealists in particular rejected the respectable professional careers that their families had prepared for them and sought, when possible, to escape labour altogether. As Helena Lewis notes, '[r]egular work, especially anything that could lead to a successful career, was forbidden. Breton, Aragon, Jacques-André Boiffard, and François Gérard all abandoned their medical studies and others deliberately left the university without getting a degree.'⁷ Jacques Rigaut, another French Surrealist, once stated that suicide is 'only

slightly less disagreeable than having a job' and that it would be better to 'live day to day' as a 'pimp' and a 'parasite' than to work.⁸ Elsewhere, he writes with some absurd humour: 'The second time I killed myself, it was out of laziness. Poor, having an anticipatory horror of all work, I killed myself one day, without any convictions, as I had lived.'⁹ Louis Aragon similarly, in 1925, foreshadows the famous 'never work' graffito of Guy Debord with the phrase, 'I will never work, my hands are clean.'¹⁰ To this extent, the Surrealists embodied the living artistic values of Parisian Bohemia that stretched back at least as far as the mid-nineteenth century. Even financial success as an artist was viewed with a great deal of suspicion. Dissident Surrealists, for example, criticised Breton, who was at times in his life no stranger to a lack of monetary means, for his role as an art dealer. Breton himself mocked Salvador Dali with the moniker 'Avida Dollars', an anagram of his name meaning Greedy Bucks, due to his commercial success and the nature of his art. Painters, poets and novelists, the Surrealists preferred to idle about the city in search of pleasure, inspiration and poetic encounters rather than labour. Such 'disambulation' was a form of 'laziness' particularly favoured by Breton and Aragon, as two of their respective novels, *Nadja* (1928) and *Paris Peasant* (1926), attest.

The Surrealist opposition to labour, moreover, has not gone unnoticed in the critical literature. Lewis, for example, states that the anti-work stance of Surrealism was simply an extension of the movement's general rejection of bourgeois values.¹¹ The critique of work was, as such, not an irreducible position based in a hope for total social revolution. Marguerite Bonnet, however, who is one of the editors of the Pléiade edition of Breton's works, insists that the rejection of work is an 'essential' Surrealist value.¹² She argues that the Surrealist opposition to labour is primarily moral in character, that is, while Breton does not reject work as a natural necessity, he does refute it as an absolute cultural value or ethical principle. Carole Reynaud-Paligot provides a lengthy interpretation of these anti-work positions, linking them to Marxian critiques of the division of labour and to the influence of utopian and libertarian traditions in France.¹³ Furthermore, there is plenty of evidence that the Surrealists were directly influenced by the critiques of work that have been previously discussed in this book. Breton was a great reader of Fourier, whose work he reproduced in his *Anthology of Black Humour* (1940)—albeit not his anti-work passages—and he famously penned a poem in his honour, 'Ode to Charles Fourier', in 1947. Likewise, Breton kept a copy of *The Right to Laziness* in his personal library and referred to Paul Lafargue himself as an 'enlightened

materialist'.¹⁴ The evidence suggests therefore that the Surrealist critique of work emerged out of a dialogue with a now well-established tradition in modern French thought. The continuation and development of that tradition was, as we will see, fundamental to what was truly radical about the Surrealist project.

ART, RIMBAUD AND ANARCHISM

The fact that many of the artistic avant-gardes of the twentieth century should have taken on the critique of work as a central thematic is not at all surprising. The relationship between art and an oppositional stance towards labour has a long history. Romantic philosophers, such as Friedrich Schiller, had argued, since at least the eighteenth century, that art represents both a refuge from and a potential solution to the problem of alienation. Man finds himself cut off in modern civilisation from his initial unity with the natural world and his own nature. His existence is 'inauthentic', fragmented and dominated by the impersonal character of both civil society and the world of the market that had replaced the unity of the pre-modern religious community. Art, as such, emerged as a new kind of symbolic realm that allowed the subject to come to terms with the world; a realm of experience, in other words, in which man could be truly free and fully develop his passions. Art was therefore implicitly opposed to work. Man laboured out of necessity and constraint. In contrast, the artist—and his spectator—engaged in a free play of the faculties that, in the greatest works of art, permitted mankind to rediscover the unity with the world that it had lost.¹⁵ Furthermore, where, for most of its history, it had largely been religious and state-supporting in character, by the end of the nineteenth century, art—particularly the visual and plastic arts which had lagged behind—had finally begun to assert its full autonomy from the dominant culture.¹⁶ Art became, that is to say, a sphere of relative freedom that, although still dependent on economic life, was able to develop alternative behaviours, ways of seeing, values and models of everyday life.¹⁷ The sense that art could provide some resolution to alienation reached its apogee in modern art in which the attempt to 're-enchant' life was nearly always accompanied by some kind of political engagement. Art was therefore the natural home for the critique of work even when it seemed that almost every other sphere of social life had been entirely subsumed beneath its logic.

The emergence of art as a sphere of social life with its own set of values opposed to those of dominant society was closely associated, from the middle of the nineteenth century, with the figure of the Bohemian. Bohemians—in the idealised form given to them in music, literature and film—were young people who flouted bourgeois social conventions in the name of Truth, Beauty and Poetry. Rather than compromise their values, they preferred to live in happy poverty and in the cheaper districts of Paris, such as the Left Bank and, from the late nineteenth century onward, Montmartre. They lived a creative communal existence based on friendship and disdained boring middle-class life. Bohemians eschewed work in the normative sense and kept irregular hours. Paris, as the capital of the art world, was naturally the heartland of Bohemia, which constituted a genuine subculture made up of artists, actors, students, dancers, poets, novelists and the wayward sons and daughters of the bourgeoisie. The Bohemian life therefore represented a kind of lived art: an alternative model of social being that ostensibly obeyed different rules to those of the dull, mundane, mercantile world of modern industrial society. Bohemia embodied, even for the bourgeoisie who consumed representations of it in the form of novels and operas, a refuge or utopia that was materially poor but allowed the individual to live a more intense and ‘authentic’ existence.¹⁸ The Surrealist rejection of work—along with that of the other avant-gardes considered in this book—was the extension of the Bohemian artistic ideal into the new century.

The embodiment of that ideal, as far the Surrealists were concerned, was the figure of the French poet Arthur Rimbaud (1854–1891). The poet’s short but brilliant life served as a touchstone of Surrealist expression and revolt. ‘Rimbaud’, wrote Breton in the first Surrealist manifesto, ‘is Surrealist in the practice of life.’¹⁹ In an open letter, from 1927, addressed to Ardennes officials who had dared to erect a statue to the poet, Breton made clear what he meant: ‘[Rimbaud] got drunk, picked fights, slept under bridges, had lice [and] he loathed work.’²⁰ It was a point to which Breton would return repeatedly. For example, in a 1934 essay on Surrealism, Breton turns once again to the theme: ‘Was it not Rimbaud who said: “I will never work.”’²¹ Breton also quotes Rimbaud, alongside Lafargue, under the heading of ‘work’ in *The Abridged Dictionary of Surrealism* (1938): ‘To work now? Never, never: I’m on strike. Right now, I’m beshitting myself as much as possible. Why? I want to be a poet, and I’m working to turn myself into a *seer*...’²² Rimbaud, for the Surrealists, embodied the lived experience of a modern art that was in revolt against

the world. That revolt necessarily meant a rejection of the work ethic and of a life devoted to labour in the manner of the bourgeoisie and of workers. It could, in this sense, also be understood as an ironic and playful revalorisation of the aristocratic disdain for labour that had characterised early-modern societies. In his poem 'Bad Blood', for example, Rimbaud, who was not himself literally of aristocratic stock, refers to 'workers and bosses' alike as 'ignoble peasants', that is, servile and stupid.

These anti-work themes in Rimbaud have certainly not gone unnoticed in the critical literature. Martin Sorrel, for example, notes that Rimbaud 'unashamedly adopted the position of a cynical outsider, the drop-out who refuses to work or to conform to society's rules, but who will rather scrounge his sustenance from friends'.²³ Rimbaud, he states, imagines the 'work' of the poet to be 'idleness, vice and depravity'.²⁴ Kristin Ross, however, provides perhaps the most in-depth analysis.²⁵ Ross reads the anti-work stance of Rimbaud as a critique of the alienation and division of labour in late-nineteenth-century capitalist society. She argues that Rimbaud uses castration as a metaphor for the way in which labour turns the body and the mind into extensions of the exterior power of capital. Rimbaud refuses to allow himself to be 'mutilated' by the process of capitalist accumulation. His rejection of labour allows him to remain corporeally 'intact'. Furthermore, his claims that he has 'a horror of all trades' and that he will 'never learn to use [his] hands', as well as his critique of workers and bosses as 'peasants', constitute a rejection of the professional formation of the modern subject that results in its decided lack of poetry or 'narrow horizons'.²⁶ Like Lafargue, Ross argues, Rimbaud adopts the notion of 'laziness' in order to escape the simplistic dichotomy of production and consumption. The figure of the bum or the do-nothing, the very notion of laziness itself, acts in his life and work as a poetic symbol for the body that is unmarked by the mutilation of labour and which can, as a result, experience intense sensation.²⁷ Rimbaud's hatred of work and love of laziness therefore figure as an important source of inspiration for the French avant-garde.²⁸

The Surrealist critique of work also took a great deal of inspiration from the Anarchism of the Belle Époque. In fact, by the turn of the century, the lines between the Parisian subcultures of Bohemia, Anarchy and criminality had often proved to be decidedly blurred. Surrealism shared a particular affinity with Anarchist Individualism and Illegalism. Where a great deal of the rhetoric of nineteenth-century Anarchism had focused on moral arguments grounded in abstract ideals, such as Brotherhood and Equality,

the Individualists followed a philosophy that emphasised, individual freedom and desire. They took direct inspiration from Max Stirner (1806–1856), in particular his *The Ego and Its Own* (1844), and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). Stirner rejects all constraints placed on individual liberty and argues that individuals do not require moral justification for their actions. Nietzsche, likewise, constructs a philosophy that invites the individual to break out of the constrictions of bourgeois morality in order to form its own body of values based on its desires. French Anarchists, at the turn of the century, were in part attracted to these ideas as they provided a model for individual self-determination outside of bourgeois ideology that, in many respects, echoed the countercultural and artistic values of Paris's Bohemian subculture.²⁹ For example, the *Anarchist Encyclopaedia* (1934) entry on labour, written by Gerard de Lacaze-Duthiers, cites Ruskin and Morris for whom 'labour should be joyful', and E. Armand, in another entry, claims that it should 'generate individual liberty'.³⁰ Individualist Anarchism had therefore already adopted many aspects of the artistic critique of work. The Individualist Anarchist critique is, nevertheless, decidedly 'phenomenological', and therefore 'affirmative', in character. The Individualist Anarchists accept 'in theory' the mantra that 'work is freedom' and that it has a certain 'beauty'.³¹ It is only class exploitation and mismanagement that make labour the worst form of slavery and ugliness. The problem, as such, is not work as a social form, nor even the work ethic in itself (there are plenty of references to workshy 'parasites'), only that labour is unfree.³²

The Surrealists were arguably less interested in Anarchist theory, however, than in the practice of Illegalism and propaganda by the deed. The Illegalist Anarchists held that, in a society where a small class exploited workers and stole the full value of their labour, it was perfectly acceptable to refuse to work and instead to steal from the expropriators. The Anarchist thief Marius Jacob, who claimed to have taken part in over a hundred robberies, justified his actions in exactly these terms: 'Theft is restitution, retaking possession. Rather than be cloistered in a factory, like a prison, rather than beg for that which I have a right, I preferred to rise up and combat step to step my enemies by going to war on the rich, and attacking their goods.'³³ Theft was, of course, a widespread spontaneous act of resistance to the labour regime among workers themselves.³⁴ However, it was those who were motivated by a revolutionary ideology and engaged in the most audacious acts of criminality—usually less for personal gain than to fund revolutionary movements—who would become popular heroes

among the working class. The Surrealists were particularly enamoured with the Bonnot Gang, an Anarchist Illegalist group which, between 1911 and 1912, engaged in an epic crime spree that included bank robberies, carjackings and police killings.³⁵ In March 1921, the proto-Surrealist journal *Littérature* listed Bonnot as a 10.36 in a mock school grading system, just above Baudelaire (9) and Freud (8.63), well above Hegel (2.36) and a little below Apollinaire (12.45) and, of course, Breton himself (16.85).³⁶ The Belgian Surrealist, Louis Scutenaire (1905–1987), expresses similar esteem: ‘Perhaps the most beautiful account [*récit*] in the French language [is] Carouy’s statement at the trial of the Bonnot gang.’³⁷ The Surrealists therefore identified strongly with the Anarchist rejection of work and its revolt against bourgeois morality in the name of individual liberty.

MODERN TIMES

The First World War is in many respects the event that defined the generation from which Dada and Surrealism emerged. For Breton and his friends, as for many people of the epoch, the mechanised horrors of the war and the imbecilic patriotism on which it rested had exposed once and for all that Western culture embodies a vacuous and destructive mode of existence. The regimentation and rationalisation of everyday life, through factory labour and militarism, teach human beings stupidity and submissiveness. Breton, as we will see, was particularly struck by the common characteristics he observed between the patriotic soldier that willingly sacrifices himself for the nation and the voluntary servitude of the modern worker who sacrifices himself to the regime of capitalist accumulation. In other words, there was a sense that the mass mobilisation of the armies of Europe and the mass mobilisation of the armies of labour reflected one another and resulted from a similar attitude to life. The First World War could, in this sense, be understood as an expression of the wider war of total mechanised competition that was transforming modern societies and leaving the work ethic more entrenched in the social psyche than ever before.

France, in the first half of the twentieth century, was already undergoing the beginnings of the Second Industrial Revolution that would eventually reach its apogee in post-war Europe and America. The number of people employed in French industry was rising by 40,000 a year before the outbreak of war. Important French manufacturers, such as Renault, were already introducing proto-Fordist industrial techniques to increase

manufacturing efficiency. As a result, more and more of the French population was experiencing the most 'empirically abstract' forms of labour on the assembly line.³⁸ The increasingly industrialised character of social life did not go unnoticed within modern art. Many avant-garde artists and movements enthusiastically celebrated the new industrial and technological development. Industry seemed to transform society in dramatic and exciting ways, breaking down old restraints and offering new ways of perceiving the world. Modernist artists such as Fernand Léger, the Futurists and the Bauhaus school of design embraced, in aesthetic form, the merger of man and machine. Other artists, however, took a more critical point of view. François Picabia, to give just one example, famously satirised the reduction of man to machine in the form of a technical drawing of a spark plug with the title *Portrait of a Young American Girl in a State of Nudity* (1915).

Perhaps the greatest satirical takedown of the brave new world of industry that was produced in France in the inter-war years was René Clair's early talkie *Freedom for Us* (1931). The film follows the lives of two convicts, Louis and Émile, as they get caught up in the oppressive and absurd world of early Fordist France. Clair opens the film with a scene of prisoners forced to work at an assembly line making toys for children. The men are under constant surveillance, unable to rest or talk to one another. They dream of the freedom they would experience beyond the walls of the prison. Louis, with the help of Émile, is eventually able to escape. On the outside, he gradually climbs the social ladder until he owns his own factory that produces gramophones. Many years later, Émile himself is freed. He goes to lie down in a beautiful meadow with the chimney stacks of a factory looming in the distance. Immediately, however, he is arrested by two passing policemen: 'You are not working. Don't you know...' The film transitions to a scene of a schoolteacher lecturing young children: 'Work is obligatory, because work is freedom.' The children repeat the catechism in the form of a song. After a failed attempt to kill himself, Émile escapes from his cell but, in an effort to escape his pursuers, accidentally ends up signing up for a job at Louis's factory. Clair effects a series of clever visual rhymes between the regimentation of life in the factory and the prison. The workers are pushed about, constantly watched over by foremen and marched from place to place. Émile is put on an assembly line where he is expected to screw in a single bolt over and over again. He is, however, a poor worker and easily distracted. Soon enough he misses a bolt and has to chase it down the line, creating a domino effect, as each successive worker knocks over the

one next to him, leading to a scuffle that only ends with the intervention of the foreman.³⁹ At the end of the film, Louis, who loses all of his money, gifts a now fully automated factory to the workers—who spend their time partying—and lives the rest of his life as a tramp with Émile.

The central critical point of the film is that ‘freedom’ is meaningless, a kind of Orwellian doublespeak, in a society where the modern labour regime is obligatory. The prisoners dream of a life beyond the prison walls, but in the factory, they find only the same regimentation and boredom. At one point in the film, a worker, eating at a meal table which itself takes the form of a factory belt, suddenly stops and dreams that he is far away eating his meal with the girl he loves. How therefore can we speak of ‘freedom’ when real life takes the form of an obligation to produce under such conditions? The fact that the prisoners and factory workers manufacture objects of leisure, toy horses and gramophones respectively, is no accident. Clair is pointing to another irony of Fordism. The emergent mass consumer market, which presents itself as an escape from work, is founded upon the mass implementation of the most mind-numbing and alienating forms of labour. Moreover, through the figure of Émile, who is clearly incapable of internalising, or even understanding, the discipline of the modern workplace, Clair brings attention to the totalitarian imposition of a certain kind of subjectivity, as bosses and workers alike constantly become frustrated with his disinterestedness and force him to behave. It is as though the whole of social life, at least for the working class, has been turned into a permanent mass mobilisation in the service of the valorisation of value. Ultimately, it is only the gift of automation that frees the workers. *Freedom for Us*, nevertheless, provides a perfect picture of the empirical reality of modern industry against which the Surrealist critique of work was launched.⁴⁰

WORK IN SURREALIST PHILOSOPHY

The Surrealist critique of work, although rooted in the contexts described above, has an originality and specificity that emerges from the philosophical underpinnings of the movement. Surrealism, generally speaking, rejected the notion, which has always been prevalent in the workers’ movement, that under certain circumstances a liberated ‘labour’—in the abstract or the concrete—could become a positive aspect of life. Rather, work is always presented in the most negative of terms. Louis Aragon, for example, describes labour simply as ‘immonde’, meaning, squalid, unfit,

impure or vile.⁴¹ The central object of Surrealist criticism is, however, the subject that has 'consented' to labour. Breton, in the original Surrealist manifesto of 1924, makes the link between labour and the problem of subjectivity explicit:

Man, this irrevocable dreamer, from day to day more discontent with his lot in life, hardly explores all the possibilities of the objects that he has been led to use, and that have been given up to his indifference, or his effort, his effort nearly always, because he has consented to work, at the very least he has not been loath to try his luck (what he calls his luck!).⁴²

Aragon echoes almost the exact same sentiment a year later in 1925:

The man who has finally consented to work to preserve his life, the man who has sacrificed his attention, everything that remained divine with him, for the puerile desire to continue to live, may he look within himself, and may he recognise what prostitution really is.⁴³

Work is associated in these two passages with an *a priori* schism and degradation of the self that seems to characterise modern life. Man is, in his essence, an 'irrevocable dreamer' and contains a 'divine' aspect. These are the irrational, oneiric and enchanted aspects of the self and the world that it inhabits. Work, in contrast, is purely rational, necessary and positivistic in character. It limits the horizon of possibilities and, in so doing, prevents the subject from incorporating these aspects of reality into itself. Man, in consenting to work, abstracts from himself and his lived existence these 'divine', higher and poetical, facets of human existence. Effectively, his desires, dreams and fantasies—and all that lies outside the rationalist logic of a society devoted to production—are repressed and degraded; they are relegated to the unconscious. Labour, writes Aragon, is a 'god that reigns uncontested over the West'.⁴⁴ The 'discontent' of modern man is the result of the disenchantment with the world that characterises a society dominated by work.

The Surrealist rejection of labour is, as these arguments demonstrate, a fundamental aspect of the deeper philosophical critique of Cartesian metaphysics. Descartes reimagines the self as pure thought: *cogito, ergo sum*. His 'subject' is a reductive category that abstracts from the understanding of the self and human beings in general all of the rich complexity of the human animal in its relationship with itself and the exterior world.⁴⁵ The *I*

is identified solely with the capacity to think within the categories of Reason or *logos*. The body, which in other forms of society has equal status to the mind or is at least recognised as a reality with its own demands, is reduced to the status of a non-living object, a machine, that is simply the vessel for the mind. Likewise, the exterior world is relegated to the status of an inanimate object upon which the self, identified with pure rational thought, acts. The Cartesian subject sees in concrete reality only a mass of undifferentiated material into which it projects its order and mastery through the categories of Reason. As such, the Cartesian subject can only grasp reality through a rationalist mode of thinking that excludes all forms of logic and experience that do not fall into its simplistic and dualistic oppositions: reason and irrationality, real life and dream, the conscious and the unconscious, work and idleness, fact and fantasy. Labour, which, as we saw in the first chapter, is a category of Reason, is, for the Surrealists, the ultimate expression of Cartesian metaphysics as it reduces human life to the status of just such a subject. The man who has ‘consented to work’ has accepted the Cartesian form of subjectivity. He embodies the emptying of human experience of all that lies outside of economic rationality. We might even think of the Surrealist critique of labour therefore as to some extent a corollary to aspects of the critique of value-dissociation and its critique of the subject. There is an implicit recognition in Surrealism, in other words, that labour is an empty category that rests upon a fundamental schism within the self and society that reduces the complexity of human experience and the world to a single aspect.

Surrealism is, moreover, particularly attuned to the relationship between the abstract character of labour and modern notions of utility. As Breton puts it, ‘[u]nder the colours of civilisation, under the pretext of progress, we have managed to banish from the mind everything that could be accused, rightly or wrongly, of superstition, of illusion, to forbid any form of research into truth that does not conform to accepted practice.’²⁴⁶ Much of the most brilliant output of the French avant-garde in the first half of the twentieth century was aimed at the utilitarianism and functionalism of modern society. The creation of bizarre and useless objects out of the stuff of everyday life is a quintessentially Dadaist and Surrealist expression of the plastic arts. Perhaps the most iconic example is Man Ray’s *The Gift* (1921), which consists simply of an iron with nails glued to its flat side, rendering the object unusable and therefore worthless as a ‘gift’ (at least from the perspective of a Cartesian subject). Aragon makes the link between the ‘deification of labour’ and utilitarianism in an essay on architecture and the decorative arts:

[In this desert of walls] [e]verything is measured in terms of utility; utility is resplendent down to the smallest cinder block; and if some memory beyond the immediate falsehood of bad weather and destruction revives this place, built in the now lyrical proportions of the factory and the hanger, one can wonder if it is not solely due to the spasms of pragmatism, a sort of necessary deification of work and its fashions, a principle strengthened by its deficiency, and, like the cry of reinforced cement, the hysteria of materials as they adapt to the conventions of men, to their self-serving calculations, to their fears.⁴⁷

Aragon demonstrates how Surrealism fundamentally contradicts with industrial design and, more generally, with a conception of culture in which everything ultimately serves a utilitarian function. Aragon describes the very materials with which mankind constructs its world as being tortured by the need to adapt to the 'conventions of men', that is, the utilitarianism that is born of the 'fashions' of work, which does not recognise in these materials anything more than the stuff in which it realises itself. The reference to cement is not accidental as it represents the archetypal material of modern architecture: a material that is apparently infinitely adaptable to the abstract forms created by minds steeped in rationalist functionalism and necessity. The obsession with 'utility' and functional form arises out of the Cartesian subject in its narcissistic attitude of mastery and possession towards the material world that is recognised no rights, or independent reality, of its own.

Surrealism, and its critique of work, can be understood in this light primarily as a project to put the Cartesian subject into a state of crisis and, ideally, to overcome it altogether: first, through a revolution of the mind and, secondly, through a social revolution. The central goal was to overcome the classical division between subject and object. Breton, in fact, describes the Surrealists as working precisely towards the goal of overcoming the 'necessity and value' of the distinction.⁴⁸ Bourgeois society saw in the work society only abstract individuals who enter into 'free' and 'rational' relations of utility. The subject, in turn, makes the objective world submit to its will through the categories of Reason. The exterior world that exists outside pure thought has no rights and no subjectivity of its own. The goal of Surrealism, in opposition to such a model, is for people to enter into a richer and more fulfilling relationship to the 'real' that could only be constituted by a unity of subject and object. Breton speaks, for example, of Surrealism's 'will for a deepening of the real, an ever clearer and more

passionate revelation of the sensible world'.⁴⁹ Surrealism represents therefore a break with the abstract bourgeois individual which is only validated as a 'subject' through his 'skill' of mastering the world according to the categories of Reason and hard work. As a result, Surrealism equally represents a rupture with a conception of the 'object' as the undifferentiated stuff in which the subject realises its will. Objects can have a life of their own and take an active role in the Surrealist search for the absolute and sublime. Poetry is not simply imposed on reality, as in the demiurgic fantasies of *homo faber*, rather it is already out there in the world waiting to be discovered. These positions explain, for example, the importance within Surrealism of the poetry of the 'found object' and of walking the city in search of poetic experience.⁵⁰ Even the sculptures of the Surrealists, despite being strange and impossible, did not take the form of concrete moulds, but rather the merger of objects that really do exist in the world, such as a plastic lobster and a telephone. René Magritte provides a model for such poetry in his painting which, similarly, moves away from abstraction towards hyper-realistic representations of real objects that are placed in strange combinations or given unlikely properties that speak for abstract ideas. Surrealist poetry, in the broadest sense, seeks therefore to create 'leaps of the subconscious' that reveal the rich reality of a world beyond the dualism or subject-object opposition of the dominant metaphysics of labour.

The Surrealist conception of poetry emphasises dreams, fantasy, love, imagination, desire, sex, chance, the sublime, absurdity and play because these are aspects of the human experience that have been ejected from modern life. They have no place in the world of work and, as a result, they have no place in the construction of a self based on the model of the Cartesian subject. The initial importance of Freud to Surrealism is that his theory of the unconscious, at least as far as they understand it, seems to provide evidence for the argument that the modern ontology of subjectivity is a false one. There exists a form of subjectivity that precedes, and subsists beneath, the identification of the self with Reason. If only this unconscious aspect of the self could make itself felt consciously, the Cartesian subject would be overturned.⁵¹ Surrealist poetry is therefore a historical effort to 're-enchant' human experience through the revelation of these repressed aspects of the self and an attempt to reincorporate them into life. Life, a 'real' unified life, necessarily only exists, for the Surrealists, beyond work. It is for this reason that the Surrealists cast their scorn upon labour and those who 'consent' to it. The starting point of the Surrealist revolution is to recognise that work is in itself already a repugnant condi-

tion and to revolt against it. The Surrealist critique of labour is, as such, quite different from, and in some ways superior to, the one that animates the Anarchists and Marxists of the period. The Surrealists do accept the critique of work as a critique of bourgeois exploitation, particularly after their rapprochement with Marxism, but the argument itself is not 'Surrealist'. Rather, the specifically 'Surrealist' critique touches upon aspects of the ontology of labour itself by rejecting the empty quality of the subject form that was founded upon it.

BRETON'S WAR ON WORK

Breton, of all the Surrealists, is arguably the one to have most fully developed the themes described above. Perhaps some of the most striking examples of the Surrealist critique of work are found in his novel *Nadja* (1928). The book ostensibly concerns the brief relationship that Breton undertakes with a young woman who he encounters during one of his walks through Paris. Breton hopes that an account of his peregrinations in the city will send some of his readers 'rushing into the streets' having grasped the 'inadequacy' of 'any action that requires a continuous application and which can be premeditated'.⁵² These words lead Breton in a brief diatribe against the work ethic in anticipation of objections to such a proposal:

And after all this, let no one speak to me of work—I mean the moral value of work. I am forced to accept the notion of work as a material necessity, and, in this regard, I strongly favour its better, that is fairer, division. That life's sinister obligations impose it upon me, so be it, but that I should be asked to believe in it, to revere my own or that of others, never. I prefer, once again, walking by night to believing myself a man who walks by daylight. There is no use to being alive while one is working. The event from which each of us is entitled to expect the revelation of his own life's meaning—that event which I may not have, but on whose path, I seek myself—is *not earned by work*.⁵³

Breton accepts the notion that labour is a material necessity.⁵⁴ However, he seems to be referring here to the rather broad, and meaningless, definition of labour as the fact that people have to feed, clothe and shelter themselves. We also see that Breton criticises the famous capitalist 'division of labour' in the name of equality. He rejects, however, the idea that work, of any kind, should ever be valorised. Work is nothing other than a 'sinister obli-

gation'. It is an imposition. Moreover, he opposes the notion that labour can constitute a source of essential meaning for the individual. That meaning can be found, but it is not something that can be discovered through work, only beyond it. Breton even suggests that one is not truly alive while one is working: 'There is no use to being alive while one is working' [*Rien ne sert d'être vivant, le temps qu'on travail*]. With these lines, Breton anticipates Debord's later identification of labour with death, which is itself a reversal of Marx's identification of labour with life. The point of the passage is to suggest that the work ethic does not permit human beings access to those events that put them in touch with the true, re-enchanted, self.

It is at this point, immediately after his critique of work, that Breton introduces the figure of Nadja. She, like Breton, lives a life of relative autonomy from 'work'. It is implied that she maintains herself, at least in part, through prostitution.⁵⁵ The poet and the prostitute share, in a certain sense, an unconventional existence on the margins of the world of work. They require money, of course, but they are 'unproductive' from the perspective of capital and generally have no direct experience of the privileged sites of labour, that is, the factory and the office. Nevertheless, it is the valorisation of labour that becomes the first point of contention between Nadja and Breton in the novel. Nadja tells Breton that she sometimes likes to take the second-class metro cabin to look at the commuters. Nadja explains that she enjoys reading the expressions of people and guessing what they are thinking about. The fact that commuters are an object of curiosity and fascination for Nadja highlights that she lives at a remove from the world of work. However, when Nadja describes the commuters as 'good people' [*brave gens*], Breton interjects angrily:

People cannot be interesting insofar as they endure their work [...]. I hate, with all my strength, this enslavement that people hold up to me as being so valuable. I pity the man who is condemned to it, who cannot generally escape it, but it is not the burden of his labour that disposes me in his favour, it is—it can only be—the vigour of his protest against it. I know that at a factory furnace, or in front of one of those inexorable machines which all day long [...] impose the repetition of the same gesture, [...] one can still feel free: but it is not the martyrdom one undergoes which creates this freedom. It is [...] a perpetual unfettering [...] But it is also [...] the relatively long but marvellous series of steps which man may make unfettered. Do you suppose these people capable of taking such steps? Have they even the time for them? Have they the heart? Good people, you said, yes, good people like those who get themselves killed in wars, isn't that what you mean? Enough talk of heroes: a lot of unhappy men and a few poor imbeciles.⁵⁶

Breton focuses his critique of labour on the subject that has 'consented to work'. He has no time for any discourse that presents those who willingly submit themselves to the yoke of labour, who have internalised its discipline, as 'good' or 'brave' exemplars of humanity. On the contrary, Breton rarely expresses so much ire in his oeuvre as on the subject of the voluntary servitude of the 'worker' (be he or she a member of the bourgeoisie or the working class). The source of his disgust is tied, as we can see in this passage, to his experience of the horrors of the war. He believes that the subject that submits to labour is the same subject that pointlessly went to die for his country on the plains of the Somme. The link between the mindset of mass mobilisation and mass production is clear in his mind. He does not believe in the heroism of war, nor does he believe in the heroism of labour. These martyrs to labour and nation are no more than 'unhappy men' and 'imbeciles'. Breton is not even sympathetic to the empirical burden that these people suffer under. He reserves his admiration only for those who revolt against the imposition of labour. There is no freedom in work. Freedom can only exist in the revolt against it. The subject that rejects labour with all his being unfetters himself, perpetually, and takes the steps that make him truly human. Breton doubts that the majority of those that Nadja describes as 'good people' are capable of such revolt. Nadja herself, who does not submit to the labour regime and lives an unconventional life, could ironically be said to represent for Breton a person in revolt. Perhaps what most riles Breton is the fact that, in her valorisation of the work ethic, Nadja contradicts the symbolic meaning he has projected onto her.

Breton treats similar themes in an article entitled 'The Last Strike' (1925) that appears in the second issue of *The Surrealist Revolution*. He criticises, in a manner that echoes Paul Lafargue, the way in which the working class has adopted and internalised the labour form as a positive source of self-identity:

It is without a doubt on the subject of work that the modern consciousness, in the collective sense of the word, manifests its most stupid assumptions. So, workers, rightly incensed at the mediocre existence left to them, affirm their right to live generally on the basis of the very principle of their enslavement. Here and there they struggle and consent, in the name of individual sacrifice, to arrive at a meagre attenuation of their suffering. Truthfully, it is, in my opinion, nowhere near enough. [...] All too willingly, they take pride in their capacity to work. [...] As paradoxical as it might seem, they devote

themselves to the idea of work in a quasi-religious fashion. It seems that [...] they feel the need, like everyone else, to demonstrate the extent of their selflessness. It is even the case that the greatest authority is given to those who bend to the harshest labour. Are not the voices that carry the most authority in the leagues those of Construction, Metalwork and Mining? All of them proclaim the sacredness of work and tend to exalt it all the more if the work is material.⁵⁷

Breton, once again, demonstrates here that the Surrealist critique of work is aimed primarily at the subject form of the worker. Breton recognises that work is a form of exploitation and class domination, but these are essentially second-order observations. His real target is the subject that ‘consents’ to work. Breton is concerned with pointing out the absurdity of oppressed subjects who turn the ‘principle of their enslavement’ into a positive source of individual and collective identity. A life devoted to labour is nothing more than a ‘mediocre existence’. However, the worker does not set himself in revolt against labour but turns the very concept into a veritable cult. He takes pride in working hard and, instead of a revolution that would suppress it, he seeks only measures that would make it more palatable. Moreover, Breton points out the bizarre fact that, within the workers’ movement, the more empirically ‘concrete’ and the more physically demanding the labour, the more workers fetishise it. Those workers who engage in these forms of labour actually carry greater political authority in discussions than those who do not. The Cartesian subject form is, as such, not only characteristic of the bourgeoisie. Breton, on the contrary, demonstrates that it is essential also to understanding the worker that ‘consents’ to labour and incorporates it positively into his or her own identity.

Work, as a general theme, also occasionally rears its head in Breton’s poetical works. In *Soluble Fish* (1924), for example, Breton develops a satire of Taylorism: ‘I have endeavoured to encourage the division of labour in the factories by every means, so that, today, in order to make a nail file, for example, it is necessary for several teams of workers to labour day and night, some flat on their bellies, others on a ladder.’⁵⁸ In another, earlier, prose poem, ‘Factory’ (1919), Breton gives us the bizarre statement: ‘workplace accidents, nothing will contradict me, are more beautiful than marriages of convenience.’⁵⁹ The theme of work equally appears occasionally in the poetry of other French Surrealists, such as André Masson’s ‘The Tyranny of Time’, where he states: ‘What are the pulsations

of time to me (which one should not confuse with the beating of the heart), the factory clock and the slit throat.⁶⁰ The logic of abstract time, the time of labour, appears here as a form of violence. Masson goes on to describe abstract time as a 'crucifix', an instrument of torture, that renders men into 'cogs'.⁶¹

The Surrealist critique of work would also find poetic expression across the border in Belgium. It was, above all, Louis Scutenaire, a member of the Surrealist group in Hainaut (Belgium's industrial 'Black Country'), who would provide the movement with many of its most pithy anti-work maxims in his collection of poetry *My Inscriptions* (1943–1980). Scutenaire, who grew up in a working-class town dominated by porphyry quarries, notes that, passing by a funeral, the workers had the habit of simply asking 'what hole' (did he fall into)?⁶² He plays on the French homonym *carrière* to warn his readers: 'Do not fall into a profession/quarry.'⁶³ Scutenaire was also, like Breton, very simple in his assessment of those who consent to work, 'the worker is a masochist', and, rather than criticise the bourgeoisie for not working, he points out that it is one of the absurdities of capitalism that it is a 'society where even the rich work'.⁶⁴ Scutenaire himself claimed: 'I hate work so much that I could never ask someone else to do it for me.'⁶⁵ Breton, for his part, was fond of the anecdote of the poet Saint-Pol-Roux who, when he went to bed at night to dream, used to hang up a sign on his door that read 'The poet is working.'⁶⁶ Scutenaire, on the other hand, points out to the rest of us that 'you sleep for your boss'.⁶⁷ However, perhaps his most insightful observation is that 'unemployment is only unpleasant because it is not universal'.⁶⁸

DADA, DUCHAMP AND LAZINESS

The Surrealist critique of work did not emerge all at once, fully formed, but arose out of and accompanied that of the Dadaist avant-garde. Breton himself was one of the first in France to give voice to the Dadaist opposition to labour in the proto-Surrealist journal *Littérature* in 1920: 'Dada devotes itself to nothing, neither to love nor to work. It is unacceptable for a man to leave a trace of his passage upon the earth.'⁶⁹ No statement could be further from the Cartesian valorisation of *homo faber*! However, the French Dadaist who would most fully develop the stance of laziness as an oppositional gesture in both form and content is undoubtedly Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968). Duchamp is perhaps the greatest admirer in history of Lafargue's *The Right to Laziness*, which he first read in 1917.⁷⁰

Maurizio Lazzarato, who explores the theme at some length, reads the entirety of Duchamp's life and work primarily through the standpoint of a 'refusal of work'.⁷¹ Duchamp, Lazzarato demonstrates, explicitly invites such a reading by way of a number of public statements. He states, with reference to Lafargue, '[i]t seems to me still today to be very worthwhile to challenge the forced labour to which every new born is subjected.'⁷² Elsewhere, Duchamp proves even more forthright: 'It is shameful that we are still obliged to work simply to live, [...] to be forced to work in order to exist, that, that is an abomination.'⁷³ Duchamp, moreover, fundamentally rejects the argument that work is necessary due to scarcity: 'God knows that there is enough food on Earth for everyone to be able to eat without having to work. [...] And don't ask me who will make the bread, or what have you, because in general there is enough vitality in man to stop him from staying lazy.'⁷⁴ Duchamp also proposes opening a 'Hospice for the very lazy' where work would be banned, but, nevertheless, doubted that there would be as many residents as one might think because 'it is not actually very easy to be truly lazy and do nothing'.⁷⁵

Lazzarato argues that Duchamp turns the refusal of work, in the form of a stance of laziness, into the veritable basis of his (anti-)art. His plastic artistic production, for example, in the form of the 'readymade' is an explicitly 'lazy' approach to creation that, in opposition to the highly developed skills of the academic artist and craftsman, requires only, for example, the idea of signing a urinal and putting it on display in art gallery. The mass-produced commodity is already there and ready to be appropriated through a minimal amount of effort (even if, conceptually speaking, it is an inspired practical joke). Duchamp, that is to say, is the creator of a full-blown aesthetic of laziness. He is not in the least bit interested in the idea of the artist as a skilled practitioner in the manipulation of matter. He even goes as far as to reject the very notion of the creative powers of the artist: 'I am afraid of the word "creation". In the social sense, of the word, creation is very nice, but deep down, I do not believe in the creative function of the artist.'⁷⁶ Duchamp was able to live his critique of labour in practice thanks to independent means that allowed him to 'work' only two hours a day. One of his most brilliant satires of the logic of labour comes in the form of a proposal for a '[t]ransformer designed to use small amounts of wasted energy', including, laughter, streams of urine, falling tears, the growth of finger and toe nails and so on.⁷⁷ It is a 'modest proposal' that perfectly encapsulates the reduction of human being to an 'undifferentiated expenditure of human energy'.

Both Duchamp and the Surrealists, however, often make the mistake of identifying labour as such with any kind of skilled, premeditated or strenuous activity. The fact that, in capitalism, abstract labour takes hold of and transforms the social meaning of skill, creativity and concerted effort—putting them to the service of the valorisation of value—leads many artists to conclude, erroneously, that these aspects of human experience are indistinguishable from ‘work’ in all times and in all places. Ironically, this is to adopt, albeit in a negative sense, the perspective of abstract labour itself, which makes false claims to universality. Perhaps, in the context of capitalism, the stance of pure idleness, of leaving no trace upon the earth, of deskilling oneself, might constitute a critical-poetical position, but it would be just as absurd as a universal end-in-itself as abstract effort for its own sake. We might, moreover, choose to agree with William Morris that the importance of skill, practical knowledge and an ability to do things for oneself seems to be more characteristic of pre-modern societies than capitalism, which has largely made humanity almost completely reliant on its modes of mediation in order to survive. Nevertheless, and theoretical niceties aside, there can be little doubt that Duchamp remains unsurpassed as a satirist of the modern vision of mankind as *homo faber*.

POETRY MUST BE MADE BY ALL

Perhaps the most decidedly innovative critique produced by the avant-garde in France at this time comes from the Dadaist-cum-Surrealist Tristan Tzara (1896–1963). In an ‘Essay on the Situation of Poetry’, first published in 1931 in *Surrealism at the Service of the Revolution*, Tzara anticipates many aspects of the critique of work that would become central to the Situationist avant-garde in the post-war period:

Just as labour in a socialised society no longer represents what it does to us today, just as the proletariat, no longer exploited, loses the meaning that we give to it, can we predict that poetry, which will throw off even its name in its flight towards its historical becoming, will mature into an activity of the collective mind (like dreaming), [...] and that, in this form, Lautréamont’s formula that ‘poetry must be made by all’ will become a reality?⁷⁸

Tzara draws an analogy here between the transformation of the category of work and his vision for the future development of poetry in a communist society. Neither form as we currently understand them ultimately

persists once class society has been overcome. The very distinction between labour and poetry, between necessary and playful creation, loses its meaning in the coming into being of a collective *poiesis* with its own rules and laws. The reference to Lautréamont is also significant as his maxim that ‘poetry must be made by all, not by one’ was central to the Surrealist and Situationist projects. Poetry, in other words, should not be the preserve of artists alone, that is, of a select few who have been awarded the role within the capitalist division of labour. Rather, the destiny of poetry is to become integrated into the totality of life. It is the re-enchantment of lived experience, the overcoming of the distinction between work and play, labour and art, that is at stake.

Most surprising of all, however, is that Tzara, in this 1931 article, essentially foreshadows the central argument that Debord, as we shall see in the following chapter, would put forward, more than three decades later, in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967):

‘The right to laziness’, Lafargue states, ‘is sacred’. Laziness, however, is a part of the struggle to overturn social values, as, from the moment it becomes a real conquest of the Revolution, it ceases to exist as such. What will it consist of when productive labour has been reduced to a small number of hours? What form will leisure take in order to prevent it from creating new needs that would, in turn, quantitatively increase the number of hours devoted to labour to the detriment of leisure itself. How will we prevent productive labour from resembling what we are used to calling laziness and leisure from virtually becoming labour?⁷⁹

Tzara and Debord do, of course, diverge in many respects. Tzara, however, does highlight here a problem that would be key for Debord: the perpetual extension of the amount of time that society devotes to labour through the extension of the consumer market into the realm of leisure. Tzara, that is to say, points out that the reduction of ‘productive’—that is, necessary—labour through technological development, or ‘Revolution’, means nothing if the result is that the ‘free time’ that is won is compensated for by the commodification of leisure. The fact that Tzara makes such an argument in the 1930s when it was not until the post-war period that the logic of mass consumerism would come into its own is all the more surprising.

It should also be noted that the Surrealists did not entirely ignore the question of the gendered ‘division of labour’. The French Surrealist

Georges Sadoul, for example, in another article published in 1931, provides a brilliantly caustic critique of ideologies that seek to keep women trapped in the domestic sphere. Here he sarcastically pretends to argue in favour of such arguments as a solution to the unemployment crisis instigated by the Great Depression:

Millions of women work. Let's follow the orders of our Holy Father the Pope (*encyclique Casti Connubii*): Go home, women! The workshop corrupts and debases you. God, meanwhile, created you for noble toil such as: peeling carrots, emptying chamber pots and changing nappies. Home with you then, serpent, let the husband work and live off his salary. It does not matter that his salary is hardly enough to feed you, make children anyway; France needs them. But the *Intransigent* claims that it would be impossible to remove women from industry. They do the same work as men but for half the pay. Replacing them would make the crisis even worse.⁸⁰

The Surrealist critique of work, we can see here, does occasionally extend to a critique of the position of women and domestic labour in society. Ideally, women too would revolt against labour, housework and the motherhood that is promoted, in a utilitarian fashion, to produce soldiers for the next war. Elsewhere in the article, Sadoul foresees the 'destruction of the unemployed by the most modern means possible', another world war, as a realistic possibility: 'What would you say to a new war? There will be "work and well-being for all".'⁸¹ Sadly, he was to be proved correct.

MARXISM AND THE PCF

Surrealism, as we have seen, rests upon the desire for a fundamental rupture with the rationalist, positivistic and empiricist approach to work and society. It makes it incredibly surprising therefore that so many Surrealists would ultimately give their support to the Communist Party. The Party was defined, at least at the upper echelons of power, precisely by a vulgar Marxist metaphysics that embodied all of the values that the Surrealists claimed to hate. The Party was above all pro-work. Work was the primary source of working-class identity, its pride and its mission. The Communist Party took as its most iconic symbols the tools of the most apparently 'concrete', and harshest, forms of work: the hammer and the sickle. It saw in work a transhistorical and natural necessity that provided the material basis for all cultural values and served as the basis of human expression.

Moreover, and by extension, the orthodox Marxist conception of the ideal man—rational, hard-working, self-sacrificing—could not have been more obviously Cartesian in character. Although it is true that in its early days the PCF was a more liberal institution—and for a long time continued to *tolerate* Hegelian Marxists such as Henri Lefebvre who concerned themselves with the problem of alienation—the Surrealists actually joined the Party at precisely the moment when it was undergoing its period of Stalinisation. The rapprochement of Surrealism and Marxism therefore requires some explanation. How was it that a movement that proclaimed a ‘war on work’ came to support the ‘Republic of Labour’?

Surrealism, in its earliest formation, was not primarily concerned with political engagement. When it did come to politics, as we saw above, the Surrealists were originally attracted to Anarchist Individualism and Illegalism. The interest in Anarchism, however, was perhaps more artistic and abstract in character than rooted in any serious engagement with Anarchist theory. The Bonnot Gang, for example, was important as an example of revolt, which was, in itself, already an inspiration. Marxist revolution, on the other hand, initially stirred little interest. Aragon, who would go on to be one of the most ardent supporters of the Party, famously dismissed the Russian Revolution of 1917 in the journal *Littérature* as no more than a ‘ministerial crisis’. The Surrealist stance changed, however, once more information about events in Russia began to become available. The Russian Revolution appeared to them to have created a blank slate, a new kind of society, through a total revolt against the established bourgeois order. Moreover, the Surrealists were motivated in large part by opposition to the war and French nationalism. Lenin, who argued in favour of ‘revolutionary defeatism’, that is to say, a complete rejection of the war effort, therefore earned a great deal of admiration from the Surrealists. The Surrealists, like almost everyone outside of Russia at that time, had little knowledge of the Bolsheviks’ violent suppression of the left opposition and the wresting of power away from the soviets.

Breton was particularly moved upon reading Trotsky’s *Lenin*, first published in French in 1925, which he reviewed in *The Surrealist Revolution*. Breton, quite uncharacteristically, seems to put his Surrealist anti-work ethics aside in the text. He claims, for example, that he does not agree with those among his friends who criticise the USSR on the basis of some principle, ‘even one that seems so legitimate, such as the rejection of work’.⁸² His reasons, such as they are, consist in the assertion that the Bolshevik Revolution represents the ‘most marvellous substitution of one world for

another' regardless of whether it is 'good or mediocre' or 'defendable or not from a moral point of view'.⁸³ Breton defends the Bolshevik Revolution, in other words, mainly due to its form rather than its content. It represents a great revolt that appears, at least in its most superficial properties, to be the 'greatest social overturning' that the world has ever seen.⁸⁴ Breton is not truly interested in the ideological content of Bolshevism, rather, as with the Bonnot Gang, it seems poetic to him as a revolt, pure and simple. He convinces himself, as a result, that supporting the Russian Revolution, despite its positivism, scientism and deification of labour, does not contradict the Surrealist project of total refusal. Nevertheless, the fact that he feels the need to defend himself, and specifically on the subject of work, demonstrates he is at least aware of the contradiction. *Lenin* seems to mark a turning point for Breton, at least conceptually, in allowing him to imagine a merger of Marxist and Surrealist notions of revolutionary transformation.

The rapprochement of Surrealism and Marxism seems to have come about in large part due to the French government's intervention in the Rif War (1925–1926) against Berber tribes in Morocco. The Surrealists, who remained committed pacifists, wrote a joint declaration of opposition to the war, 'Revolution, now and always!', with members of the Marxist journal *Clarté*. The Clartéists, who were at that time still members of the PCF, played the role of inducting the Parisian Surrealists into the theories of Dialectical Materialism. Articles by both groups began to appear in each other's journals and the idea of uniting the two was floated. The problem, however, was that the PCF, at that very moment, was undergoing its period of Stalinisation. The Clartéists rejected Stalinism and took sides with Trotsky. As a result, the group was excluded from the Party. Breton, however, was committed to a rapprochement with the PCF and the exclusion of the Clartéists made any possible merger with *The Surrealist Revolution* impossible. Breton and four other Surrealists finally joined the Party in 1927. Nevertheless, problems arose almost immediately. Breton was not particularly enthused, as an artist, to be told that he was expected to make a report on a gasworks. As we saw above, the communist workers of the cell were not necessarily pleased by his presence either. Breton was, moreover, constantly brought before panels of Party bureaucrats, in the manner of a police interrogation, and made to explain the contents of *The Surrealist Revolution*, in particular, its anti-work positions. Although, as in the case of Tzara and Sadoul, the merger of Surrealism and Marxism could produce interesting results, much of the 'Marxist' literature produced by

the Surrealists feels more like a profession of faith than the poetry they had originally aimed at. Aragon, of course, took the transference to a paroxysm by repudiating Surrealism and writing a poem to Stalin's secret police! The Surrealists, it must be said, were always far more radical when they were being Surrealists, than when they were being Marxists.

There are arguably two main reasons that explain why, despite the obvious contradictions, the Surrealists ultimately joined the Communist Party. First, as we saw above, Breton initially saw in the Bolshevik Revolution a great revolt and an overturning of the existing order. They saw in the notion of a proletarian revolution a potential agent for radical social change that might provide the material basis for a Surrealist revolution. The Surrealists, as such, accepted the Party, which claimed to represent the proletariat, as the 'subject of history' that would enact this social transformation. Moreover, the Surrealist rapprochement with Marxism and the PCF went hand in hand with a more or less explicit abdication of intellectual responsibility. The group, while recognising the need for social change, simply left the issue of political economy and the organisation of the revolution up to the Party. Breton makes the point quite explicitly in an article from 1927: 'Purely economic debates, discussions that require a profound understanding of political methodology, or also some experience of union life, these things do interest us, but we are not at all prepared for them, unless it is to recognise formally their importance and their absolute revolutionary necessity.'⁸⁵ As we will see in the following chapter, these positions separate the Surrealists dramatically from the Situationist avant-garde. The Situationists held that it was a basic error to identify the subject of history with the Party and not the proletariat itself. Moreover, unlike the Surrealists, the Situationist International would develop aspects of the artistic critique and the critique of political economy as part of a continuum.

Secondly, because they saw the Communist Party as the 'revolutionary party', the Surrealists felt that it was necessary to push for the official recognition of Surrealism and the tradition of modern art as the true 'revolutionary' art.⁸⁶ It was, after all, a central aspect of Surrealist aesthetics that art should oppose empiricist realism, utilitarianism and didacticism. It was the role of radical art always to revolutionise form, to develop new behaviours and oppositional values. The alternative model was, in inter-war France, that of Proletarian Literature, represented by such writers as Henri Barbusse. Proletarian Literature asserted its right to the throne of 'revolutionary' art on the basis that its writers were themselves members of the

working class who wrote about working-class life. The aim was to arrive at an 'authentic' content that was, in formal terms, couched in an objective, realist style. Zola, in particular his novel *Germinal* (1885), served as a primary point of stylistic inspiration. Much of the Surrealist activity in the Party therefore turned around the debate between modern and proletarian art. Breton felt that art should be free of any external control so that it can freely develop on its own terms (having for so long existed under the rule of religion, the state and the academy). Proletarian Literature, on the other hand, suggested that the politico-artistic value of a work of art rested in the subjective class position, the misery and exploitation, of the worker. A proletarian revolution required proletarian revolutionary artists. Ironically, neither position, in ideal form, entirely won out as, in the USSR, workers were certainly not allowed to be authentic to their experience. The Stalinist official cultural policy of Socialist Realism did, however, have more in common with the formal concerns of Proletarian Literature. We could conclude that Surrealism's rapprochement with the PCF can be understood as a miscalculation that resulted from its attachment to the specialised role of the artist. Breton was finally excluded from the Party, after years of uneasy relations, in 1933.⁸⁷

The Surrealist critique of work is in many respects one of the most innovative in French thought. Its originality lies in its implicit understanding of the link between the oppressive character of labour and the emptiness of the Cartesian subject. Surrealism does not simply criticise work in a rhetorical fashion. Rather, its philosophy is fundamentally opposed to the mindset that it produces. The Surrealists seek to overcome the vision of mankind as *homo faber*, a being that identifies only with thought and that treats the external world as so much undifferentiated material for its own realisation. Instead, they wish to re-enchant the world by reincorporating all those aspects of the self that are 'dissociated', repressed, in the formation of the modern psyche that devotes its life, such as it is, purely to the regime of work. The Surrealists recognise that 'real life' begins only beyond and in revolt against labour. Surrealism at its most insightful, and in contradiction to the model of *homo faber*, recognises the 'rights' of the object or the exterior world. Its desire to overcome the very distinction between subject and object speaks to a perspective that wishes to establish a new kind of relationship between the self and nature that is based on reciprocity and not domination. The Surrealists, moreover, were not afraid of aiming their critique squarely at the worker, or those who 'consent to work', and the deification of labour that characterised so much of the

workers' movement. The alliance with the PCF was a mistake, but ultimately Breton could not relinquish his fundamental hatred of work and critique of positivism. It is possible that the Surrealists could have developed a critique of capitalism that united the artistic critique and the critique of political economy. We see an inkling of such a critique in the writing of Tzara, though he never developed these ideas much further. Nevertheless, it was to be the Situationists, and not the Surrealists, who would realise the critical potential of the artistic avant-garde.

NOTES

1. *La Révolution surréaliste*, July 1925, cover.
2. André Breton, *Œuvres*, vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 'Sur la mort de René Crevel' (1935), p. 554.
3. Breton, *Œuvres*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 1541.
4. Ehrenburg cited in Helena Lewis, *Dada Turns Red: The Politics of Surrealism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990) p. 122.
5. Lewis, *Dada*, p. 121. The letter in question was printed on p. 43 of the fifth issue of *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*, May 1933.
6. André Breton, *Œuvres*, vol. 2, 'Le Dialogue en 1934' (1934), p. 535.
7. Lewis, *Dada*, p. 23.
8. Breton, *Œuvres I*, 'L'Affaire Barrès' (1921), pp. 429–430.
9. Jacques Rigaut, 'Jacques Rigaut', *La Révolution surréaliste*, 12 (1929), p. 56.
10. Louis Aragon, 'Fragments d'une conférence', *La Révolution Surréaliste*, 4 (1925), p. 24.
11. Lewis, *Dada*, p. 40.
12. Marguerite Bonnet in Breton, *Œuvres*, vol. 1, p. 1541.
13. Carole Reynaud-Paligot, *Parcours politique des surréalistes: 1919-1969* (Paris: CNRS, 1995), pp. 215–217, 218–221.
14. Breton, *Œuvres II*, 'Du temps que les surréalistes avaient raison' (1935), p. 460. Lafargue was also the first port of call when it came to defining work in the *Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme* (1938), *ibid.*, pp. 848–849.
15. For further reading on the relationship between Romanticism and the critique of capitalism, see Michael Löwy, *Morning Star: Surrealism, Marxism, Situationism, Utopia* (Austin, TX: Texas University Press, 2009) and, with Robert Sayre, trans. Catherine Porter, *Romanticism Against the Tide* (London: Duke University Press, 2001). See also, Anselm Jappe, 'Grandeur et limites du romantisme révolutionnaire', *Revue des Livres*, 2, Nov–Dec 2011, pp. 32–37.
16. This is why we can hardly speak of 'art' at all, at least in this modern sense, when referring to pre-modern societies.

17. See Jappe, *Writing on the Wall*, pp. 141–142.
18. Those who criticise Bohemia from the left point out that it usually represents a temporary stage. Many artists pass through Bohemia only to be celebrated in later life and incorporated into bourgeois society.
19. Breton, *Œuvres*, vol. 1, ‘Manifeste du surréalisme’ (1924), p. 329.
20. Surrealists, ‘Permettez!’ (1927), cited in Lewis, *Dada*, p. 71.
21. André Breton, ‘Qu’est-ce que le surréalisme?’, *Œuvres*, vol. 2, p. 227.
22. *Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme* (1938), ‘Travail’, *Œuvres II*, pp. 848–849. From a letter to George Izambard Charleville, 13/5/1871, trans. Wyatt Mason, *Rimbaud Complete*, vol. 1 (New York: Modern Library, 2003), p. 365.
23. Martin Sorrell, ‘Introduction’ in Arthur Rimbaud, *Collected Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. xvi.
24. *Ibid.*
25. Ross, *Social Space*, pp. 50–59.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
28. We could also add that Rimbaud shares with Lafargue and Fourier the sense that the violent imposition of the modern labour regime is one of the most oppressive features of European colonisation. In his poem ‘Bad Blood’, he puts forward a quasi-apocalyptic image of white men, the first empirical group to be given the status of NCOs of capital, imposing labour on an indigenous non-white population: ‘The whites are landing. The cannon! We will have to submit to baptism, get dressed, and work’ (cited in *ibid.*, p. 67).
29. For a more detailed discussion, see Richard Parry, *The Bonnot Gang: The Story of the French Illegalists* (London: Rebel Press, 1987), pp. 15–19.
30. *Encyclopédie anarchiste* (Paris: Editions Anarchistes, 1934), vol. 4, pp. 2784, 2792.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 2784.
32. *Ibid.*
33. Marius Jacob, trans. Mitch Abidor, ‘Why I Was a Burglar’ (1905), *Marxists.org* (2005).
34. Alphonse Bourlard (1903–1969), aka Constant Malva, a Borin miner and writer closely associated with the Surrealists in Hainaut, records how his maternal grandfather, also a miner, preferred a life of theft to work: ‘Work horrified him. Perhaps he would have submitted to it more gracefully if he gained the full profits! But to enrich others, he said, “I’m not so stupid ...” To those who accused him of laziness, he responded: “We are not born to work, we are born to live”. “But to live”, they would add, “you need to work.” “How’s that? I see on the contrary that those who do not work live very well and those who do work live very badly.” Constant Malva, *Histoire de ma mère et de mon oncle Fernand* (Paris: Cahiers Bleus, 1932), pp. 26–27.

35. See John Merriman, *Ballad of the Anarchist Bandits: The Crime Spree that Gripped Belle Époque Paris* (New York: Nation Books, 2017).
36. *Littérature*, n. 18, Paris, March 1921, pp. 1–7.
37. Louis Scutenaire, ‘Mes Inscriptions II (1945–1963)’ in Raoul Vaneigem, *Louis Scutenaire* (Paris: Seghers, 1991) p. 114. Édouard Carouy (1883–1913) was a member of the Bonnot Gang. He committed suicide in 1913 after being condemned to life imprisonment.
38. As I noted in the first chapter, labour is always essentially ‘abstract’ in form. Here we are talking about the phenomenon of Taylorism, that is, a different level of social reality where it is possible to talk about empirical forms of abstraction in the sense that the work is experienced, concretely speaking, as being highly rationalised, fragmented and involving very little creative input from the worker.
39. Exactly the same joke is later found in Charlie Chaplin’s classic *Modern Times* (1936). Like Clair, Chaplin satirises the absurdity of Taylorism and the modern factory regime. His little tramp is literally caught up in the machinery of modern capitalism. Like Émile, he is incapable of internalising its discipline and, as a result, constantly earns himself the ire of authorities and sometimes his fellow workers. The similarities between the two films are so striking—particularly in their portrayal of the absurdities of factory work—that they became the subject of a long-running court case over copyright infringement. The Surrealists were greatly enamoured with Chaplin—Philippe Soupault wrote a short biography of his little tramp, *Charlot* (1931)—and, in the grading system referred to above, he receives a 16.09.
40. Ironically, the Surrealists themselves published a critique of the film ‘Un Film commercial’ in 1934 in the fourth issue of *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* (p. 29). The group was, at this point in time, deeply into Communist Party dogma and they, like everyone else, could not ignore the implication that the critique was aimed at the USSR as much as the Western nations. They quote, for example, one review from 1931 by a G. Charensol of *Voilà*, ‘There is no doubt that René Clair wanted to give us a satire of this religion of work that communism, following capitalism, adopts with a candid mystique.’ The Surrealists mock the tongue-in-cheek attitude of the film to factory and prison life and the lack of any revolutionary message. They even imply that the film is ‘counter-revolutionary’. Such an assessment only demonstrates how ideologically blind the group was at this time to anything that contradicted the Party. For a detailed examination of the film’s reception, see François Albera, ‘Le machinisme et la révolution dans *À nous la liberté!* de René Clair vus par trois périodiques de gauche’, *1895. Mille huit cent quatre-vingt-quinze*, March 2014, pp. 109–127.
41. Louis Aragon, ‘Fragments d’une conférence’, *La Révolution Surréaliste*, 4 (1925), p. 24.

42. Breton, *Œuvres*, vol. 1, 'Manifeste du surréalisme' (1924), p. 311.
43. Aragon, 'Fragments', p. 24.
44. Ibid.
45. See Jappe, 'C'est la faute à Descartes', *La Société autophage*, pp. 27–38.
46. Breton, *Œuvres*, vol. 1, 'Manifeste', p. 316.
47. Louis Aragon, 'Au bout du quai, les Arts Décoratifs!', *La Révolution surréaliste*, 5 (1925), p. 26.
48. Breton, *Œuvres*, vol. 2, *Qu'est-ce que le surréalisme?*, p. 258.
49. Ibid., pp. 230–231.
50. It is also why the Surrealists do not highly value practical 'skill' and why, due to the academic context of art at the time, it was mocked. Today in the era of the deeply non-oppositional culture of video games and television, we might argue that learning to paint and to draw well could be a more edifying and critical form of 'laziness'.
51. At the same time, here the Surrealists also fall into the trap of Left Freudianism, which is to imagine that an *a priori* 'good' subject persists beneath the 'carapace' of bourgeois morality; whereas, for Freud, the individual requires culture to overcome its initial narcissism. We see in Surrealism both tendencies, on the one hand, an attempt to arrive at respect for the rights of the other and, on the other, a feeling of omnipotence or the total assertion of desire against all barriers.
52. André Breton, trans. Richard Howard, *Nadja* (New York, Grove Press, 1960), p. 59.
53. Ibid., pp. 59–60. Translation has been changed.
54. This was not a universally shared opinion among the Surrealists. Max Morise (1900–1973), for example, holds to the maxim that 'work is unnecessary'. Max Morise, 'A Propos de l'Exposition Chirico', *La Révolution surréaliste*, 4 (1925), p. 31.
55. Breton, *Nadja*, p. 68. Nadja hints at the reality of her situation when she speaks of how shocked her mother would be if she were to know how she gets by in Paris. Nadja was based on the real-life personage of Léona Delcourt who lived in a similar manner. See Mary Ann Caws, 'Breton, Char, and Modern French Poetry' in ed. Christopher Prendergast, *A History of Modern French Literature: From the 16th Century to the 20th Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), pp. 555–556.
56. Ibid., pp. 68–69. Translation changed.
57. Breton, *Œuvres*, vol. 1, 'La Dernière grève', pp. 890–891.
58. Breton, *Œuvres*, vol. 1, *Poisson soluble* (1924), p. 392.
59. Breton, *Œuvres*, vol. 1, *Les Champs magnétiques* (1919), 'Usine', p. 87.
60. André Masson, 'Tyrannie du temps', *La Révolution surréaliste*, 6 (1926), p. 29.
61. Ibid.

62. Raoul Vaneigem, *Louis Scutenaire*, p. 16.
63. Louis Scutenaire, 'Mes Inscriptions', in *ibid.*, p. 140.
64. *Ibid.*, pp. 137, 107.
65. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
66. Breton, *Œuvres*, vol. 1, 'Manifeste', p. 319.
67. Scutenaire, 'Mes Inscriptions', p. 118.
68. *Ibid.*, p. 161.
69. Breton, *Œuvres*, vol. 1, 'Deux manifestes Dada' (1920), p. 230.
70. Therefore only 34 years after its publication. It is interesting to note that far more time separates us from Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* than Duchamp from *The Right to Laziness*.
71. Maurizio Lazzarato, *Marcel Duchamp et le refus du travail* (Paris: Les Prairies ordinaires, 2014).
72. Duchamp cited in *ibid.*, p. 20.
73. *Ibid.*
74. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
75. *Ibid.*, pp. 20–21.
76. *Ibid.*, p. 29
77. Cited in Breton, *Œuvres*, vol. 2, *Anthologie de l'humour noir*, p. 1117.
78. Tristan Tzara, 'Essai sur la situation de la poésie', *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*, 4 (1931), p. 21.
79. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
80. Georges Sadoul, 'Le Problème du chômage résolu en une demi-heure', *Le Surréalisme au service la révolution*, 3 (1931), p. 34.
81. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
82. Breton, *Œuvres*, vol. 1, 'Léon Trotsky: *Lénine*' (1925), pp. 911–912.
83. *Ibid.*
84. *Ibid.*
85. Breton, *Œuvres*, vol. 1, 'Au Grand jour' (1927), p. 940.
86. For an extensive analysis of this side of the Surrealist rapprochement with the PCF and its battle with Proletarian Literature, see Raynaud-Paligot, *Parcours politique*, *op. cit.*
87. The rupture led to a new Marxist alliance with the left opposition in the form of Trotsky. Breton went to meet Trotsky in Mexico and the two would co-author a manifesto in support of autonomous art: 'Towards a Free Revolutionary Art' (1938). Raoul Vaneigem, in his *A Cavalier History of Surrealism*, trans. Donald-Nicholson Smith (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2000), suggests that the brief alliance would not have taken place if Breton had been aware of the role Trotsky played in the bloody suppression of the Kronstadt Rebellion in 1921. After the war, and after the authoritarian aspect of Trotsky became more widely known, Breton seems to have returned to his initial interest in Anarchism.



Guy Debord, the Situationist International and the Abolition of Alienated Labour

In 1953, on a wall of the Rue de Seine, Paris, Guy Debord wrote his most infamous maxim: 'NEVER WORK'. An opportunistic photographer, who happened to chance upon the piece of graffiti a short time later, snapped a picture of the words which he then sold as a run of tourist postcards under the humoristic title of 'superfluous advice'. When, ten years later, Debord chose to reprint a copy of the image in *Internationale situationniste*, this time with the words 'preliminary programme of the Situationist movement', he received a letter from the publishers of the postcard that included a demand for financial compensation of 300 francs for copyright infringement. Debord replied that not only was he the author of the anonymous graffiti, as a number of witnesses could attest, but he also took deep offence at the dismissive manner in which his message had been presented: 'Given that it is obvious that the great majority of people work; and that the aforesaid work is imposed on the quasi-totality of these workers by a crushing constraint, NEVER WORK can in no way be considered "superfluous advice".'¹ Debord, having been forced to reveal himself, demanded that the publishers either take the postcard out of circulation immediately or, at the very least, reprint it with the very clear message that the author was entirely serious. He never received a reply.

The graffiti became a repeated refrain throughout the life and work of Guy Debord. He would often use copies of the postcard to communicate with new correspondents and it became something of a calling card closely associated with his personal identity.² Debord even wrote to a scholar later

in life that he believed it to be the ‘most beautiful’ of all the works of his youth.³ The beauty of the ‘never work’ graffiti derives from its bold and uncompromising negativity. It is also, like all great works of (anti-)art, a phrase that invites multiple meanings thanks to the generality of the abstraction that it negates: ‘work’. It could be interpreted, quite correctly, as an attack on the work ethic and a call to non-conformity in the here and now. Debord never had a ‘proper job’ and chose to live largely ‘by his wits’ and with the help of friends; though some other members of the Situationist International (SI) did work in the traditional sense.⁴ Equally, as a street-level gesture, it could be understood as a political affirmation of the popular tradition of working-class Parisian resistance to bourgeois exploitation and a life devoted to drudgery. It was certainly not, however, an imprecation to do nothing at all. Debord was a highly active revolutionary who animated arguably the most radical avant-garde revolutionary organisation of the post-war period.⁵ He was also a prolific writer, filmmaker and editor who made genuine innovations in almost every medium he touched.⁶ ‘Never work’ might therefore be read as an attack on the way in which the word ‘work’ is associated above all other forms of activity with human intervention in the world. Debord’s own life attests to the fact that another form of human agency is possible; it is perhaps why he identified so strongly with this specific radical gesture. It is certainly, and as his own letter to the offended publisher attests, an invocation of the refusal of the ‘crushing restraint’ of the wage labour system that can only be overcome through a mass movement of social emancipation.⁷

OVERCOMING ART

Debord made many similarly provocative anti-work gestures in the course of his avant-garde ‘career’. In the summer of 1963, for example, he painted the words ‘abolition of alienated labour’ on a pre-existing work of ‘industrial painting’ by the Italian painter Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio (1902–1964).⁸ Industrial painting was an earlier Situationist attempt at the ‘devalorisation’ of art through employing productive machinery and a rationalised division of artistic labour to reduce the cost of artistic production.⁹ Debord no doubt chose to paint these words on this canvas therefore because he recognised the irony of the fact that such a practice, far from embodying a revolutionary standpoint, merely reproduced the alienating conditions of the modern factory. His *détournement* was as such a conscious act of vandalism, another graffiti of sorts, that was meant as a critique of this cultural

artefact, which anticipated nothing so much as the insipid mass-produced abstract 'art' sold in modern department stores, and of Gallizio himself, who had been excluded from the SI three years earlier. (Gallizio's work was itself originally intended to be a parody of abstract expressionism, so Debord had in fact achieved a negation of the negation.) The canvas, along with four other 'directives' that included the phrases 'supersession of art', 'workers' councils everywhere', 'everyone against the spectacle' and 'realisation of philosophy', was part of an exhibit that was partially destroyed in a bomb attack on the house of the Scandinavian Situationist J. V. Martin in 1965. Debord commented that such violent artistic negation was not yet the suppression and realisation of art that he had in mind.¹⁰

Debord, like André Breton before him, placed the 'artistic' dimension of the problem of work at the forefront of his critical theory. He inherited from Surrealism and the Left Bank youth culture of the 1950s much of the traditional Parisian bohemian and avant-garde critique of work. Debord criticised work as such not only as a form of exploitation, as was the case for mainstream Marxism, but more fundamentally as a qualitatively poor lived experience characterised by instrumental reason, boredom, conformity, meaninglessness and a lack of personal identity with the act of creation. Art, in contrast, represented a mode of creative activity that revealed a qualitatively rich realm of intense, passionate, vital and playful experiences that were largely excluded from the centre of social life in capitalism. The Situationists were also, in this sense, very much followers of Charles Fourier.¹¹ The originality of the SI, as we shall see, however, was to go beyond the simple romantic exaltation of art against work. Debord was deeply critical of the fact that previous generations of avant-gardes had not sufficiently taken the artistic critique of work beyond the world of art and art practice. Art was still a form of alienation itself to the extent that it embodied a separate sphere of social life, the reserve of artists, that, precisely because it represented only a marginalised form of activity, was easily tolerated, and even required as a space of innovation, by capitalist modernity.¹² The artistic critique of work, which, for Debord, was implicitly the most radical core of art history, could only be realised therefore through the suppression of art, an idea that had not been sufficiently theorised by Surrealism. The Situationist call for the 'supersession of art' was as such one and the same as the demand for the 'abolition of alienated labour'. The free creative activity that had previously been the reserve of the

separated artistic sphere should be generalised to the whole of social life through the suppression of wage labour.

Debord proposed that in the place of work *and art* (both understood as forms of alienation), human beings might instead concern themselves with the construction of ‘situations’: a ‘moment of life concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organisation of a unitary ambiance and a game of events’.¹³ In other words, instead of a world organised around the needs of capitalist production, society could use all artistic means available to it to transform life itself into the generalised creation of the kinds of passionate and liberating moments of lived experience that are typical of art and play. Such a model of human being was inspired not only by Surrealism, and the history of art more generally, but also by the ideas of the Dutch anthropologist Johan Huizinga (1872–1945), whose *homo ludens* (1938), literally ‘playing man’, had revealed an alternative aspect of human experience beyond the reductive economism of bourgeois models of human subjectivity. However, where Huizinga saw play as only a small part of human experience, Debord wanted to overcome its limited place in social life through the liquidation of work: ‘Play is felt to be bogus due to its marginal existence in relation to the overwhelming reality of work, but the work of the Situationists is precisely the preparation of the ludic possibilities to come.’¹⁴ The Situationists therefore saw themselves as pioneers of a new kind of social activity that invited a very different conception of a revolutionary society than the one that dominated the contemporary revolutionary left: ‘Actual communism will be the work of art transformed into the totality of everyday life.’¹⁵ Such a new world would also mean the creation of a new kind of human being beyond the capitalist division of artistic labour: ‘The old specialisation of art has finally come to an end. There are no more artists because everyone is an artist. The work of art of the future will be the construction of a passionate life.’¹⁶

Some of the earliest proposals for what such a metamorphosis of social life might look like concerned the suppression of the utilitarian city space, constructed per the diktats of work and consumption, in favour of a ‘unitary urbanism’ that would, through ingenious architectural innovations and new modes of circulation, encourage passionate, playful and even hallucinatory experiences.¹⁷ The French section of the Situationist International, moreover, was in a certain sense experienced as a living model of this alternative mode of existence. Debord represented it as a kind of ‘micro-society of pure consumption’, in which, by implication, it was work, not play, that found itself marginalised.¹⁸ The Situationists in

Paris also practised playfully ‘drifting’ [*dérive*] through the modern urban environment to uncover its oppressive character as well as its ludic possibilities in place of the daily commuter grind of ‘metro-boulot-dodo’.¹⁹ Debord, however, never proposed anything as systematic as Fourier’s vision of Harmony.²⁰ Such scientific utopianism was generally far too static for Debord, who identified much more with the passage of historical time and the traditional avant-garde task of innovation in modes of expression and lived experience.²¹ The ‘constructed situation’ could be understood therefore both as a specific instance of a freely and consciously created playful and passionate moment in life and as a democratically open utopian model of social life beyond labour. It is certainly for this latter reason that the Situationist International chose to take on the term as its moniker and that of its members: ‘Our specific task [is] a qualitative leap in the development of culture and everyday life.’²²

The emphasis that Debord placed upon the playful and qualitative aspects of the ‘situation’ was meant as an implicit critique of the phenomenological position of the subject within the modern labour process. Debord, while still a Situationist, was, from 1960 to 1961, also briefly a member of the group Pouvoir Ouvrier (PO), made up of disillusioned ex-Leninists associated with the journal *Socialism or Barbarism*, to which he anonymously contributed.²³ *Socialism or Barbarism* criticised the way in which, on both sides of the Iron Curtain, workers increasingly experienced the dehumanisation of being reduced to mere mindless drones performing simple actions within a highly rationalised and hierarchical division of labour over which they had no control and where only the technocrats had any view of the ensemble. As Debord put it in a collaborative text with Daniel Blanchard, a member of *Socialism or Barbarism*, ‘Labour tends [...] to be reduced to its pure execution and therefore rendered absurd. To the extent that the technical apparatus pursues its evolution, it is watered down, the work is simplified, its absurdity becomes more profound.’²⁴ Workers were ‘alienated’, or separated, therefore not only from the products, or the full value, of their labour, as in the traditional criticism of wage labour, but also from a key aspect of the concrete labour process itself because, whether in an automobile factory in the USSR or France, they had little to no input due to the hierarchical nature of its organisation. Every conscious aspect of the creative process was managed from above and what was left was nothing but its passive implementation. Raoul Vaneigem, in his seminal 1967 work of Situationist theory *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, evokes how greatly the historical situation of labour had

change in this respect by noting that the pleasure that nineteenth-century artisanal workers could once take in the use of their skill was now completely excluded from the modern factory worker.²⁵ The instrumental reason of the modern labour process, in other words, broke the worker down to a minutely quantified productive function, a ‘living chronometer’,²⁶ as though he were nothing more than a soulless machine.

These phenomenological forms of critique, although they had certainly been anticipated in the 1930s, were in many respects a response to the dramatic changes that French industry and civil society underwent in the immediate post-war period. Communist and Western powers alike were adopting modernising socio-economic policies broadly commensurate with a combination of Fordism and Keynesian state-led investment in public infrastructure. France, in particular, underwent a major period of industrialisation that depopulated much of the traditional countryside and saw more people than ever before falling under the yoke of the assembly line and into newly constructed concrete jungles in the towns and cities. At the same time, where work had, for many, been simply a matter of survival in the pre-war world, workers in post-war Europe, at least in the most ‘productive’ sectors of the world economy, increasingly earned high-enough wages to purchase a new universe of mass-produced commodities—automobiles, white goods, televisions—that had once been luxury items. The boom funded an upward trend in ‘living standards’, as governments and unions were able to provide full employment, reductions in working hours, greater access to higher education and all the other social policies that made up the Welfare State. Nearly the entirety of the left hailed, as it continues to do today, these developments as positive ‘victories’ for the working class, even where it was obvious, such as in the expansion of mass consumer markets, that they existed solely to expand the horizon of capitalist accumulation.²⁷

The Situationists, in contrast, developed a much more radical understanding of the relationship between the new forms of labour and consumption that were emerging. They explicitly condemned, in no uncertain terms, any critique of the phenomenological reality of work that did not touch this deeper level of social reality. Such critiques, from the Situationist perspective, ultimately limited themselves to a simple demand for better working conditions, rather than a critique of the fundamentally alienating character of a society based on the production of commodities:

The death of the commodity naturally means the suppression of *work* and its replacement by a new type of free activity. Without this firm intention, socialist groups like *Socialism or Barbarism* or Pouvoir Ouvrier fell back on a reformism of labour couched in demands for its ‘humanization’. But it is work itself which must be called into question. Far from being a ‘Utopia’, its suppression is the first condition for a break with the market. The everyday division between ‘free time’ and ‘working hours’, those complementary sectors of alienated life, is an expression of the internal contradiction between the use value and exchange value of the commodity. It has become the strongest point of the commodity ideology, the one contradiction which intensifies with the rise of the consumer. To destroy it, no strategy short of the abolition of work will do.²⁸

It is here, in the critique of labour as ‘commodity-producing’ labour, that the Situationists made a crucial step in the development of the radical critique of work. It is an element of the critique of labour that was never really expressed in the preceding history of anti-work discourse. Much of the ‘artistic’ dimension of Situationist critique had already been present, at least in embryo, in the work of André Breton and the Surrealists (and even, much earlier, in William Morris).²⁹ However, with these kinds of deeper ontological criticisms, the SI move towards a categorical Marxian critique of the basic categories that underlie the concrete forms of alienation experienced both in the workplace and in everyday life outside: the ‘totality’, that is, of modern society, which is founded upon (abstract) labour. It is this combination of a more ‘esoteric’ side of Marxian theory with the artistic critique of work that gives Situationist theory and practice much of its novel character. Debord went much further in this respect than any other member of the Situationist International, and this is perhaps the reason his work continues so many decades later to be the focus of so much critical interest.

THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

Debord puts forward his most extensive Marxian analysis of labour in capitalism in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967). In this book Debord describes contemporary capitalism, or the Spectacle, as the concrete manifestation of the ‘abstraction of all particular labour and the general abstraction of production from the whole’.³⁰ Debord appears to be referring here to the fact that in capitalism, each individual moment of living labour only

'counts' as a *quantity* of homogenised social labour and, at the same time, that 'production' itself emerges concretely as a separate sphere of social life cut off from the rest in the form of the 'economy'. Debord explains this abstract side of labour in capitalism as the result of the domination of production by the commodity form, which has through the course of history become the universal category of social mediation.³¹ In pre-modern society the commodity represented only a marginal form that facilitated the exchange of surplus product between communities. In modern societies, however, the commodity has become the centre of all social life such that the accumulation of exchange value on the market in the form of money has turned production into nothing more than a 'process of quantitative development'.³² The commodity form, in other words, privileges the realisation of exchange values over meeting the qualitative needs of the human community because its '*mode of being concrete* is precisely abstraction'.³³ Labour, in capitalism at least, is not, for Debord, therefore primarily a concrete activity that responds to qualitative considerations but rather a process of oppressive social abstraction in which 'human labour is transfigured into commodity-labour, into the *salaried worker*',³⁴ that is in turn transformed into its dead, quantified, form: 'this essential movement of the spectacle, which consists of bringing back into itself everything that existed in human activity in its *fluid state*, in order to possess it in its coagulated state'.³⁵

The mediation of production by the commodity form necessarily assumes a situation in which the producers themselves do not communicate directly with one another about what will be produced and under what conditions. Debord emphasises throughout *The Society of the Spectacle* that the abstract mediation of the commodity form relies upon and enforces this separation of human beings into isolated individuals who only encounter each other, their own activity and its products through the mediation of the commodity. The result is a perverse and contradictory anti-social social synthesis where all authentic human community dissolves: 'With the generalised separation of the worker and of his product, all unitary point of view on the activity performed, all direct personal communication between the producers, is lost.'³⁶ In other words, the commodity form, an abstraction, takes the place of a conscious discussion between the producers as to how to organise social activity. An impersonal, abstract and quantitative social form organises society and not the human beings themselves. Debord recognises that labour, at least wage labour, in its form of abstract commodity-producing labour is as such a

fetishistic social projection specific to capitalist society that forms the basis for a situation of total alienation in which human beings have become the mere 'spectators' of the 'spectacle' of their own social activity. Furthermore, precisely because commodity-producing labour has come to mediate all social life, these relations, the 'crushing restraint' of wage labour, appear to them in reified form as a 'pseudo' or 'second nature' that seems to them to be beyond question.³⁷

Debord criticises labour in capitalism as such as a form of alienating activity where a reversal occurs between the social subject and its object. The producers, the supposed 'doers', are in fact reduced by this system of social domination to nothing more than the objects of economic laws that escape them: 'There where the economic *it* was, the *I* should replace it.'³⁸ It is, at times, the economy, or rather the runaway process of commodity production, itself that emerges as the real social 'subject' behind the tautological movement of this oppressive social reality: '[The spectacle] is nothing other than the economy developing itself for itself.'³⁹ Debord's theory of the Spectacle therefore suggests a social reality in which labour is the basis for a fetishistic process of accumulation where it is the social mediation of abstract economic forms, of exchange value, in material production that is the source of social domination, and alienation, rather than capitalist exploitation alone. Debord suggests, in other words, that labour should be rejected not only because it is boring and exploitative, but because it is a kind of unconscious and automatic servitude in which human beings are subjected to the abstract domination of a self-referential tautological accumulation that has no other goal than its own continued existence. Labour in capitalism cannot be 'humanised' because it will always bear this alienating character: an experience of total alienation from others and one's own activity. The aim of a revolutionary movement would therefore be to suppress the domination of social life by commodity production through the creation of modes of social synthesis that would allow for a fully conscious, directly democratic, discussion between the producers about how to organise social life. Debord's critique of work as such touches a deeper ontological level of capitalist production than the merely phenomenological.

Nevertheless, as significant as these more 'esoteric' insights are, it would be misleading to suggest that Debord already puts forward a fully developed categorical critique of labour or that, even where he does intuit such a critique, he does so in a manner that is without contradiction. Debord seems to have had only a limited, and even largely negative, understanding

of the later works of Marx, such as *Capital* (the *Grundrisse* would not be published in French until the late 1960s), in which the critique of ‘abstract labour’, a term never employed by any member of the SI, is most fully developed. Debord, like most of his generation, was mainly a reader of the ‘young’ Marx—the Marx of *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844), *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) and *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (1844)—who was widely believed to be more of a revolutionary theorist than the later Marx of the critique of political economy. Recent archival research of his reading notes demonstrates that although he certainly read *Capital*, Debord never developed a precise definition of the most important Marxian categories such as abstract labour, fetishism, value and crisis; the commodity form being a major exception.⁴⁰ In *The Society of the Spectacle* Debord even criticises Marx for working on *Capital* in the British Library in the manner of a political economist, which he saw as a significant retreat into a kind of deterministic scientism in the face of the historical defeats of the working class in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁴¹ Debord’s re-elaboration of Marx’s concepts of labour, fetishism, commodity and so on does not, as such, take the form of a precise definition, but remains closer to the concept of alienation found in Marx’s earlier work. Debord grasps something of the spirit of the deeper level of Marx’s critique of labour in *Capital*, but, perhaps in a conscious effort to avoid the kind of economism and theologising that was typical of traditional Marxist readings of the later Marx, never got to grips with the full extent of the categorical critique found therein.

One of the results of this is that Debord, throughout his writing, where he does recognise something of the abstract side of labour in capitalism—its fetishistic quality of being the undifferentiated expenditure of human energy—often confuses it with the empirical forms of abstraction—that is, Taylorism and assembly line mechanisation—that were generalised in the Fordist work environment in the context of the Second Industrial Revolution. Let us consider, for example, this passage from *The Society of the Spectacle*:

[The spectacle is] separated power developing itself for itself, through productive growth by means of the incessant refinement of the division of labour through the parcelling out of gestures, now dominated by the independent movement of machines.⁴²

Debord gives the impression here that the fetishism of the commodity results from the phenomenological division of labour within the modern

labour process, rather than from a social relationship of separation between abstract social ‘subjects’ mediated by abstract labour. It erroneously suggests that the power of the automatic subject derives from measures that increase productivity rather than such development being the result precisely of the separation of humanity into individual producers—businesses or individuals—competing with one another for a share of the total mass of social ‘wealth’.

Debord inherits these problems in large part from Hegelian Marxism through György Lukács, whose *History and Class Consciousness* (1919–1923) was Debord’s main source of inspiration for the critique of commodity fetishism developed in *The Society of the Spectacle*.⁴³ This mode of criticism of work gives the impression that it is only this specific *type* of (concrete) labour, rather than (abstract) labour ‘in general’, that is the historically specific social basis for the fetishistic matrix of abstract domination that makes up capitalist modernity. Debord, in other words, does not consistently identify labour *per se* with capitalism. Equally, like Lukács, this leads Debord to conclude that behind the fetishism of the commodity is in fact still the personal domination and control of an oppressing subject group. It is the division of labour between intellectual, managing, labour that controls and has a view of the whole apparatus and manual labour, which is identified with pure execution, and consumption of the pre-determined results, that appears as the source of the problem of commodity fetishism. Debord, as such, appears to confuse the abstract side of labour with the ‘immaterial labour’ or mental labour that is carried out, and increasingly so, in the highly technical and complex cybernetic systems that were emerging with the Third Industrial Revolution. The Situationists therefore imagine a form of domination that is in some sense ‘abstract’ but still primarily, as in traditional Marxism, ‘personal’. The old class divisions appear as one between the order-givers and the order-takers; a critique that the Situationists would then also apply to the state bureaucracies of the USSR. To this extent, where they confuse the ontological with the phenomenological, the Situationists do not go much further in their critique than the *Socialism or Barbarism* group. This is not to say that what the SI describe is not true at an empirical level, only that a piece of the theoretical puzzle was missing. Debord, in his critique of labour and the Spectacle more generally, was undoubtedly far in advance of his contemporaries in grasping the most fundamental reality of capitalist modernity: the total domination of social life by the incessant, tautological and purposeless valorisation of value regardless of the human and environmental cost.

Debord, in place of abstract labour, primarily thinks of labour in capitalism in terms of the concept of ‘alienated labour’. Labour is ‘alienated’ because exchange value (which Debord does not distinguish from value) has, through the abstract mediation of commodity production, and of wage labour, led to the victory of quantitative accumulation for its own sake over use value in the production process. Labour could also be understood as alienated because it is ‘forced labour’ that takes place under the hierarchical conditions of exploitation based on private property relations. Debord opposes alienated labour to an implicitly non-alienated, or at least not socially, ‘human labour’, a term which is frequently employed throughout *The Society of the Spectacle*, which preserves the supposedly qualitative frame of reference of use value as the positive pole of the labour abstraction. The Situationists reaffirm, that is to say, labour as a rational abstraction to the extent that they continue to imagine labour outside of the context of capitalism as dominated by its ‘concrete’, purposeful, use-value-producing side. Debord is, of course, right from an historical perspective that the sole aim of social ‘production’ in pre-modern societies was not the production of commodities for sale on the market, as is the case in capitalism. However, the category of use value, and with it the transhistorical concept of labour as ‘useful productive activity’, is simply the concrete side of the alienation embodied in abstract labour, the specific way in which the value form takes hold of objects that are not in themselves abstract. Debord as such implicitly preserves an anthropological conception of labour as a positivistic category that ideally responds to basic human need.

Debord maintains the category of ‘human labour’ because, despite the elements of a categorical critique of work we can find in his writing, his critical theory still rests upon an implicit social ontology inherited from the exoteric Marxian tradition. Specifically, Debord largely adopts the concept of the ‘realm of necessity’, which he associates with the concept of an ‘economic base’, that Marx develops in the third volume of *Capital*. The Situationists never use the precise phrase ‘necessary labour’, though Debord does speak of ‘primary labour’. However, the notion that labour arises first and foremost out of a struggle with a fundamentally hostile natural environment is nonetheless the implicit assumption behind the concept of ‘human labour’. Raoul Vaneigem, for example, speaks of the existence of a pre-social ‘primitive’ or ‘natural’ alienation that emerges from ‘nature’s blind domination’ of humanity.⁴⁴ The French Situationist André Frankin even refers to the category of ‘human labour’ explicitly in terms of the ‘struggle against nature’.⁴⁵ Debord then associates labour,

this 'economic base' of necessity, with what he calls the 'cyclical time' of (re)production in which the same moments of life constantly repeat themselves and societies largely maintain the level of development they already have.⁴⁶ The notion of 'cyclical time' also evokes the phenomenological sense of 'dead time', or boredom and drudgery, that characterises medieval 'labour' and modern factory work. 'Human labour', or the 'economic', is, as such, for Debord an implicitly negative realm of experience characterised by a certain social stagnation and a 'natural' lack of 'freedom'. These perspectives lead Debord to reproduce the dubious assertion inherited from bourgeois political economy that '*economic necessity* [...] was the unchanging basis of ancient societies'.⁴⁷

Debord implicitly contrasts the realm of necessity, of 'human labour', with the realm of freedom, which he associates with the non-productive time devoted to 'culture' or 'everyday life', that mankind must win from nature through the development of the labour process. In *The Society of the Spectacle*, for example, Debord explicitly describes social history as the 'production of man by human labour', which he suggests is commensurate with the 'social appropriation of time'.⁴⁸ In other words, through the evolution of the labour process, mankind 'appropriates' an increasing amount of 'free time'—that is to say, the amount of time spent on necessary labour is reduced—which allows people to devote themselves to activities that escape the repetitive nature of 'economic' life. In contrast to the cyclical time of production, the 'free time' of the cultural superstructure is an 'irreversible' and 'historical time' of ever-changing lived experiences and cultural development.⁴⁹ The Situationists even describe such 'free time' as the '*use value* of life'.⁵⁰ Social alienation, for Debord, only begins with the appropriation of the surplus (historical time) of the producers. Debord asserts that in pre-modern societies, which had evolved beyond mere survival, the mode of life for the majority of people still rested in a largely static, non-historical, cyclical time of production.⁵¹ However, the ruling class, through its appropriation of irreversible time in the form of the social surplus product (Debord speaks of 'temporal surplus value' and the 'private ownership of history'),⁵² was able to devote itself to non-economic activities: to make history through war, to engage in palace intrigue and to develop a leisurely disdain for labour.⁵³ Debord associates 'irreversible time' as such with the positive experience that characterises free creative activity such as play, art, leisure and festival, but also with the vitality of the war and politics that characterised the early-modern period.⁵⁴

The bourgeois seizure of the whole of society, however, brings about a dramatic change in the relationship between the realm of necessity and the realm of freedom. Debord argues that where previous ruling classes had used historical time in a manner that left the economy largely untouched, the bourgeoisie, whose power rests upon the rise of commodity production, reinvests its expropriated irreversible time back into the realm of necessity or the economic base.⁵⁵ The bourgeoisie as such turns labour into ‘labour that *transforms historical conditions*’ because, by revolutionising the labour process, it dramatically reduces the amount of time that society traditionally needs to devote to its own reproduction.⁵⁶ It releases, in so doing, a massive amount of ‘temporal surplus value’ or irreversible historical time. The cyclical time of pre-modern production becomes therefore the irreversible historical time of the rapid development of productive forces: ‘The victory of the bourgeoisie is the victory of *profoundly historical time*, because it is the time of economic production that transforms society, permanently and from top to bottom.’⁵⁷ The bourgeoisie is as such the first class to make work, or at least its exploitation, the focus of its ‘culture’, its ‘everyday life’ or ‘use value of life’ because it identifies its own progress with the development of the labour process.⁵⁸

The crucial point for Debord, however, is that by making the economy the centre of historical time, the bourgeoisie has, in the same movement, created the material conditions for the abolition of (necessary) labour as the centre of social life thanks to its revolutionising of the development of productive forces:

Due to the very success of separated production [...], the fundamental experience linked in primitive societies to primary labour is being displaced, at the peak of the system’s development, towards non-work, towards inactivity. This inactivity, however, is in no way liberation from productive activity: it depends upon it, it is the uneasy and admiring submission to the needs and results of production; it is itself a product of its rationality. [...] Thus the current ‘liberation from work’, the increase in leisure activities, is in no way liberation within work, nor liberation from a world created by this work. Nothing of the activity stolen in labour can be rediscovered in submission to its results.⁵⁹

Debord asserts here that capitalism has reached a point where labour, the central ‘value’ of bourgeois ‘culture’, has been so marginalised that, even within this system, the centre of social life has started to shift towards ‘leisure’. However, the increasing focus on leisure activities—shopping,

televisual ‘entertainment’, package holidays and so on—does not represent a movement away from alienated labour but rather a process that reinforces it as the primary category of social mediation. The *real* realm of necessity—‘primary labour’—has in reality been vastly reduced by technology, but, in order to preserve the mediation of social life by commodity production, by alienated labour, an *artificial* realm of necessity, of ‘pseudo-needs’, logically emerges in the form of modern mass consumer society and its ever-expanding ‘service sector’.

It is possible to read *The Society of the Spectacle*, with its insistent theme of the inversion of appearances and essences, therefore as a critique of a society that continues to insist on the ‘necessity’ of work in the name of ‘survival’ despite the fact that any such argument has been made null and void by the development of productive forces: ‘Economic growth liberates societies from the natural pressures that arise from their immediate struggle for survival, but now it is from their liberator that they have not been liberated.’⁶⁰ Debord argues as such that although the problem of ‘survival’ has been ‘without a doubt resolved’, it is a question that is, thanks to the personal domination of a ruling class whose power rests in commodity production, ‘always reposed at a higher level’ in order to preserve the status quo.⁶¹ All of the ‘free energies’ that have been released by the development of productive forces are simply used up, in the West and the East, in more of the same economic life: the production of mass consumer commodities and their consumption. Debord describes the Spectacle as such as the ‘concrete inversion of life’ because, for him, life, which should be characterised by the irreversible time of play and historical transformation that in pre-modern societies was embodied in the realm of freedom beyond production, has instead become a ‘pseudo-cyclical time’ of the consumption of commodities produced by pseudo-necessary labour.⁶² A social state of unconsciousness of these changed historical conditions is achieved not so much through media manipulation but simply through the expansion of commodity production. The Spectacle, as the expression of this commodification of ‘free time’, or everyday life, is as such the permanent material and ideological justification of the work society: ‘The spectacle is the preservation of the unconscious in the practical changes of the conditions of existence.’⁶³ Debord describes it therefore as the ‘pseudo-use of life’, that is to say, the misuse of the free, irreversible, historical time that humanity has won from nature through the development of productive technology.⁶⁴

THE LAST AVANT-GARDE

The Situationists argue that the disconnect between the immense technical powers of capitalism, its highly developed domination of nature and its 'cultural' use of those powers, which had not kept up to date with these changes but simply continued in the same vein in the form of the Spectacle, had created a 'cultural crisis'. Capitalism was in a state of 'decomposition' therefore because its value system, its use of irreversible historical time, is brought into question by the 'appearance of superior means of dominating nature'.⁶⁵ The old argument in favour of labour and hierarchical social forms, such as the state, had always been that they were natural outgrowths of the realm of necessity or the need to survive, but it was becoming increasingly obvious to observers over the course of the twentieth century that such arguments were now null and void. As Vaneigem puts it, 'Once the bourgeoisie develops world-transforming technology to a high degree of sophistication, hierarchical organisation [...] becomes an anachronism, a break on the development of human power over the world.'⁶⁶

It should be recalled at this point that the Situationists primarily saw themselves as both the inheritors and culmination of the history of the development of the cultural avant-garde. The Situationists believed therefore that cultural decomposition had effectively been proclaimed by the emergence of Dadaism in the period during and after the First World War. The Dadaist desire to suppress art expressed an attack on the cultural superstructure of capitalism and the limits that it places on human expression.⁶⁷ However, Dadaism had not sought the 'realisation of art' through a new use of everyday life or the realm of freedom. Every form of the avant-garde since had simply repeated the Dadaist gesture pointlessly or simply denied it, as in the case of Surrealism, which, unlike Dadaism, had sought the 'realisation of art', of free creative play, in everyday life but without abolishing art also.⁶⁸ What separated the Situationists from previous avant-gardes, however, is that they identify culture with the realm of freedom, the non-productive time of 'everyday life', that is won from nature through the development of productive forces. Culture is the 'reflection and prefiguration, in each historical moment, for the organisation of everyday life' or the 'complex of aesthetics, feelings and mores by which a collectivity reacts to the life objectively given to it by its economy'.⁶⁹ This definition of culture shifts the meaning of the avant-garde mission to innovate the most 'modern' cultural forms by making the whole realm of freedom, the entire 'use value of life' or 'everyday life', its terrain of action.⁷⁰

The Situationists were therefore interested, first and foremost, with both criticising how society currently organises everyday life and proposing an alternative form of ‘cultural’ activity: a ‘question of the use of life [which] is effectively posed by the margin of freedom already, and increasingly, reached by our appropriation of nature’.⁷¹ This mission was formulated quite explicitly: ‘Situationist critique and construction concerns, at all levels, the *use value* of life.’⁷² The role of the avant-garde was, as such, to revolutionise the human relationship to the realm of freedom, its expanded domination of nature, by proposing a new use for it in the context of its runaway growth under the Second Industrial Revolution. It seemed completely irrational to Debord, and the Situationists as a whole, that modernisation should take the form of the Spectacle, the expansion of the reign of the commodity into everyday life, when it could take the form of the ‘construction of situations’: a non-hierarchical activity where everyone would partake in the free irreversible historical time that characterises play, art and festival. The ‘situation’ was therefore imagined essentially as the collective, and directly democratic, use of the ‘temporal surplus value’ arrived at through man’s ever-increasing rational domination of nature that would be liberated from bourgeois expropriation through the abolition of the wage labour system. This simple idea, that life might be devoted to something other than wage labour and the consumption of its insipid products, is perhaps the most radical aspect of Situationist theory. It was, and continues to be, a beacon of sense in a world dominated by the dreary labour utopias and consumer paradises of many mainstream politicians and even large parts of the ‘radical’ left.

Nevertheless, although the Situationists put forward here a radical proposal for a new way of life beyond the world of work, the details of the critique explored above evidently do not rest upon a categorical critique of labour and its social ontology. On the contrary, despite the evidently anti-work political and artistic content, the Situationists maintain much of the rationalist conception of labour handed down from the exoteric Marxian tradition and bourgeois political economy. The Situationists, as we saw previously, explicitly conceive of ‘human’ labour, and the development of the labour process, as a pre-social *struggle* against nature or ‘natural alienation’. Debord, unlike André Breton and the Surrealists, thinks of the human therefore in quasi-Cartesian terms as a ‘subject’ that, through the development of productive forces, increasingly dominates and appropriates the natural world through the application of *logos*. Within this schema, as we have seen, Debord develops a surprisingly negative opinion of the

quality of lived experience achieved by ‘non-developed’ societies, which, as in traditional political economy, are imagined to have only scratched out a living through ‘primary labour’ with little to no time to devote to play. Labour is imagined to be transhistorical, with the suggestion that all productive activity is inherently utilitarian and characterised by cyclical drudgery, but ‘necessary’ to the extent that it is a product of the struggle with nature. The development of productive forces through the emergence of modern industry can therefore only seem to be a positive development because it apparently ‘liberates’ mankind from the supposed ‘necessity’ of labour. The more industry is developed, the smaller the realm of necessity, the less ‘necessary work’, the larger the realm of freedom, the more ‘life’, the more ‘irreversible’, ‘historical’ time to devote to ‘play’.

The ‘constructed situation’ is, as such, part of a certain underlying ‘dialectic of reason’.⁷³ It is imagined as a more ‘rational’ and more ‘modern’ or avant-garde use of the realm of freedom won from nature by capitalism through the development of technology. As Debord puts it in his ‘Report on the Construction of Situations’ (1957), ‘We need to go further, and to rationalise the world even more, which is the first condition for making it passionate.’⁷⁴ This is not to say that Debord has a wholly positive conception of the application of technology and science to the labour process, far from it; but it is to say that, even in the late 1960s, he believes that work can only be ‘abolished’ in a categorical sense by the development of industrial technology. The proletarian revolution, which abolishes the wage labour system, is only ever a *coup de grâce* on an activity that has been made redundant by technology. In early Situationist writing the link is simply made much more clearly: ‘With automation, work will no longer exist in the current sense of the word, and there will no longer be rest, but free time for free anti-economic energies’.⁷⁵ The group even speaks of the need to rediscover nature as a ‘worthy adversary’,⁷⁶ while Constant states, ‘We [the SI] apparently all agree on the positive role of industry [...] it is the material development of the epoch that has created the general cultural crisis; and the possibility of it being overturned through the unitary construction of practical life.’⁷⁷ Such a positive conception of the process of modernisation does not mean that Debord thinks that the development of capitalism alone will bring about communism—on the contrary, the theory of the Spectacle shows precisely why that is not possible—but it does mean that the bourgeois seizure of power appears as a necessary phase in the teleological movement of man’s increasing domination and appropriation of nature. The ‘situation’, and the revolutionary society

imagined by the Situationists in the 1960s, therefore enters into a *modernising* perspective.

There is, moreover, even a great deal of ambiguity in Situationist theory about the status of the ‘abolition’ of labour in a post-revolutionary society. Is it truly consigned to the past? One article in *Internationale situationniste*, for example, states that ‘it is true that full temporal freedom first requires the transformation of labour, and the appropriation of labour for ends and under conditions that are entirely different from the forced labour that has existed until now’.⁷⁸ The implication is that a new ‘free’ type of labour would in fact continue to exist in a communist society. Raoul Vaneigem implies a similar transformation of labour: ‘Only playful attraction guarantees a non-alienating labour, a productive labour.’⁷⁹ Evidently, Vaneigem does not have in mind what Marx means by ‘productive labour’, that is, labour that produces surplus value as part of the cycle of valorisation. The mistaken belief that a non-capitalist society might engage in ‘non-alienated labour’ was possible, despite the many other fundamental critical insights of the SI into the nature of ‘production’, because the group did not fully, or, at least, consistently, break with the notion of work in its concrete form of appearance as ‘productive’ and ‘socially useful’ labour. A suggestion remains that ‘human labour’ would be freed from its alienating condition once its ability to create ‘use values’ is released from its domination by the exchange values created in commodity production. Labour *qua* labour, as such, continues to have an implicitly positive role at the level of social ontology.

These theoretical missteps even lead the SI, at one point, to let the notion of the ‘constructed situation’ drift into the category of a new kind of labour: ‘The next form of society will not be founded on industrial production [...] it will be a society of realised art [...] this “absolutely new type of production which will be in preparation in our society” [...] is the construction of situations, the free construction of life events.’⁸⁰ These theoretical issues show that the Situationists, Debord included, still hold onto the notion of the human being as a transhistorical producing ‘subject’, *homo faber*, whose historical agency depends on its conscious mastery of nature. The greater the development of the means of production, the greater the ‘subject’ can express itself. At the most extreme this leads to the desire for the complete eradication of nature in the city so as to maximise social space.⁸¹ Raoul Vaneigem, in particular, emphasises human freedom in terms of the realisation of its ‘will to live’ without constraints, and recognising no barriers to the subject, he even advocates narcissism.⁸²

These excesses are by no means characteristic of the whole, far from it, but they speak to some of the subtle weaknesses of some of the thinking around labour and the subject form in the SI that would allow them to emerge in the first place.

The critique of labour in capitalism that Debord develops could equally be read as an artistic twist on the traditional Marxist critique of the ‘theft’ of the full value of the producers’ labour. Rather, for Debord, the problem is more essentially the theft of the producing subject’s time: an expropriation of the working mass’s ‘temporal surplus value’. Debord actually performs a *détournement* of Marx’s famous ‘free association of producers’ when he speaks of ‘*freely associated time*’.⁸³ The goal of a revolutionary society would, as a result, be the libertarian, or directly democratic, ‘use’, or appropriation, of such ‘free’, surplus, time in a manner that reflects the exoteric Marxian demand that ‘value’ be made to benefit the producers. However, such a reading, while it does speak to some of the contradictions found in Debord, does not take into account the more categorical or esoteric side of his critique, and would be far too reductive. More so than any previous historical critic of work, Debord came very close to the categorical critique of Marx. Indeed, although such a critique is clearly insufficient today, it is fair to say that the Situationists’ attempt to create a revolutionary theory that aimed at the abolition of the work society far surpassed any of their contemporaries.

The Situationists’ positive conception of modernisation, and of the emancipatory potential of automation, should also be understood against the backdrop of the wider social discourse about labour in the post-war period. The boom had led almost everyone, the Situationists included, to conclude that capitalism had overcome its tendency towards crisis and that the future only held full employment and increases in standards of living. The Situationists, in this vein, make constant reference to ideological developments in the field of cybernetics. The work of the French economist and theorist of cybernetics Jean Fourastié (1907–1990) is a particular point of interest for the SI. Today Fourastié is perhaps best known for coining the phrase the ‘Thirty Glorious Years’ to refer to this period of unprecedented growth and industrial development that characterised European economies from the end of the war until the oil crisis of 1973. In the 1960s, however, Fourastié was best known for his works on the social implications of modern productive technology such as *The 40,000 Hours* (1965). In this book Fourastié erroneously suggests, in a manner

that Debord follows, that pre-modern man had devoted himself entirely to labour (actually, as the work of anthropologists such as Marshall Sahlins and others has shown, the reverse is true). However, the technological developments of the future would mean that, in the twenty-first century, workers would only need to devote 'six of every hundred hours', that is, six per cent of their lifetime, to production. Fourastié thought that such a development, although positive in many respects, would pose a threat to the moral order of human society that it was the role of cyberneticists to address through finding new ways of occupying humanity.

Situationist theory, in particular the concept of the Spectacle, could, in this light, be understood as a more 'progressive' response to what they saw as the reactionary proposals of modern social scientific 'experts' to the supposed liberation from work that was occurring in the post-war boom. The emergence of mass consumerism, the utilitarian concrete city spaces, the consumption of the leisure activities placed on offer, all allowed the moral order based on work to continue despite the utopian potential of a society in which necessity had been reduced to a minimum. Debord saw the Spectacle as such a period of transition, of decomposition, in which capitalism was going to be replaced by a 'revolutionary solution or sci-fi barbarism'⁸⁴ dominated by experts such as Fourastié:

A totalitarian and extremely hierarchized cyberneticisation, which would naturally be very different from the dreams of actual cyberneticists or the experience of the old fascist dictatorships, but which will resemble them in certain respects, mixed with those that appear everywhere in the democratic society of abundance: the perfected control over all aspects of people's lives, reduced to a maximum passivity in automatised production as in a production entirely oriented to the mechanisms of the spectacle.⁸⁵

From such a perspective, the 'collapse of modernisation' from the start of the 1970s could only come as an absolute shock. If anything, it seems from these words that Debord imagined the bureaucratic technocracies of the USSR would be a more likely future model than the neo-liberalism that actually followed. The Situationists had not thought in terms of the negative *substantiality* of labour—labour was a 'natural necessity'—so there was no way of predicting that such technophilic optimism would prove hollow. It is perhaps historical serendipity that the group itself dissolved in 1972, just as the OPEC oil crisis was about to hit and after the initial optimism that had come after the events of May '68 was finally

destroyed by the revelation that the whole of the post-war boom, on which the initial belief in the emancipatory potential of automation had rested, had been nothing but a brief hiatus. Although there are many undoubtedly interesting developments in the writing of individual Situationists in the years after, Debord and Vaneigem, the group's two main critical theorists, both clearly struggled to revise their revolutionary theory in the light of these developments.

THE RADICAL SUBJECT

The central problem was that the Situationists did not fully develop a critique of the subject-producer and its roots in abstract labour. The only mode of social 'crisis' or emancipation that they could put forward was based on the traditional notion of the emergence of a 'radical subject' from within the development of capitalism that would, thanks to its oppositional relationship to labour, realise its historical mission to overcome it. The old class divisions become a separation between those who hierarchically control the organisation of production-consumption (increasingly the 'experts' more so even than the 'capitalists'), and who have some personal choice in the use of irreversible time, and those who are subject to that organisation, and who have no way of asserting their desires within the realm of freedom. The Situationists therefore define the proletariat as all those people in society who lack control over the 'use' of their lives: 'We could consider as proletarians people who have no possibility of modifying the social space-time that society allows them to consume.'⁸⁶ It is important to note that the Situationists see this definition of the proletariat as something 'new' that did not necessarily exist in the nineteenth century and that tends to increasingly encompass every person in society. This is not meant to replace the traditional critique of the exploitation of surplus value but to bring it up to date. Such a position can only be understood if we recognise that the Situationists are assuming here the idea of a radical reduction in 'necessary labour' and expansion of the realm of freedom. Lack of control over the use of the expanded 'temporal surplus value' or non-work time is primarily what is at stake. The working class therefore emerges as the subject of history because it is defined entirely by its position of subordination to the alienating apparatus of modern commodity-producing society, the Spectacle, that makes any conscious use of this new expanded realm of irreversible time of play, 'culture', festival or creativity impossible. The proletariat now develops its struggle with

an increasing awareness of the inherently life-denying essence of the capitalist mode of production and overcomes the totality of the Spectacle through seizing that time. The proletariat would in so doing realise its historical mission of overcoming the Spectacle by managing for itself the 'temporal surplus value' of society, creating the conditions for the generalised construction of situations, and abolish itself as the proletariat, becoming, in this sense, Situationists.

The Situationists' definition of the proletarian revolution, as a struggle for a mode of life devoted to qualitative experience and free creative activity beyond wage labour, had the advantage of setting the group in total opposition to the pseudo-revolutionary praxis of the contemporary left, which largely continued down the 'spectacular', and authoritarian, path of productivism and consumerism. Situationist theory, however, to the extent that it continued to rely on the self-emancipation of the 'producers', still retained traditional Marxism's failure to apply the category of fetishism equally to all classes. Debord argues that the development of industry tends to reinforce the proletariat objectively, even if subjectively the workers are not yet conscious of their historical role. Debord often asserts therefore what the proletariat *ought* to be rather than what it *is*. The Situationists found themselves caught as such between a certain workerism, where they had to always look to the proletariat for hints of the emergence of a spontaneous revolutionary movement, and, at the same time, the recognition that the Spectacle conditions the exact opposite. The result is a very ambiguous relationship to theory. On the one hand, Debord is clearly aware that capitalism is reified and opaque, that it seduces people and that it limits their capacity to think critically. His writing and filmography is difficult and makes no excuses for its audience. It is not the sort of patronising didactic 'cultural' product that is the usual fare of those who would push the proletariat to revolution. Overcoming capitalism, for this side of Debord, evidently requires the mediation of a complex analysis so that it can be combatted. On the other hand, Debord thinks that the working class is capable, and even destined, to develop spontaneously a critique of capitalism that can be put immediately into practice. Vaneigem goes so far as to claim that theory is simply an expression of what the proletariat has already put into practice or what it already knows, and even that workers do not need to read Marx to understand him!⁸⁷ Indeed, at times one gets the impression that simply asserting one's 'desire' or 'will' in the face of capitalism is all that is necessary. Critical theory, as such, appears as opposed to revolutionary practice rather than a form of it.

We should, of course, understand the Situationists' ambiguity towards theory as a kind of corrective to the history of the traditional workers' movement where revolutionary organisations were often dominated by a strict division between intellectuals who developed theory and the workers who were supposed to carry it out in the form of orders. However, it would make much more sense that workers should engage with and develop theory without the mediation of experts than expect them to organise and to act in a revolutionary manner spontaneously. When the SI say that the workers need to become 'dialecticians', they meant that workers should realise their needs and desires immediately, rather than become critical theorists themselves, which would be a meaningful 'realisation of philosophy', in the sense of a *practice* of understanding the world for oneself so that it can be transformed in a positive direction. The role of theory for the SI was only ever to make conscious for the proletariat something that they were already supposed to know: 'Our ideas are already in everybody's heads.' Yet the Situationists were most effective precisely when they suggested the exact opposite, such as when they criticised the 'student' in *On the Poverty of Student Life*, which might be better translated as *On the Poverty of the Student Movement's Ideas*. No such critique, however, was ever applied to the 'worker'. Rather, the SI tended to look to examples of spontaneous anti-work feeling within the working class as the proof of their own theory, which, while it has the advantage of bringing to light a reality suppressed by the mainstream left, nevertheless ignores that the clear majority of people in capitalist society, while they might hate their own work, do not necessarily oppose work as such. This does not mean that being a worker excludes one from taking part in the movement of social emancipation; on the contrary, there are obvious reasons why a person who suffers the crushing restraint of work on a regular basis might revolt against his condition. However, it does mean that such revolt, to the extent that it is not mediated by theory, tends to take 'spontaneously' a form that will reproduce the category of (abstract) labour. The Situationists, nevertheless, generally attributed the failures of previous revolutionary movements, such as the collapse of the Russian Revolution into a state-capitalist dictatorship, to 'betrayals', to a representation of the working class that had escaped its control, which, while certainly true, did not attribute any fault to the fetishistic character of the 'subject' form that also encompasses proletarians.

These problems become much clearer at a political level when we consider that the forms of practice that the Situationists called for essentially

consisted of a demand for the ‘democratisation’ of production and social communication. The Situationists place particular faith in the self-organisation, or self-management, of the working class into ‘soviets’ or ‘workers’ councils’, as had been practised partly during the Paris Commune, the early days of the Russian Revolution and, later, the Spanish Revolution. The councils were meant to represent the horizontal organisation of the use of the productive forces for the marginalisation of necessary labour and the use of free irreversible time for the construction of situations. The Situationists were certainly correct in thinking that the idea of workers’ councils is the closest the traditional workers’ movement ever came to the genuinely emancipatory notion of organising life on the basis of a conscious discussion among those who would actually live it. However, the problem with simply putting one’s faith in such councils historically is precisely that the subjects of capitalism, its *demos*, without the mediation of a precise critical theory of the nature of abstract labour, the commodity, value and so on, tend to reproduce the same fetishistic social matrix. And this is exactly what the Situationists themselves discovered at the Occupation of the Sorbonne during May ’68 with the constant frustration that these subjects, although they now had their own directly democratic organ of communication in the General Assembly, seem to have simply communicated these categories to each other.⁸⁸ Neither Situationist ideas nor the categorical critique of (abstract) labour were already unconsciously present in people’s heads only to be consciously freed suddenly by democratic mediation. The Situationists had not fully appreciated that the failure of previous attempts at workers’ councils was not so much, or only, through force of arms, but also the fact that workers are just as much a part of capitalism as any other sociological class and would, without such critical theory, reproduce it.

What I have presented here is a highly critical account of a movement that should, nonetheless, be recognised as the most radical expression of anti-work thought in the post-war period. Together, Guy Debord and the Situationist International put forward a genuinely radical vision of a social movement that called for the abolition of labour, the state and the commodity form, in favour of a society devoted to the possibility of a ‘good life’ beyond it that would be based on genuine human community, festival and play. The theoretical issues that have been addressed here show us just how far in advance of their contemporaries the Situationists were, but also why today’s social movements, although they can draw inspiration from this historical example, must do so with a critical eye.

NOTES

1. Guy Debord, *Œuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), pp. 89–98.
2. Fanny Schulmann, ‘Des Cartes Postales, Rectangles Dynamiques’, in *Livre Debord* (Paris: L’Échappé, 2016), pp. 362–363.
3. Debord, *Œuvres*, p. 92. Letter to Marc Dachy 25/8/1994.
4. Raoul Vaneigem, for example, who was the group’s other main theorist, was a high-school teacher when he first joined.
5. The most important scholarly work on Debord, which is one of only a handful of texts to provide an actual theoretical analysis of his critical theory, and, which, moreover, was greatly appreciated by the author himself, remains Anselm Jappe, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, *Guy Debord* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2018); first published in Italian in 1992. Tom Bunyard in *Debord, Time and Spectacle* (London: Brill, 2018) has also provided a new and important philosophical analysis of the Situationists from a Hegelian perspective.
6. For an overview of this more ‘artistic’ side of Debord, see Vincent Kaufmann, trans. Robert Bononno, *Guy Debord: Revolution in the Service of Poetry* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
7. Debord was well aware that he was by no means the first person to make a similar statement. In his last film *Guy Debord: His Art and His Times* (1994), made for television, he quotes the last three lines from this extract from the song ‘Lazybones’ [Lézard] by the popular *fin-de-siècle* Parisian singer Aristide Bruant (1851–1925): ‘J’peux pas travailler, ça m’emmerde. / J’en foutrai jamais un secousse, / Mêm’ pas dans la rousse, / Ni dans rien.’ These words, as Bruant’s own dictionary attests, have a double meaning: either, ‘I can’t work, it bores me to shit, / I’ll never work, / Not even when I’m in trouble, / Not ever’; or, ‘[...] / I’ll never cum, / Not even inside a redhead, / Not in anything’. ‘Never work’ therefore precedes Debord in the form of a dirty joke. See Aristide Bruant, *L’Argot au XXe siècle* (Paris: Flammarion, 1905).
8. Debord, *Œuvres*, p. 656.
9. Situationist International, ‘L’activité de la section italienne’ (1958), *Internationale situationniste (IS), édition augmentée* (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 1997), pp. 59–62.
10. Debord, *Œuvres*, p. 656. Note that Debord always spoke of the ‘supersession’ or ‘sublation’ of art by using the term ‘dépassement’, which is the French translation of the Hegelian, German term ‘Aufhebung’: to abolish and, at the same time, to preserve. See Jappe, *The Writing on the Wall*, p. 165. It is significant, in contrast, that Debord *never* spoke of the ‘supersession’ of work or labour, but only ever of its ‘abolition’ or ‘suppression’. There was nothing about work that was worth preserving in his view. His

position on labour, at least at this rhetorical level, was therefore one of pure negativity.

11. 'We must constantly reinvent the sovereign attraction that Charles Fourier describes in the free play of passions', '... une idée neuve en Europe' (1954), *Potlatch: 1954–1957* (Paris: Allia, 1996), p. 29. Raoul Vaneigem suggests that if workers were to take over the modern technical apparatus, they might be able to realise such a dream: 'Snatched from its masters, it is possible that cybernetics will liberate human groups from work and social alienation. This was precisely the project of Charles Fourier in an age when utopia was still possible.' Raoul Vaneigem, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (London: Rebel Press, 2006), p. 84 [Translation altered]. The Situationist interest in cybernetics is discussed in detail below.
12. For a detailed theoretical analysis of the relationship of the Situationists to the supersession of art, see Anselm Jappe, *L'Avant-garde inacceptable: Réflexions sur Guy Debord* (Paris: Léo Scherer, 2004).
13. 'Définitions' (1958), *IS*, p. 13.
14. 'Contribution a une définition situationniste du jeu' (1958), *ibid.*, p. 10.
15. 'La fin de l'économie et la réalisation de l'art' (1960), *ibid.*, p. 129.
16. Vaneigem, *Everyday Life*, p. 202.
17. The foundational text is 'Formulary for a New Urbanism' by Gilles Ivain, the pseudonym of Ivan Chtcheglov, partially republished in the first issue of the group's journal in 1958, *IS*, pp. 15–20. For an overview of the Situationist critique of contemporary urban modernisation, see Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).
18. Debord describes the Situationists in Paris in his film *On the Passage of a Few Persons Through a Rather Brief Unity of Time* (1959): 'This group existed at the margins of the economy. It tended towards a role of pure consumption, and primarily the free consumption of its time.' Debord, *Oeuvres*, p. 472.
19. See Patrick ffrench, 'Dérive: The Détournement of the Flâneur', in Andrew Hussey and Gavin Bowd (eds), *The Hacienda Must Be Built* (Manchester: Aura, 1996), pp. 41–53.
20. The closest thing to a Situationist 'utopia' is put forward by the Belgian Situationist Raoul Vaneigem in his 2005 novel *Voyage à Oarystis* (Tournai: Estuaire). The book recounts the tale of two Venetian lovers who are invited to stay in a city that is inexplicably cut off from the capitalist world. Here the protagonists 'drift' through a fantastical urban-cum-natural environment where social life has become a matter of organising artistic and playful experiences. Work, to the extent that it exists, is largely divided out spontaneously according to inclination and, where unpleasant, reduced to an absolute minimum. Aspects of life that require larger social organisation

take place per directly democratic principles, where ‘politics’ concerns only the running of the city, with citizens voting on new projects or proposals by crossing to one or other side of a bridge in the central plaza. Despite the faith in modern technology and cybernetics that characterised much of Situationist writing in the 1960s, Oarystians live in a more ecologically favourable relationship with nature and even seem to prefer developing pre-modern forms of machinery. Suffice it to say that Oarystians also highly value the work of Charles Fourier.

21. ‘The utopian currents of socialism, although themselves founded historically in the critique of existing social organisation, can rightly be termed utopian to the extent that they refuse history – that is to say, the real struggle taking place, as well as the movement of time beyond the immutable perfection of their image of a happy society, but not because they rejected science.’ Debord, *La Société du Spectacle* (1967), *Œuvres*, p. 796.
22. ‘Notes éditoriales’ (1958), *IS*, p. 42.
23. For an intellectual history of the group, see Stephen Hastings-King, *Looking for the Proletariat: Socialisme Ou Barbarie and the Problem of Worker Writing* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2014).
24. Debord, ‘Préliminaires pour une définition de l’unité du programme révolutionnaire’ (1960), *Œuvres*, p. 512.
25. Vaneigem, *Everyday Life*, pp. 53–55.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 226. [Translation changed.]
27. The fact that decades later, after the collapse of the historical conditions that created the post-war boom, these meagre social protections are now under threat can only be seen from such a perspective as a ‘loss’ and a ‘defeat’ at the hands of neo-liberal ideological trickery. So much of what often passes for the ‘radical’ left still pines for a return to Keynesianism. One of the reasons that the Situationist International is such an important historical reference point now therefore is that it demonstrates there were people revolting against this social model that is today looked back upon with such evident nostalgia. Everyone remembers what was good about the past except that which led to the present.
28. Situationist International, *On the Poverty of Student Life* (1966), <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/141>
29. See Anselm Jappe, ‘William Morris et la critique du travail’, in William Morris, trans. Dominique Bellec, *La Civilisation et le travail* (Neuvy-en-Champagne: Le passager clandestin, 2013), pp. 7–26.
30. Debord, *Œuvres*, p. 772.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 778.
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*, p. 774. Original emphasis. As I note below, such use of the category of ‘exchange value’ is, strictly speaking, incorrect.

34. Ibid., p. 778. Original emphasis.
35. Ibid., p. 776.
36. Ibid., p. 773.
37. Ibid., pp. 778, 772.
38. Ibid., p. 782. Original emphasis.
39. Ibid., p. 769.
40. Anselm Jappe, 'Debord, Lecteur de Marx, Lukács et Wittfogel', in *Lire Debord* (Paris: L'Échappée, 2016), pp. 281–291.
41. Debord, *Œuvres*, p. 798.
42. Ibid., pp. 772–773.
43. See Jappe, *Debord*, op. cit.
44. 'Banalités de base' (1962), *IS*, pp. 272–273.
45. 'Esquisses programmatiques' (1960), *ibid.*, p. 125.
46. Debord, *La Société du Spectacle* (1967), *Œuvres.*, pp. 820–821.
47. Ibid., p. 782. Original emphasis.
48. Ibid., p. 829.
49. Ibid., pp. 821, 823.
50. 'Notes éditoriales' (1960), *IS*, p. 153. My emphasis.
51. Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*, *Œuvres*, p. 824.
52. Ibid., pp. 821, 823.
53. Debord says of Ancient Greece that 'only those who did not work lived'. Ibid., p. 824.
54. Debord speaks positively, for example, of early-modern aristocratic revolts such as The Fronde and the Jacobite rebellions in Scotland as 'the freedom of the irreversible temporal game of feudal lords'. Ibid., p. 821.
55. Debord, *Œuvres*, p. 828.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid., p. 773.
60. Ibid., p. 778.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid., p. 776.
63. Ibid., p. 772.
64. Ibid., p. 781.
65. 'Définitions' (1958), *IS*, p. 14.
66. Vaneigem, *Everyday Life*, pp. 215–216.
67. For the most complete Situationist account of the history of the avant-garde, see Raoul Vaneigem, *A Cavalier History of Surrealism*, op. cit.
68. Debord, of course, constructs a version of the history of the avant-garde that suits his purposes. The important thing, for him, is that he feels the avant-garde never recognized the 'end of art' that he himself had theorised.

69. 'Définitions' (1958), *IS*, p. 14.
70. The term 'everyday life' was not meant simply to refer to the totality of day-to-day experience but specifically referred to all those aspects of life that fell outside of labour. This has been mostly overlooked in the critical literature on the SI despite the fact that Henri Lefebvre, from whom the SI take their interest in everyday life, specifically defined it as such.
71. 'Notes éditoriales' (1959), *IS*, p. 72.
72. 'Notes éditoriales' (1960), *ibid.*, p. 153.
73. This line of argument has already been anticipated, albeit from a different direction; see Laurent Jeanpierre, 'La "Dialectique de la raison" situationniste: Guy Debord face à l'essor des sciences de l'homme', in *Livre Debord* (Paris: L'échappée, 2016), pp. 401–414. See also, Gabriel Zacarias, 'Eros et civilisation dans *La Société du spectacle*: Debord lecteur de Marcuse', *Revue Illusio*, 12–13, Oct. 2014, pp. 328–343.
74. 'Rapport sur la construction des situations' (1957), Debord, *Œuvres*, p. 313.
75. Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio, 'Discours sur la peinture industrielle et sur un art unitaire applicable' (1959), *IS*, p. 101.
76. 'Notes éditoriales' (1963), *ibid.*, p. 302.
77. Constant, 'Sur nos moyens et nos perspectives' (1958), *ibid.*, p. 56.
78. 'Notes éditoriales' (1961), *ibid.*, p. 202.
79. Vaneigem, *Everyday Life*, p. 259. Translation changed.
80. 'Notes éditoriales' (1962), *IS*, p. 257.
81. Constant, 'Une autre ville pour une autre vie' (1959), *ibid.*, p. 107.
82. Vaneigem, *Everyday Life*, pp. 254–255.
83. Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*, *Œuvres*, p. 836.
84. Debord and Daniel Blanchard, 'Préliminaires pour une définition de l'unité du programme révolutionnaire' (1960), *Œuvres*, p. 513.
85. Debord, 'Sur la consultation visant à définir 'la région parisienne à la fin du siècle'' (1962), *Œuvres*, p. 602.
86. 'Domination de la nature, idéologies et classes' (1963), *IS*, p. 309.
87. Vaneigem, *Everyday Life*, p. 198.
88. For the Situationists' own account of May '68, see René Vienet, trans. Richard Parry, *Enragés and Situationists in the Occupation Movement, France, May '68* (London: Rebel Press, 1992).



The New Spirit of Capitalism and the Critique of Work in France Since May '68

In 1972, a French management magazine reported on a bizarre incident that had taken place in a factory over the course of the previous summer. One Monday morning, all of the workers suddenly, and without any warning, stopped working. The workers, far from being up in arms, appeared to be relaxed and, despite enquiries, by the close of the day, they had made no demands to the management. The following day, Tuesday, the same thing happened. The workers all turned up to the workplace, but spent the day chatting and playing cards. The management approached the workers' representatives, in an effort to learn the reasons for the strike, but, yet again, none was forthcoming. On Wednesday, the workers once again came to the factory, but this time they organised comedy sketches and 'psychodramas' about the everyday life and idiosyncrasies of the factory for their own amusement; even the boss, apparently 'without insolence', was play-acted in these mini dramas. By Thursday, the management, at its wits' end, decided to be proactive and announced an increase in holiday pay of 300 francs. The announcement, however, fell completely flat and things continued as before. 'The strikers', the magazine notes, 'had not asked for anything, and wanted nothing more it seems than to let the machines rest'. After a week of this, the workers all turned up at their posts on the Monday morning and got on with their jobs as though nothing had happened. The management could not understand 'what demon' had possessed the workers the previous week. 'And the most extraordinary thing about this story', writes the author, 'is that it is true.'¹

This incident has all the qualities of a fairy tale. It is as if some witch or wizard had cast a magic spell. The workers, as though at the wave of a magic wand, seem to forget, for a brief while, the totalitarian rule of the labour form: the need to produce, to obey, to be ‘present’ in the way that capitalism demands. The whole world of work seems to have existed for them as some kind of distant dream or fancy to be played out by mechanicals on the stage of the factory floor. It is labour, and not a world beyond it, that has been relegated to fantasy. It is, however, like all fairy tales, ultimately self-contained. At the end of the story, the spell must be broken, and everything reverts back to the mundane. A world that has been turned on its head (or, perhaps more accurately in this case, turned right side up) returns to normal. It is, in fact, as though nothing had ever happened. This story, in many ways, encapsulates the ambiguities and contradictions of the critique of work in the period, our own period, after the events of May ’68 and the global economic crisis that hit the world economy in the 1970s. Never had a certain ‘artistic’, ‘qualitative’, critique of work—of the kind developed by the authors previously examined in this study—been more implanted in the working class and, yet, despite the hopes, and continued hopes, that the proletariat would finally fulfil its role as the revolutionary subject of history, to abolish itself by abolishing labour, never, in hindsight, has such a dream seemed more distant. This chapter will explore the way in which a certain ‘artistic’ critique of labour continued to flourish in the 1970s and how, in the course of several decades, it was partially incorporated into the very logic of capitalism itself. At the same time, it is the story of how, in the face of the failures of a critique of work couched within the conceptual framework of traditional Marxism, a new, deeper, categorical critique of labour began to emerge.

THE NEW SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM

The year 2018 marked the 50th anniversary of the ‘events’ of May ’68. The empirical situation of the economy and culture between our own time and the post-war period can seem almost like mirror images of one another. In the 1960s, the critique of capitalism took place in the context of effectively full employment, with growing purchasing power, social benefits and an almost universally positive vision of technological development. Culturally speaking, the dominant personality of the ‘forces of order’, identified with the bourgeoisie, was that of the authoritarian ‘type’ whose positive model of human being rested upon deference to hierarchy, sexual

repression and a strong Protestant work ethic. The critique of capitalism, in its empirical form, therefore consisted primarily in a rejection of 'bourgeois' values—identified with all forms of authority and social taboos—and finding ways to realise the utopian promise of the productive capacity capitalism had so far created. Today, the situation could not be more different. We are, since successive economic crises, from the mid-1970s onwards, faced with mass under- and unemployment, precariousness, rising wealth inequality and a constant attack on social benefits and workers' rights in the name of competitiveness. The promise of technology, to which some still cling, appears now only in the form of ever-greater populations 'superfluous' to the production process. Moreover, our productivity even seems to put the very existence of life on this planet into peril. At a cultural level, though, things are apparently 'freer' than ever. Capitalism, although it continues, of course, to wield the Protestant work ethic and hierarchy as a stick when necessary (which is often), increasingly invites us to realise our every desire, to recognise no limits and no authority, to transgress every boundary, to break every taboo. Labour, if one is 'lucky' enough to get it, is imagined today less as a duty or necessity, but more as a means to an end that lies beyond itself, to leisure and consumption, and even as a means of self-fulfilment, a privilege, rather than a 'vale of tears' for the worker.

Observing the advertisements on the contemporary Paris metro can be instructive as to the types of normative changes that have taken place since the 1960s. Take, for example, the phrase 'Metro, boulot, dodo' [Work, Tube, Sleep]. In the 1960s it stood, with its simple phonic rhythm, for a popular critique of the seemingly endless repetitive cycle of an everyday life structured by work, that is, the way in which labour pursues the self even beyond the factory or the office. It was, in this respect, a complement to Debord's 'never work' graffito, an act of defiance against an oppressive and hierarchical society that did not like to admit that people would rather be doing something else. Today, however, the slogans of the 1960s are marshalled in the aid of advertising. In a relatively recent example, one of those large posters that hug the curved walls of the Paris metro reads, 'Metro, boulot, libido', an advertisement for a website that helps married people cheat on their spouses. The 1960s rejection of the morality of the family is actively adopted in the aid of the value form, as the daily alienation of the commuter is recognised as a prime space for promoting the promise of sexual self-realisation, in the form of a consumable service, beyond it. Capitalism adapts popular expressions of discontent originally

aimed at itself for its own purposes. In a similar example, an advert for a clothing brand reads, ‘Everything is permitted’; a phrase that once stood for the height of transgressiveness among the avant-garde milieu of the 1960s. As was noted in Chap. 1, even the phrase ‘never work’ has been co-opted. An American consultancy firm uses the tagline ‘never work’, because ‘if you love your job, you’ll never work a day in your life’. Capitalism no longer seeks to deny feelings of alienation at work, it uses them to sell products. At the same time, it divests itself of responsibility. If your job is dull and stressful, it is your own fault for not finding a better one or for not having a ‘positive attitude’.

In *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, first published in French in 1999, two sociologists, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, sought to analyse these dramatic changes in the world of work and everyday life since the 1960s. The central argument of the book is that, starting in the mid-1970s, the management of capitalist enterprise in developed countries began to shift away from the hierarchical, repetitive, utilitarian model of Fordism towards a new form of accumulation based on the metaphor of networks. Firms that adopted the new network model aimed to provide workers with greater autonomy, creative input and a sense of self-investment in the work they were expected to perform. These changes, Boltanski and Chiapello argue, were, at least in part if not wholly, driven by the critiques that were levelled at capitalism in the post-war period and which reached a high point in the anti-capitalist movements of the 1960s.

Boltanski and Chiapello employ the concept of the ‘spirit of capitalism’, drawing on the work of Max Weber, to provide a critical framework for grasping the normative values that capitalism marshals in order to give people ‘the opportunity to participate in it more enthusiastically’.² Given that a wage labour society assumes a ‘certain amount of voluntary subjection’, they argue that capitalism requires strong personal incentives—‘possibilities for self-realisation and room for freedom of action’—and moral arguments—in the name of the common good—in order to both excite interest in and justify the goal of capital accumulation (not least because it marks a deep rupture with all other known forms of human society).³ In essence, the ‘spirit of capitalism’ is the ideology or normative framework that motivates people to take part in capitalism willingly and even with excitement. The authors provide a periodisation of three distinct forms that this ‘spirit’ has taken over the course of the history of capitalism.⁴ First, from the early-modern period until the Great Depression, the spirit of capitalism could be characterised as utilitarian, adventurist,

and thrifty. It was generally smaller in scale and focused on family businesses, or small firms, where the owner was often known to the workers. Secondly, from the 1930s until the mid-to-late 1970s, capitalism emphasised a certain *dirigisme* and long-term planning. It favoured large, sometimes state-run, enterprises that were faceless organisations in which the figure of the ‘director’ was the ideal ‘type’. Thirdly, from the 1970s and continuing today, the ‘new’ spirit of capitalism emphasised networks, ‘leaders’, non-hierarchical structures, personal initiative, goal-orientation, and, in some cases, it even incorporated aspects of play and spontaneity into the accumulation process (one might think of the big tech companies such as Google and Facebook).⁵

Boltanski and Chiapello argue that ‘critique’ plays the important role of a historical ‘motor’ of change in the spirit of capitalism in its successive phases. The second spirit of capitalism—with its emphasis on a long-term planned economy and large organisational structures—was inspired in part, they argue, by the critiques that socialists and communists levied at the first spirit of capitalism. They point out, for example, that the *dirigisme* of the post-war French economy was aligned in many respects with the goals and ideals of French Communists. We might add that the political motivations were even very similar, for example, the need to bring the market under the ‘democratic’ and ‘conscious’ control of the state in order to work for the good of the people, rather than leave them at the mercy of a risky and unregulated market. The historical transformation of cultural, economic and social norms embodied in the shift to the second spirit of capitalism therefore provides an historical example of how capitalism, when it is ‘obliged to respond positively to the points raised by critique’, is forced to ‘incorporate[...] some of the values in whose name it was [previously] criticised’.⁶ In the case of the second spirit of capitalism, it was obviously the crisis of the 1930s that encouraged labour and capital to adopt the ‘anti-capitalist’ criticism of its earlier, liberal, spirit. Capitalism needed to be controlled and reigned in through state intervention. Crucially, Boltanski and Chiapello argue that a similar transformation of the spirit of capitalism began in the mid-to-late 1970s in response to the criticisms levelled against it by the May ’68 movement, that is, a lack of personal autonomy, creativity, self-realisation, play, equality and community.

Boltanski and Chiapello identify two primary modes of critique of capitalism: artistic and social.⁷ The former, the artistic critique, was developed within the Bohemian, artistic and intellectual milieu, particularly in Paris, from the mid-to-late nineteenth century right up to the Situationists in the

1960s (in essence much of what we have described in more detail in the previous two chapters). Artistic critique, the authors argue, focuses on a critique of capitalism that emphasises inauthenticity and disenchantment as well as a lack of freedom to act and express oneself. For the artistic critique then, capitalism is primarily problematical due to the fact that it places barriers in the way of the full realisation of the creative individual. Social critique, in contrast, focuses primarily on the material poverty that capitalism leaves in its wake and, equally, the way in which it encourages a certain selfishness and absence of human community or fellow feeling. Social critique, in other words, seeks to redress the exploitation of the worker that takes place in the production process by giving her back the full value of her labour and organising the economy in such a way as to benefit the greatest number. We will return to this thematic later. For now, it is worth saying that although these categories help us to discuss side by side some of the more general themes or superficial aspects of these critiques—in particular the ‘artistic critique’—they are somewhat reductive and do not accurately reflect much of the complexity that we have discussed in previous chapters. The authors, for example, state that it is ‘virtually impossible to combine these different grounds for indignation and integrate them into a coherent framework’.⁸ However, as we saw in Chap. 1, we can, through a categorical critique, easily account for both realities. As such, it is highly questionable to hold that artistic and social critiques, or at least the issues that they seek to address, are irreconcilable. Nevertheless, in identifying the artistic critique, the authors highlight an important point of connection between the modes of criticising capitalism and the normative frameworks that have emerged over the course of the past half-century.

Boltanski and Chiapello argue that the rise of mass consumption in the post-war period brought about new cultural norms that came into conflict with the old spirit of capitalism. Consumerism promoted individuality, self-expression and immediate gratification based on credit in a manner that contrasted strongly with the more restrained, controlling and save-for-hard-times attitude of the first and second spirits of capitalism. Equally, the expansion of higher education—the increase in the number of school leavers going onto do degrees—meant that a more educated French workforce was less willing to perform mind-numbing, repetitive tasks that required no creative input and did not allow a great deal of personal autonomy. The Fordist workplace with its scientific organisation of labour and strict hierarchies looked less attractive and was less willingly submitted

to by the new post-war generation. Boltanski and Chiapello argue that groups such as the Situationists, whom they refer to explicitly, adopting the artistic critique developed by groups such as the Dadaists and the Surrealists, 'answered to the expectations and anxieties of new generations of students and cadres, and spoke to the discrepancy between their aspirations to intellectual freedom and the forms of work organisation to which they had to submit in order to be integrated socially'.⁹ It was to these values, to this artistic critique that had inspired a generation, that capitalism turned in order to make itself appear more attractive, to create more willing, enthusiastic, subjects of the process of capitalist accumulation.

Boltanski and Chiapello refer specifically to the Belgian Situationist Raoul Vaneigem, and his magnum opus of May '68 rebellion, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, to highlight the similarities between the anti-hierarchical, network-based, and creative model of the new, or third, spirit of capitalism that took hold in the years after its original publication in the late 1960s. They provide a number of examples that, they say, 'could feature in the corpus of neo-management'.¹⁰

Has anyone bothered to study the approaches to work of primitive peoples, the importance of play and creativity, the incredible yield obtained by methods which the application of modern technology would make a hundred times more efficient?¹¹

Using makeshift equipment and negligible funds, a German engineer recently built an apparatus able to replace the cyclotron. If individual creativity can achieve such results with such meagre stimulation, what marvels of energy must be expected from the qualitative shock waves and chain reactions that will occur when the spirit of freedom still alive in the individual re-emerges in collective form to celebrate the great social fête, with its joyful breaking of all taboos.¹²

The problem then is how to organize, without creating a hierarchy; in other words, how to make sure that the leader of the game doesn't become just 'the Leader'. The only safeguard against authority and rigidity setting in is a playful attitude.¹³

These examples are interesting as they are extracts from the work of Vaneigem that are most obviously inspired by his reading of Fourier. The idea is that, by making work more attractive, in the manner described by artistic critique, it could actually produce greater yields and release more

energy, but in a fashion that is attractive to the individual. Here we really are in the realm of ‘it’s not “work” if you enjoy doing it’. This is hardly sound theoretical territory. However, Boltanski and Chiapello do not seem to understand the problem of ‘recuperation’ in these terms, but rather see it as the result of the separation of the artistic critique of work from the context of the original social critique to which it was attached. Moreover, the exact nature of the criticism directed at Vaneigem is not clear. Is it that there is something wrong in these arguments—already anticipated in Fourier—or is it simply that Vaneigem happened to be the one expressing them at a time when capitalism needed to adapt its management style and normative framework? In either case, the important point for Boltanski and Chiapello is that capitalism did partly incorporate these criticisms into itself. It provided employees in many firms with greater autonomy and created structures that encouraged them to invest themselves creatively in their work (albeit often with the result that oppression is all the more individualised). However, all this, for Boltanski and Chiapello, was at the cost of cutting back wages and making work more precarious at a material level. The artistic critique triumphs where the social critique gives way.

The problem with these arguments is that the categories upon which they rest are largely superficial. Boltanski and Chiapello, although they do hit upon a significant issue in the recuperation of the artistic critique, do not distinguish between an ‘affirmative’ (or purely ‘phenomenological’) and a ‘categorical’ critique of work. As we saw in Chap. 1, a crucial theoretical distinction must be made between the critique of the concrete empirical phenomena that fall under the rubric of work and a critique of work *as such*, labour qua labour, understood as being, in and of itself, a socially destructive, historically dynamic and tautological form of abstract domination. We have seen, throughout the current work, that elements of both modes of critique have played a part in the history of the critique of work in French thought. Ideally, the critique of the empirical forms of labour, and whatever vague ideas we may develop about a world beyond it, is *grounded in* a categorical critique. What Boltanski and Chiapello describe is, therefore, not so much, as they perceive it, a problem of a critique that has become detached from its ‘social’ content, but rather the way in which those aspects of the French critique of work that were ‘affirmative’—that were not grounded in a critique of the category itself—reached a vanishing point where they were finally, and in a great historical irony, incorporated

back into the management of labour. The affirmative critique of work, in other words, turned back upon itself to reinforce the labour form. So long as the critics of work clung to the assumption of the transhistoricity of labour, this was always a danger. The problem is most obvious in Fourier precisely because, unlike Debord, he had very little insight into abstract domination. Nevertheless, as we see here, even in the case of the SI, a certain affirmative critique of work found expression.

The fact that Boltanski and Chiapello are unaware of the categorical critique of labour also complicates the analysis found in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* in another important way. As we saw in Chap. 1, we can understand the empirical changes that reshaped the world of work since the 1970s as the result of capitalism reaching its internal limits. The current period is essentially one of a capitalism that is in crisis at all levels. Boltanski and Chiapello, in interpreting these changes as primarily the result of cultural recuperation, mistake the present moment. The collapse of traditional social critique and the recuperation of the artistic critique of work are symptoms, epiphenomenal changes, and not the cause. Boltanski and Chiapello, however, reject the very notion that capitalism is in trouble at all. Crisis is designated as a ‘stock theme’ and the prevalent desire to use the term is described as ‘inapposite’.¹⁴ They reject crisis theory on the basis that the period in question has been marked by a ‘massive redeployment of capitalism’.¹⁵ It is true that these words were written a decade before the 2008 financial crisis. Nevertheless, the suggestion is that the various crises of past decades—the OPEC Oil Embargo, the dotcom bubble, as well as the general financialisation of the markets, falling wages and increasing unemployment—are not the result of an inevitable collapse of the valorisation process, but rather part of the normal cycle of boom and bust, and the successful realisation of the personal domination of those nominally in power. The ‘failure’ of the artistic critique of work is understood, therefore, not in terms of its failure to grasp the deepest, most essential level of social ontology, but rather as a failure to be ‘social’. However, this purported ‘social critique’ is, as we saw in Chap. 1, just as affirmative in nature as the artistic. The period after 1968 should therefore be correctly understood as the moment when the artistic critique of work faced its own internal limits, as affirmative critique, even at the height of its triumph. The moral of our opening fairy tale is precisely this. It encapsulates the contradictions and limitations of the artistic critique of work that finally found a working-class audience in the 1970s.

THE 'CRISIS OF WORK' AND THE ULTRA-LEFT

The triumph of artistic critique, the point at which it reached its maximum influence among workers, reached its apogee in the decade 1968–1978. A new wave of industrial action and changes in cultural attitudes to work, or at least the work on offer, caused immense consternation among mainstream observers. Sociologists, politicians, directors and union bosses, who had traditionally understood the interests of workers in terms of 'quantitative' demands—roughly what Boltanski and Chiapello call 'social critique'—struggled to get to grips with the nature of young people's dissatisfaction with and indifference towards work. The period saw a dramatic increase in opposition and resistance to work in the factories and in everyday life: in workplaces, sabotage, slow-downs, poor quality production, stoppages, wildcat strikes and attempts at self-management (the most famous example being the LIP incident, where workers, who had been let go from a watchmaking factory, took over the premises and began organising production themselves); in everyday life, young people 'dropping out', actively choosing to live off unemployment,¹⁶ doing odd jobs and everything they could to avoid being integrated into the labour force along Fordist lines. These stances and practices were not in themselves new—a certain Anarchist, Bohemian and artistic milieu had always defined itself in similar terms, and workers had always engaged in similar actions—but the scale of the rejection of work, understood as a rejection of the Fordist model of work and, in some cases, a rejection of work as such, certainly was. In fact, by the mid-1970s, it had become common among sociologists to speak of the historical moment as a veritable 'crisis of work'.

The 'crisis of work' was the subject of a great deal of sociological discussion at the time and produced a number of important studies, the titles of which, such as *The Allergy to Work* (1974), are, in themselves, quite evocative of the epoch.¹⁷ Sociologists, in an attempt to understand the nature of the crisis—which, as Boltanski and Chiapello have shown, was really a crisis of the second spirit of capitalism, based on the scientific organisation of labour and large-scale dirigiste enterprise—spoke to young people in order to get a sense of their demands. They were, however, often horrified by the results and failed to understand fully the terminology through which discontent with labour was expressed. Consider, for example, this extract from an analysis of attitudes to work among young people in the 1970s:

Their refusal of work is based on [...] abstract values, that is, many of them tell us: 'but working isn't living'. There is a contradiction between work and life [...] Work is the alienation of freedom. That is, work implies that one enters into an organisation, thus into a hierarchy, with chains, and middle-class youths refuse with all their strength all form of hierarchy. Therefore, it is the alienation of freedom. And then, working, it is also (this moreover surprised me), it is the opposite of festival, that is, the opposite of the realisation of oneself, the opposite of that which allows one to express oneself. As this labour, when you get down to it, is too utilitarian, too functional, too fragmented, and it seems to me that this category here seeks at heart a form and reactionary one at that. That is, they are looking somewhat for a passive relationship with nature and for them the productive act does not exist, it has no value, it is without interest for 'real life'.¹⁸

Here the researcher comes face to face with the 'artistic' critique of work—or at least a vulgar version of it—that had been developed within and popularised by the radical avant-garde. If nothing else, the events of May '68 had brought to the attention of millions of young people, and perhaps many older ones too, that it was possible to imagine a different kind of relationship with one's own creative activity and that one could oppose capitalism not only in terms of pecuniary poverty, but also, and even primarily so, in terms of the 'poverty of experience'. The qualitative nature of these 'demands' was not easily processed by the highly Cartesian, rationalist and economic intellectual framework of the managers, who, until recently, had understood the struggle between classes largely in terms of a battle over remuneration. The consternation of the researcher presented with this 'artistic' critique of work—his accusation that it is 'reactionary'—rests upon an absolute identification of labour with the 'productive act' or, rather, with human activity as such. He is able to ascertain that young people react against labour, or at least *this* labour, because it turns them into an instrument of utility, a mere cog in a greater machine. Young people reject their role in the hierarchy and feel alienated. They even explicitly oppose work to 'real life'; that is, they recognise that there must be more to living than accumulation through production. The researcher, however, can only see such an 'artistic' critique as reactionary because, for him, labour is the expression of our humanity and, perhaps also, the basis of human community and fellow feeling. A traditional Protestant work ethic, resting on a rationalist (perhaps socialist) conception of labour, confronts an 'artistic' critique that seeks to move beyond it. These two opposing views of contemporary, Fordist, industrial labour, and even, albeit to a

lesser degree, labour as such, were those that confronted one another in the ‘crisis of work’ in the 1970s.

The crisis found its strongest voices in the plethora of ultra-left publications that proliferated in France in the aftermath of May ’68. These groups, heavily, and often explicitly, influenced by the Situationists and Socialism or Barbarism, but also Bordigism and, later, the Italian Autonomist movement, included the Workers Union for the Abolition of Wage Slavery, the Friends of Four Million Young Workers, the writer Claude Berger, author of *For the Abolition of Wage Labour* (1976), as well as a variety of other journals and small-scale publications such as *Le Mouvement Communiste*, *Invariances*, *Négation* and *Voyou*. What unites these groups is precisely the central role that the critique of wage labour played in their critique of capitalism. It was, moreover, primarily their opposition to wage labour, and with it the whole metaphysics of the first and second spirits of capitalism, that set these groups apart from the other ‘anti-capitalist’ movements that they despised, such as Maoism, Stalinism and, albeit to a slightly lesser extent, Trotskyism. Berger writes, for example, that ‘[t]he greatest mystification of the century is the claim to be creating communism while preserving wage labour’.¹⁹ Furthermore, these groups—in particular Workers Union—had arguably a much greater presence in French factories than the Situationist International ever had (ironically, as we shall see, this seems to have given some of them the confidence to pursue a critique of the ‘worker’ that was never developed in Situationist writing).²⁰

The focus of these groups is primarily on the development and propagation of a critique of wage labour. The key slogan was ‘Let’s Abolish the Wage System’ [*Abolissons le salariat*]. It was a call, in other words, for the abolition of the condition of being a wage labourer. Workers Union reproduces images of these words graffitied upon important monuments—a triumphal arch and a statue of Joan of Arc—in Bordeaux in the mid-70s. In Berger’s *For the Abolition of Wage Labour*, the slogan appears in a roughly drawn cartoon as coming from the mouths of workers, while, below them, a capitalist surrounded by a Fordist assembly line gesticulates wildly, declaiming, ‘That would disorganise everything!’²¹ Berger argues that May ’68 and the industrial disputes that have followed it hold within them, ‘in embryo’, the ‘abolition of wage labour’, and he speaks of the current struggles in terms of the ‘revolution against wage labour’.²² Workers Union, likewise, draws attention to the words of Marx himself, who, in a speech to the WMA in June 1865, stated that ‘Instead of the conservative motto, “A fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work!” [Workers]

ought to inscribe on their banner the revolutionary watchword, “Abolition of the wages system!”²³ One of Workers Union’s more inspired attacks was a pamphlet, widely circulated on 1 May 1975, entitled ‘Down with the Festival of Alienated Labour’. Instead of celebrating the heart of the alienation of the worker—a festival fit only for bureaucrats, priests and Stalinists—the worker ought instead to celebrate the ‘critique of alienated labour’. Elsewhere, Workers Union writes ominously: ‘Wage slavery is a horror without end, the communist revolution prepares for it an end full of horrors.’²⁴

The primary object of critique is obviously the productivism, the economism and the scientific organisation of labour—‘fragmentary, uninteresting, gruelling labour’²⁵—that predominated in the post-war period.²⁶ Workers Union speaks of the ‘everyday prison of the factory’ and, beneath a mournful image of workers heading in to work, writes: ‘Slaves from birth to death’.²⁷ ‘The modern hell of the assembly line’, Workers Union writes, ‘time clocks, stopwatches, bonuses, Stakhanovisation and unpaid forced labour has pushed the extreme dehumanisation of all life to its limit.’²⁸ The socialist state, and the traditional conception of revolution within the Marxist and social-democratic workers’ movement, is, as such, far from being a negation of capitalism, but in many respects its apotheosis: ‘What is most miserable in workerism (whether it be Stalinist or leftist) is that it treats the proletariat purely as “labour power”, realising within its ideological heart what capital had already achieved in production.’²⁹ The Friends of Four Million Young Workers express a similar sentiment in *A World Without Money* (1975–1976): ‘Mandatory planning, collective ownership of the means of production, proletarian ideology ... none of this has anything communist about it.’³⁰ Even Fourier is, correctly, criticised for not seeking to abolish the wage labour system. These criticisms are, on the whole, not entirely new and owe a great deal to the Situationist International. However, what is new is that what was often merely implicit in the writing of the SI, specifically that which related to the critique of work, is made more explicit here and serves as the central pivot around which the critique turns. It is no longer the ‘construction of situations’ but the ‘abolition of wage labour’ that takes the foreground, an historical move that was, nevertheless, only possible thanks, in large part, to the critique of work developed within SI.

The critique of these post-Situationist groups, however, retains, and even deepens, the problem of remaining largely within the realm of the traditional Marxist conception of capitalism as a form of personal domina-

tion. Wage labour, rather than work per se, remains the main object of criticism because labour continues to be conceived of mainly as a transhistorical activity that is dominated by the ruling class. Most of these groups fall into the language of opposing the concrete ‘useful’ side of labour with its ‘bad’ abstract side. At the same time, there are a few surprising points that touch upon a more categorical critique. The Friends, for example, drawing on the recently published writings of the American anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, reject the notion of a pre-modern world as one defined by scarcity and note that ‘primitive man’ was ‘wealthy, not because he accumulated wealth, but because he lived as he wished’. The group also draws attention, as Vaneigem had done in *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, to the fact that the etymology of the French word ‘travail’, or labour, is torturous activity.³¹ However, they noted that one of the key differences between the pre-modern and modern uses of the term was its generalised and universal character: ‘What characterises the word for work or labour is precisely its abstract quality. It no longer designates this or that special activity but activity and effort as such. One no longer plants cabbages, or weaves, or herds cattle; one works. All work is basically the same.’ Unfortunately, this categorical insight stands largely on its own and does not become a basis for the rejection of the category as such. Rather, as in Situationist theory, it is the transformation of the activity, and even the construction of ‘situations’, that is imagined to form the basis of a universal form of activity beyond labour. ‘Communism’, the Friends state, ‘is first and foremost a radical transformation of human activity. In this respect one can speak of the abolition of labour.’

The 1970s distinguished themselves from the preceding decade in another important respect. They introduced the theme of ecological and economic crisis as quasi-apocalyptic themes. In another cartoon from *For the Abolition of Wage Labour*, there is an image of a mushroom cloud with the words, ‘Utopia is continuing to believe that one can “earn a living” by destroying the planet’, while nearby a man dressed in rags responds, ‘You’re just saying that to discourage me, right?’ The Friends of Four Million Young Workers similarly criticise the way in which the productivist logic of capitalism is so reductive in its attempts to dominate the natural that it treats a chicken as if it were a ‘factory for producing eggs’.³² Likewise, Workers Union points out the absurdity of the ‘crap production’ that characterises modern wage labour: ‘Must we perpetuate wage slavery by polluting the entire planet in order to make guns, plastic bottles, deodorant, useless medicines, bombs, mineral water!’³³ Berger simply entitles one

article, 'Wage Labour Is Pollution'.³⁴ Debord himself would take on the theme of ecology after May '68, in his text, 'Sick Planet', written originally in 1971, but not published until 2004, ten years after his death in 1994. Raoul Vaneigem would likewise take on the issue of ecology as central to his critique of capitalism and continues to do so in his most recent work.³⁵ Another Situationist, René Riesel (1950–), would later support the movement in France to destroy genetically modified crops.³⁶ Today, in France, it is also the 'degrowth' movement that has taken on the theme of linking capitalist production to the destruction of the planet in a manner that has certain similarities with the 'critique of value'.³⁷ The introduction of the theme of ecology into the critique of work in the 1970s was in large part due to the influence of authors such as Jacques Ellul, who corresponded with Debord, and Ivan Illich of the radical school of ecological thought.

The global economic crisis equally provoked a number of reactions from the French anti-work milieu of the 1970s. Workers Union, in an article largely devoted to the situation in England, refers to the growing problems of unemployment and precarious work that led to a series of violent responses from workers internationally. The nature of the crisis is thought of squarely in terms of a crisis of overproduction and the traditional Marxist notion of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. The group states unequivocally, however, that the crisis is a 'mortal' one and that there are no solutions—such as austerity—that can simply take us back to the post-war 'society of abundance'.³⁸ Rather, capitalism is only able to respond with its traditional 'remedies' of war, credit, imperialism and mass unemployment.³⁹ The Friends of Four Million Young Workers foresee a future in which the development of productive technology would essentially make the proletariat, referred to as 'human machines', into a 'superfluous' population, reduced to the situation of 'refugees' or even, through violence, 'totally eliminated'.⁴⁰ Berger, in contrast, rejects the notion that the contemporary crisis is fundamentally different to any other as capitalism is perpetually 'in crisis'.⁴¹ What all of these groups seem to agree upon, nevertheless, is that the 'real' crisis is not economic, but one brought about by the activity of the proletariat. Berger, for example, claims that the crisis of overaccumulation itself is brought about by the demands and struggles of European workers.⁴² The Friends, likewise, suggest that even the development of new productive technologies results from the fact that workers are 'too unruly'.⁴³ However, as Berger expresses it, it is above all the crisis of consciousness, the 'struggle against the oppression of labour',⁴⁴ that is understood to be at the heart of an 'objec-

tive crisis of wage labour': the 'attraction of a salary is no longer enough to compensate for the unattractiveness of work'.⁴⁵ The crisis of capitalism remains, as such, largely understood within subjective terms.⁴⁶

Despite its popularity among a certain milieu, the critique of work in France in the 1970s can feel a little derivative, lacking innovation, at least in comparison to the earlier critiques that we have examined in the current work. There is, however, one area where this is not the case: the critique of the empirical 'worker'. Workers Union, although it engaged in the traditional ultra-left critique of unions and parties as class 'traitors', continually decries the 'patriotism' of the factory and argues that it is necessary to develop a 'realist political theory of the real proletariat'.⁴⁷ While recognising that the working class is, of course, the working class of its revolutionary moments—in particular May '68—and of resistance in the workplace, the group also insists that the working class is a class that demonstrates 'an immense incapacity to even conceive of the possibility of a society without classes'.⁴⁸ French workers are criticised for wanting 'interesting work', for their 'professionalism' [*fierté de métier*], for wanting a 'democratisation' of the workplace, for taking pride in the creation of a 'quality product' (a concept the group found absurd in the context of planned obsolescence), for their chauvinism, their racism and for clapping when union bosses, such as Georges Séguy, general secretary of the Confédération générale du travail (CGT), give speeches in favour of French arms manufacture.⁴⁹ Even the recent LIP factory incident, where workers at a watchmaking factory, who had been let go, famously seized the premises and ran the company themselves for more than a year, is considered merely a 'Pyrrhic victory'.⁵⁰ It is necessary, the group argues, to confront the 'formidable spread of the cultural and moral values of the generalised Gulag', which large swathes of workers have internalised.⁵¹

This critique of the proletariat from the left, consisting essentially of a critique of its positive identification with labour, is about recognising that the problem is not only the existence of an autonomous representation of the working class—in unions and parties—but also, and even primarily so, a class that is, except in exceptional circumstances, willing to listen to these kinds of pro-work discourse. One of the most vehement expressions of this kind of critique is addressed to workers who attended a union-organised rally against unemployment in the name of the 'right to work':

The tools of the bosses – the workers’ unions – must have really made you thick-headed that you would in your thousands demand to lose your life (whether you die in an accident at work or little by little), demand to be alienated, that is, you would submit to dispossession and the negation of yourselves through labour. Shit, when you work, you look forward to clocking out, you hate Mondays, you are always thinking about the weekend, about your days off, you love it when there is a power outage and the noise stops, the bosses run about and you are prevented from working. And you would wear out your shoes to go on a protest demanding work!!! You think that’s normal? Or do you see that you are being fucked? Do you see, for goodness’ sake, that your union masters have used you? [...] They order you (and you obey) not to contest exploitation, to go on surviving our shite existence. Moreover, they suggest that you should demand a shite existence: start work at eighteen, retire at sixty, return to a forty-hour workweek, more work, more work ... ‘Let’s fatten capital’ would become, from this point of view, a good slogan. Go on, shout it! [...] Your union strategists do not say: ‘Death to labour, never work, let’s abolish wage slavery, right to laziness, death to survival’ ... Wonder why...⁵²

Although the criticisms are still couched in terms of a critique of the unions, it is clear here that Workers Union is addressing a working-class subject that lends itself to, and even actively promotes, a self-conception and an understanding of its confrontation with capital purely in terms of living labour. The group even goes as far as to say that ‘capital is workerist’, which, by implication, suggests that workerism is fundamentally capitalist. The next step might be to say that the ‘worker’ in as far as he or she exists as a ‘subject’ is nothing more than the ‘object’ of capital, that is, that the worker acting as a worker, and without a categorical critique of labour, is fundamentally capitalist. However, such a logical step was impossible for the ultra-left of the 1970s to make so long as it held onto a revolutionary theory in which capital created its own gravedigger in the ‘worker’. Essentially, Workers Union, like all the other groups of the period possessed of a critique of labour, was faced with the same conundrum as the Situationists: how to reconcile revolutionary theory in which the proletariat was to act as the ‘subject’ of history, bringing about the end of wage labour, with a ‘real-existing’ proletariat that proved to be an integral part of the capitalist social matrix, even, for example, cheering for French arms manufacture because it creates jobs? It was a question that, frankly, was never properly answered and remains a problem for most far-left currents.

Neither the Situationists nor the critics of work of the 1970s were unaware that capitalism was capable of adopting aspects of the critiques levelled against it.⁵³ The Situationists, after all, developed the concept of ‘recuperation’ precisely to describe the process whereby oppositional values and works of art that were originally designed to damage capitalism could, over time, be used to heal it again. In 1972, Guy Debord and Gianfranco Sanguinetti, the last remaining members of the SI, noted:

The language of power has become frantically reformist. It shows nothing but well-being in every store window, all sold at the best price; it denounces the ever-present defects of its own system. The owners of society have suddenly discovered that everything has to be changed without delay, in education as in urbanism, just as thoroughly in the way work is lived as in the uses of technology.⁵⁴

Debord recognises that capitalism was, in the 1970s, in the process of seeking to address the criticisms of the post-war spirit of capitalism. However, such ‘recuperation’ of criticisms directed at certain empirical phenomena—such as assembly line work—changes nothing essential about the domination of social life by the economy, the ‘Spectacle’, that Debord criticised in 1967. To the extent that the Situationists developed a categorical critique, the fundamental criticism cannot be recuperated. Workers Union, also, in the 1970s recognised that capitalism was in the process of reincorporating these criticisms back into itself. As we saw above, the group criticises concrete workers’ demands for the democratisation of the workplace, for ‘good’ bosses and for more interesting work. Berger, likewise, asks us to ‘imagine a self-managed factory making batons for the CRS [the riot police] or gadgets that break very quickly, as soon as one uses them, with, at the heart of it all, a self-managed boss and always wage labourers’.⁵⁵ It would be wrong therefore to suggest, as Boltanski and Chiapello seem to, that the ‘artistic’ critiques of work were unaware of the possibility that they could be incorporated, in some fashion, into capitalism. It was, in fact, a tendency that they were already witnessing. Nor is it entirely correct to suggest that they have been entirely denuded of radical potential. The central point is that it is only those aspects of the critique that are ‘affirmative’ in nature that are open to recuperation (and even then, only partially—it is not as though most work today is now ‘fun’ and ‘spontaneous’). The categorical critique of work, however, remains as relevant today as it was in 1967, or 1867 for that matter.

TOWARDS A CRITIQUE OF ABSTRACT LABOUR

As the ‘crisis of work’ began to wind down at the end of 1970s, the far left in France sought to address the reasons why the dreamt-of proletarian revolution had never materialised. Roland Simon and others associated with the journal *Théorie Communiste*, founded in 1978, criticised the preceding period of revolutionary theory as a form of ‘programmatisation’.⁵⁶ Groups such as the Situationists, they argue, had imagined revolution as a programme—the abolition of work—that the proletariat would put into practice. The workers would, that is to say, immediately become autonomous from capitalism through the self-management of production. The problem, according to these more recent ‘Communisation’ theorists, is that such a model of revolution presupposes an essentialist conception of class that passes over the fact that the proletariat must come into conflict with its own being as a class through struggle. After the ‘crisis of work’, however, the proletariat is increasingly, through its immanent struggles, confronted by its own class being. Communism, as such, is understood as the struggle of the working class in the here and now to establish new social relations outside capitalist socialisation and, in so doing, overcome its class being. These criticisms, on the one hand, provided the far left with an explanation of the limitations of the preceding period and, on the other hand, did so in a way that permitted it to retain its traditional focus on class struggle as a motor of revolutionary social change. The proletariat could remain, for Simon and others, the subject of history.⁵⁷

The 1970s and 1980s also saw the emergence of a critique of work within academia and public intellectual life. André Gorz (1923–2007), a key theorist of the New Left in France and a journalist who co-founded *Le Nouvel Observateur* in 1967, took on many of the themes that had been addressed within the ‘crisis of work’ of the 1970s and that were brought increasingly to the fore as the global economic crisis deepened. Gorz courted controversy among the left when he published *Farewell to the Proletariat* (1980), an unequivocal critique of the cult of the worker that had dominated the traditional workers’ movement.⁵⁸ In this text, Gorz argues that the working class no longer represents the only road to resolving the social issues raised by the new productive technologies. Likewise, in *A Critique of Economic Reason* (1988), Gorz takes issue with the persistence of the Protestant work ethic and seeks to historicise labour with reference to the writing of Karl Polanyi.⁵⁹ Gorz, throughout his life, essentially sought out what he considered to be workable solutions to the prob-

lems of a society organised around the system of wage labour in the context of the global economic crisis. He was for or a long time one of the greatest proponents in France of introducing a universal income as official public policy. Nevertheless, his critique of capitalism remained, until the end of his life, largely within the confines of an affirmative critique of labour. His main focus of criticism is on the empirical problems themselves and not on the deeper categories that lay behind them. It was only later, thanks in part to his friendship with the French philosopher Jean-Marie Vincent (1934–2004), that Gorz became interested in a categorical critique of labour.⁶⁰

Jean-Marie Vincent is an important figure in the history of the development of a categorical critique of labour in France. Vincent was an academic who founded the political science department at Paris VIII university. He was also a member of the Revolutionary Communist League (though his ideas diverged greatly from the Trotskyist mainstream of the group). Vincent spoke fluent German and was deeply affected by the re-interpretations of Marx's theory that occurred across the Rhine in the 1970s. He was, moreover, one of the first to introduce the French-speaking public to the foundations of these debates in *The Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School* (1976).⁶¹ Vincent, perhaps in contrast to many of his French contemporaries, displays a deep understanding of the esoteric reading of Marx, that is, the categorical nature of the critiques levelled at value and labour in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*. There are many similarities between Vincent's work and certain critique of value theorists such as Moishe Postone. Anselm Jappe states that his seminal study, *The Critique of Work: Doing and Acting* (1987),⁶² is the French book that 'most closely resembles the critique of value'.⁶³ We might add that Vincent also recognises aspects of value-dissociation.⁶⁴ It would not be going too far to say that Vincent represents perhaps the first example of a self-consciously categorical critique of labour in French thought. He understands that labour is an historically specific, negative and fetishistic category that dominates the concrete world in the tautological cycle of the valorisation of value: labour for the sake of labour. Moreover, Vincent criticises the post-modern trend in French thought on the basis that it tends to treat the abstractions that dominate social life purely in terms of language, that is, codes and symbols of power. Vincent, in contrast, insists that there are 'real abstractions' that dominate social life.⁶⁵

Vincent equally breaks with the traditional Marxist cult of work and its teleology of praxis, or action, that conceives of human beings purely in

terms of an objectification of the subject through the labour process.⁶⁶ He criticises, for example, the phenomenological focus of traditional sociology on the basis that researchers have ‘largely adopted the perspective of labour as activity’, that is, not as a determinate moment in the supra-sensible process of the valorisation of value.⁶⁷ Sociology, as a result, seeks to understand labour through empirical categories—such as the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of workers—in order to give it meaning. Vincent argues, however, that it is incorrect to assume that human beings define work. Rather, the opposite is true. An ‘epistemological reversal’ is required in order to allow us to see that it is work, in the historically specific sense of abstract labour, that defines or at least ‘strongly marks’ us: ‘Labour as a social relationship detaches itself in some sense from those who produce it in order to subordinate them and carry them in its movement.’⁶⁸ As such, Vincent argues that all manner of changes could be made to the world of work—including automation and the democratisation of the workplace—without changing anything essential about work per se.⁶⁹ Vincent suggests, in fact, that it is only once capitalism threw off its pre-modern forms of authoritarian discipline that the full fetishism of labour could develop and lead to the belief that it constitutes a form of individual expression.⁷⁰

Vincent, in ‘The Legend of Labour’, also takes aim at another sacred cow of the left.⁷¹ He argues that the subject of living labour, the worker, is not actually in the best position to understand what labour *is* due to his identification with it. The worker, in as far as he exists within the strictly phenomenological world of labour, apprehends only the specific activity in question. Work per se appears, from this limited perspective, as a relationship between the worker, his tools and his end-product.⁷² However, labour is not essentially or even primarily a human relationship between subject, man, and its object, nature. Rather, it is simply a point in the process of the valorisation of value for its own sake:

It is a moment in the coming into relationship of the value form of technology and the value of form activity in order to give a value form to products (material or immaterial). In this sense, the labour process is the process of transforming values into values, a process in which the supra-sensible (valorisation) overdetermines the sensible.⁷³

The phenomenological reality of labour, the sensible experience, is determined by the metaphysical, the supra-sensible, literally that which cannot be ascertained directly with the senses. The simple fact of experiencing

work, while it might incite revolt, does not give a worker special access to understanding its essential nature or determinate form. The worker, in other words, does not occupy a special subject position that, thanks to his closeness to the labour process, gives him immediate, direct, access to the fetishistic social process in which he is caught. Vincent argues, moreover, that it is only when the worker has demonstrated that he can adapt to the exigencies of valorisation (that he has become an object) that he is allowed to express himself through labour (and is therefore awarded the status of subject).⁷⁴ Even when workers engage in collective action to improve working and living conditions, the degree of ‘sociability’ that can be attained is limited to what is permissible under the valorisation of value.⁷⁵ Any anti-capitalist movement must therefore seek to go beyond the valorisation of value to be at all effective.⁷⁶

The fact that a certain ‘artistic’ critique of work was incorporated into the management speak of the late 1980s and 1990s does not immediately invalidate every aspect of that critique, nor does it mean that all forms of anti-work discourse are equally ‘recuperable’. Jean-Marie Vincent, in the best of his writing, represents a continuation of the tradition of the critique of work that has been examined in the current work, but on a more solid theoretical foundation. Although he still couches opposition to capitalism in terms of a workers’ movement that confronts it, his critique is aimed squarely at the categories themselves.⁷⁷ He is careful, that is to say, to distinguish between the ontological and phenomenological levels of critique. Vincent is, in this sense, close to Marx, but arguably goes much further. He emphasises the oppressive character of labour as such, labour qua labour, labour *sans phrase*. Vincent’s critique therefore embodies an alternative solution to the impasse in which the ‘critique of work’ in France found itself in the 1970s. The categorical nature of his critique and others like it means that they are logically less likely to be open to the kind of recuperation that the ‘artistic’ critique suffered over the course of the past 50 years. Today, the critique of work remains a vibrant tradition in France, and it will be all the more effective if it continues to develop on the basis of an ‘ontological break’ with abstract labour.

NOTES

1. *Le Management*, Dec. 1972, cited in Alexis Chassagne and Gaston Montracher, *La Fin du travail* (Paris: Editions Stock, 1978), p. 198.
2. Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, op. cit., p. 22.

3. Ibid., pp. 7, 16.
4. Ibid., pp. 16–22.
5. Ibid., pp. 18–19.
6. Ibid., p. 28.
7. Ibid., pp. 36–40.
8. Ibid., p. 37.
9. Ibid., p. 170.
10. Ibid., p. 101.
11. Vaneigem, *Everyday Life*, p. 55.
12. Ibid., p. 199.
13. Ibid., p. 261.
14. Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, p. xxxvi, 168.
15. Ibid., p. 168.
16. A piece of Parisian graffiti from this time reads, ‘Long live unemployment! Take back the time stolen from us’, cited in *ibid.*, p. 226. Similarly, a pamphlet published in 1976, and by a group called the ‘Centre for Negation, Laziness and Doing Nothing at Work’, calls for ‘the end of jobs’ and asks that workers celebrate 1 May, that is, Labour Day or the Festival of Work, as the ‘death’ of work, and calls for the ‘détournement’ of unemployment, cited in *La Fin du travail*, pp. 311–316.
17. Jean Rousselet, *L’Allergie au travail* (Paris: Editions du seuil, 1974).
18. *Opinions sur le marginalisme: Analyse d’interviews de spécialistes de la jeunesse* (Paris: PUF, 1975), cited in *La Fin du travail*, pp. 24–25.
19. Berger, *Pour l’abolition*, p. 9.
20. This may have been a point of contention between Vaneigem and Debord after May ’68. Vaneigem argues that just as the group had criticised students in 1966, Situationist critique ‘must now be carried out on the worker milieu’ (Raoul Vaneigem, trans. Reuben Keehan, ‘Notes on the SI’s Direction’ (March 1970), *Situationist International Online*, <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/direction.html>). Equally, in his resignation letter of 1970, Vaneigem regrets the fact that Situationist theory has not penetrated the worker milieu sufficiently. Debord, for his part, mocks Vaneigem, not without some justification, for this latter position, implying that it amounts to complaining that no Situationist worked in a factory. (Debord, *Œuvres*, pp. 1170, 1174). On the other hand, Vaneigem has a point about the potential for a critique of the worker. It would have certainly been an interesting new direction for the SI and one that might have helped the group break out of the fetishisation of living labour as the revolutionary subject of history. Debord does, however, address some of these issues in the ‘Theses on the SI and Its Times’. See Debord, *Œuvres*, pp. 1088–1133.
21. Berger, *Pour l’abolition*, p. 1.

22. Ibid., p. 22.
23. Cited in *Union ouvrière*, 1, Dec. 1974, p. 3. First published in English as 'Value, Price and Profit' in 1898.
24. *Union ouvrière*, 12–13, Dec. 1975, p. 6.
25. Ibid., 5, April 1975, p. 2.
26. For a consideration of the 'anti-work' period in the factories, see Bruno Astarian, *Aux origines de l'anti-travail* (Paris: échanges et mouvements, 2005).
27. Ibid., 1, p. 1; 2, Jan 1975, p. 3.
28. Ibid., 3, Feb. 1975, p. 6.
29. Ibid., 7, June 1975, p. 3.
30. *Un Monde sans argent: le communisme* was originally published as three separate tracts between 1975 and 1976. All references to this text are to the anonymously translated version found at <https://libcom.org/library/world-without-money-communism-les-amis-de-4-millions-de-jeunes-travailleurs>
31. Vaneigem, *Everyday Life*, p. 53.
32. *A World Without Money*, n.p.
33. *Union ouvrière*, 1976, cited in *Fin du travail*, pp. 102–103.
34. Berger, *Pour l'abolition*, p. 7.
35. As, for example, in *Voyage à Oarystsis*, op. cit.
36. René Riesel, *Aveux complets des véritables mobiles du crime commis au CIRAD le 5 juin 1999* (Paris: Éditions de l'Encyclopédie des Nuisances, 2001).
37. See Anselm Jappe, 'Degrowthers, One More Effort If You Want to Be Revolutionaries!', *The Writing on the Wall*, op. cit., pp. 126–132.
38. *Union ouvrière*, 11, Nov. 1975, p. 6.
39. Ibid., 18, June 1976, p. 3.
40. *A World Without Money*, n.p.
41. Berger, *Pour l'abolition*, p. 29.
42. Ibid.
43. *A World Without Money*, n.p.
44. Berger, *Pour l'abolition*, p. 28.
45. Ibid., p. 13.
46. The French critique of work in this period was in this sense very close to aspects of Italian Autonomism.
47. *Union ouvrière*, 14, Feb 1976, p. 2
48. Ibid., 14, Feb 1976, p. 2.
49. Ibid., 11, Nov. 1975, p. 5; 7, June 1975, p. 3; 11, Nov. 1975, p. 5.

How wonderful it must be for the French proletariat to know that we make the best rifle for killing people! How proud must we producers be at the thought that tomorrow the bullet that will pass right through us

will come from “our” (!) factories – as Séguy says – it will be the fruit of “our” advanced French technology, of the thinking of French engineers, of the skill and professional pride of French workers! How comforting it is for a slave to imagine, at the same time as his own destruction, the ever-greater valorisation of national capital! What’s more, making guns provides work, which reduces unemployment. So, let’s work, let’s keep working and always more, let’s work so that tomorrow other labour powers can erect monuments to the dead: “Here lie proletarians, so that capital may live!” The simple fact that Séguy can come speak all of this bullshit without impunity, and in our name, in the name of the working class, demonstrates better than anything else, the poverty of the contemporary workers’ movement. *Ibid.*, 14, Nov. 1976, p. 5.

50. *Ibid.*, 11, Nov. 1975, p. 5.

51. *Ibid.*

52. *Ibid.*, 11, Nov. 1975, p. 2.

53. The first article in the very first issue of *Internationale situationniste*, ‘Amer victoire du surréalisme’ (1958), *IS*, pp. 3–4, concerns the recuperation of Surrealist practice into modern management techniques in the form of brainstorming.

54. Guy Debord and Gianfranco Sanguinetti, ‘Theses on the Situationist International and its Times’ (1972), *Œuvres*, p. 1093.

55. Berger, *Pour l’abolition*, p. 9.

56. See Roland Simon, *Histoire critique de l’ultragauche* (Marseille: Senonevero, 2015).

57. *Théorie communiste*, while it retains the notion that the real ‘crisis’ of the present is a result of workers’ struggles, does develop some aspects of the categorical critique of labour. In an article published in 2001, ‘For the End of the Critique of Work’, for example, the author criticises critiques of work that start from the assumption of work as an eternal construct—we might think of the Situationists here—rather than as ‘abstract labour’, that is, a form of human activity historically specific to capitalism. Nevertheless, the emphasis of communisation critique is still placed upon class relations, rather than on labour as a form of abstract domination that is, in itself, tautological, destructive and constitutive of capitalism. Rather, it is only the ‘content’ of labour—class exploitation, in the main—not the category itself (eternal or otherwise) that remains the object of critique.

58. André Gorz, trans. Mike Sonenscher, *Farewell to the Working Class: An Essay on Post-Industrial Socialism* (London: Pluto Press, 1994).

59. André Gorz, trans. Gillian Handyside and Chris Turner, *Critique of Economic Reason* (London: Verso, 1989).

60. See Anselm Jappe, 'André Gorz et la critique de la valeur' in *Sortir du capitalisme. Le Scénario Gorz* (Bordeaux: Le Bord de l'eau, 2013). Also, Jappe, *Aventures*, pp. 262–263.
61. Jean-Marie Vincent, *La Théorie critique de l'école de Francfort* (Paris: Galilée, 1976).
62. Jean-Marie Vincent, *Critique du travail: le faire et l'agir* (Paris: PUF, 1987).
63. Jappe, *Aventures*, p. 132.
64. Vincent, *Critique du travail*, p. 142.
65. *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15, 18.
66. *Ibid.*, pp. 28–29, 33, 40, 57, 62–64, 70, 93, 128–129.
67. Jean-Marie Vincent, 'La légende du travail' in ed. Pierre Cours-Salies, *La Liberté du travail* (Paris: Syllepse, 1995), p. 75.
68. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
69. Vincent, *Critique du travail*, p. 146 & 'La Légende du travail', pp. 78–79.
70. Vincent, 'La Légende du travail', p. 79.
71. *Op. cit.*
72. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
73. *Ibid.*
74. *Ibid.*
75. *Ibid.*, pp. 74–75.
76. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
77. It should also be noted, nevertheless, that Vincent, despite many great insights, was an eclectic mix of different perspectives. He was, for example, a Heideggerian and worked with Antonio Negri.



CHAPTER 7

News from Nowhere, or an Epoch of Rest

The critique of labour *sans phrase* is perhaps one of the most challenging ideas that critical theory has produced in the course of the past few decades. We are so used to identifying human activity in general with labour that it seems at first glance to be an absurd and impossible task. The abolition of labour would, from such a perspective, appear to mean the abolition of any kind of human endeavour or engagement with the world. One might as well create a critique of breathing or eating. However, what I hope to have shown in this book is that labour is not, as it appears to be, a neutral, positive or universal category of human being that can and must be projected onto every form of activity. Human beings have not always ‘worked’. They have always sown fields, built homes, created luxuries and taught children—often, throughout much of its history, they have even been paid in coin or kind for these tasks—but these concrete activities have not always had the essentially abstract form that defines them in capitalism. The Ancients were aware of ‘labour’ as pain, but labour *as such*—labour as the undifferentiated expenditure of human energy, measured in socially necessary labour time, for no other purpose than turning £100 into £110—was unknown to them. They could not even imagine, at a subjective level, applying a single category to all of the varied activities that make up human existence, let alone physical reality as a whole. It is only we, of all the historical societies that have existed before, alongside and, perhaps, will exist after us, who ‘work’. No other definition of work is satisfactory. We cannot detach it from capitalism.

Work *is* capitalism and capitalism *is* work. This does not mean that capitalism simply reshapes a pre-existing, transhistorical, ‘work’ for its purposes or that it merely alienates it (even if capitalism has indeed taken over our ‘metabolism with nature’). Rather, it signifies that capitalism *alone* reduces all human activity to the abstract expenditure of human energy for no other purpose than its own tautological development. Our tendency to identify work as such with human activity in general comes to us, as ‘subjects’, from our internalisation of the value form, or ‘dead labour’, which sees, in the particular concrete qualities of human beings and the natural world, only so much undifferentiated human and natural material to be used up in its furnace of abstraction.

The critical theory of work put forward by the ‘critique of value’ is such an exciting new development because it allows us to deepen our critique of capitalism as a whole. It gives us the conceptual tools to criticise labour as a fundamentally negative, fetishistic and destructive social form. That is what makes it such an effective and radical perspective for analysing and understanding the concrete world: it provides us with criticisms of labour that show us that it is already, even before the bourgeoisie comes into the mix, an oppressive, absurd and dangerous category. Labour debases our mode of living to a deterministic social matrix that obeys laws entirely beyond our control. It recognises no boundaries—neither moral, nor aesthetic, nor anthropological, nor environmental—to its own formal movement. It forces the whole of humanity to live what is essentially a meaningless and absurd life. It debases and degrades even further everything that it does not consider ‘productive’ such as housework and childcare. It is so voracious as to kill—most immediately through accident and stress—and it has even developed as far as to bring the very future of the planet into question. Ironically, now that it has used up and extracted the life energy of billions, it leaves us completely superfluous to requirements thanks to its own technological successes. Its final crisis threatens to destroy us. The categorical critique of work then is not some academic exercise—even if it currently represents ‘esoteric’ knowledge that is not widely understood—but is absolutely central to understanding present-day society and confronting the concrete problems that currently face us. It is, in this sense, much more radical than a critique of labour from the traditional moral point of view that sees in capitalism only a personal domination by a particular class of people. There is so much more to be said.

The ‘critique of value’ shows us that there are really only two fundamental approaches to the ‘critique of work’: the phenomenological and the categorial.

Phenomenological critique concerns criticisms that are directed at the sensible, or concrete experience, of the world of work. They may criticise how work is experienced, how it is remunerated, how it is managed and organised, who controls it, how long it lasts, the kinds of concrete products it produces and so on and so forth. All of the material that is the usual subject of a book on work. These kinds of criticisms can be important to the extent that they can tell us what is at stake empirically speaking (though direct experience of the workplace is often enough for that). A book with a similar title, *The Critique of Work in Modern French Thought*, might have focused almost exclusively on an intellectual history of empirical economic and sociological studies of conditions in factories and offices over the course of the past 200 years. These kinds of criticisms are certainly more numerous, and they are not even necessarily anti-capitalist in nature. What often makes such criticisms so dry and dull, however, is that, in focusing so closely on the surface of society, they are incapable of saying anything of importance about the essential character of labour. Instead they *reaffirm* it. We certainly need a level of critique that concerns empirical reality. However, any critique of the concrete world has to be grounded in an understanding of the deeper, supra-sensible, reality behind it: a categorical critique. The genius of Marx, in his ‘esoteric’ side, is to have understood that labour is certainly not what it appears to be on the surface. Understanding labour requires abstract thinking that goes beyond the merely phenomenological to the strange ‘metaphysical subtleties’ behind it. That is what makes the knowledge ‘esoteric’: it is not immediately accessible to us and requires the mediation of theory. The problem is that, as capitalist subjects, we, and this includes Marx himself for all his insights, struggle *not* to think with and through the category of labour. Traditional anti-capitalist approaches lack the language to theorise and communicate without it. Our incapacity to apply the category of labour precisely and to think beyond it—when it comes to imagining a different mode of life—is probably the greatest barrier to the development of a more effective critique of capitalism in theory and in practice. That is why the categorical critique of labour put forward in this book is so important.

The history of the critique of work in France demonstrates that capitalism cannot convince all of the people all of the time. It is true that work, through a process of reification, appears to us as synonymous with human activity and as a universal aspect of human experience in all forms of society. It is for this reason that, while it is commonplace to hear criticisms of money and of markets, and even of the state, it is much rarer to come across a critique of labour. Work, despite its ubiquity (or perhaps because

of it), is arguably the least criticised category of modern social life. If, however, one accepts the argument that work is an historically specific and essentially destructive aspect of modernity, one is easily shocked at the extent to which modern philosophy, revolutionary politics and even critical theory have rallied to its cause. That is what makes the critical thinkers examined in this book, and the intellectual tradition of which they are a part, such an important object of study. In a world in which it seems almost everyone worships at the church of labour, these artists, poets, theorists and revolutionaries belie capitalism's false claims to universality. They grasp, in spite of all the conditioning to which we are subject, that there is something fundamentally destructive and oppressive about the labour form in and of itself. The fact that these insights exist at all demonstrates that capitalism has not and cannot entirely root out its opposition. There is always the possibility, even in the most inauspicious circumstances, for a genuinely critical consciousness to emerge. The critique of work represents therefore a radical tradition in French thought that, as we have seen in this book, stretches back at least as far as the early nineteenth century; and it has arguably accompanied capitalism since its very beginning.

Perhaps most surprisingly, given its marginal status in mainstream accounts of French intellectual history, the critique of work has been associated with some of the most objectively creative movements in European intellectual history. Fourier was in many respects a genius whose visionary critique of early industrialisation inspired generations of thinkers, from Zola to Marx himself.¹ Lafargue, likewise, was for a long time the main representative of Marxian thought in France and crucial to the creation of its first Marxist party. Most of all, the Surrealists and the Situationists, who held the critique of work to be central to their respective critical projects, were highly 'productive' creators and innovators of new forms of being and expression. A fact that even bourgeois commentators would readily admit. In the UK also, when the critique of work surfaced most radically, it was William Morris, the father of the Arts and Crafts movement, who was its greatest advocate. The critique of work should not be considered therefore a marginal tradition, at least not with reference to its actual place in cultural history and intellectual opposition to modern life. Nor should we imagine that the tradition rests upon the advocacy of the fatuous laziness, or land of Cockaigne, of modern consumers, whose brief escape from work, as Debord points out, is still structured by its logic. The enemies of work focus precisely on the fact that the labour form impedes the creation of a meaningful and creative human existence. Work, for the

best of these critics, has never been the embodiment of human expression, but rather its absolute negation.

We can only speculate as to exactly why France, more than any other country, became a hub for anti-work radicalism over the course of the past 200 years. The French Revolution certainly embedded in the national psyche the idea that immediate and dramatic social change to the established order is both realistic and likely to occur. Fourier, although he was deeply critical of the Revolution, was clearly heavily marked by it as demonstrated in his belief in grand utopian proposals for social transformation. Likewise, despite its bourgeois ideological core, the legacy of the Enlightenment in French thought at least carried within it the notion of a healthy scepticism for gods of any kind. Lafargue, as we saw in Chap. 3, criticises the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie precisely for abdicating these values before the altar of labour. Uneven historical development is perhaps another significant factor. France came relatively late to the Industrial Revolution and for a long time, outside the capital, highly developed pockets of industry existed alongside pre-modern, quasi-medieval, modes of life. Graham Robb's *The Discovery of France* (2008), which explores the opening up of the provinces to Parisians in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, paints a picture of a country chock full of social worlds that seemed backward, strange and bizarre to visitors from Paris.² The co-existence of pre-modern and modern forms of life occasionally promotes critical reflection. Lafargue mostly looks to Spain for inspiration for an anti-work popular sentiment, but he might have found, in other parts of France, particularly in the South, similar attitudes. Nonetheless, undoubtedly the most important factor was the fact, highlighted in Chap. 3, that Paris was the capital of intellectual and artistic endeavour for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Parisian Bohemia and art provided direct, lived, inspiration for an alternative model of living. Romantic theories of art laid much of the groundwork for the hostile stance to work found in the artistic avant-garde explored in Chaps. 3 and 4.

The critique of work in modern French thought can serve as an important source of inspiration for contemporary anti-capitalist social movements. However, we cannot blandly insist upon the immediate utility and contemporaneity of these critiques. One of the major themes of this book has been precisely to highlight the tension that exists between a phenomenological and a categorical critique of work in the writing of these authors. They were, in many respects, far in advance of their own times and we must respect their historical context. Nevertheless, the authors in

question retained, alongside their greatest insights, many of the weaknesses of bourgeois political economy and traditional Marxism. These concern primarily a tendency to see all of human society through the prism of labour and to conceive of the essentially oppressive nature of capitalism in terms of a form of personal domination. Such arguments belong to the past, to a time when capitalism still bore much of its pre-modern character, and they are of no use in helping us grasp what is presently at stake. As much as this book is a history of an intellectual tradition, it is also therefore the pre-history of a genuinely categorical critique of labour. These critiques, that is to say, anticipated and perhaps created the conditions for the emergence of the fully developed, critically negative, theory of labour that we find in contemporary authors concerned with the ‘critique of value’, such as Moishe Postone and Robert Kurz, mentioned in Chap. 1. The critique of work in this latter form is, in the opinion of this author, the basis for any further effective theoretical and practical development on this subject. More generally, with the critical analysis put forward in this book, I hope to have demonstrated the efficaciousness of the ‘critique of value’ as an analytical tool for grasping many different aspects of the concrete world, from interpreting art and culture to analysing competing theories and making much larger observations about our present historical moment. There is still a great deal of ‘work’ that can be done from this perspective.

William Morris published his classic anti-work novel, *News from Nowhere*, in 1890 with the subtitle, *or an Epoch of Rest*. Morris took the main title from Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516), meaning, literally, ‘no place’. Morris’s book refers to a journey into a land that does not, or at least not yet, exist, where labour has been transformed into play. The novel depicts a world of ‘rest’ where there is, nonetheless, a surprising amount of activity that could be described as work in modern eyes.³ The difference is that there are no abstract, fetishistic, laws governing human activity in his imagined world. Social life is the product of debate and derives its meaning from the choices made by the members of society. Work is not abolished through machinery, rather it is the abstract form that is lifted off the shoulders of mankind; that is what makes it an ‘epoch of rest’. Such a world would indeed have seemed unrealistic and utopian even to most socialist thinkers in the late nineteenth century. Work, if it was ever seen as a burden, was supposed to be overcome through productive technology more than a social transformation. The genius of Morris was to have seen past the technophilia of the age to a deeper truth. Today the real utopia is

to believe, in the face of the reality of the disintegration of the labour form under the weight of its own technological success, that we can carry on working forever. We are living through an age of crisis in which it is completely unrealistic, and 'utopian', to imagine that we can continue to organise society on the basis of work. We might therefore offer a new interpretation of the title in light of our current predicament. We could read it as a question: 'News from Nowhere' (the fantasy that we can continue to base society on work) or an 'Epoch of Rest' (a society freed from the fetishistic form of labour once and for all)?

Contemporary French society is riven with anxiety about the future of work. On the right, the response to the difficulties of competing in an increasingly globalised and technologically advanced marketplace has been to attack workers' rights and wages. Successive French governments have, since the 2008 financial crisis, sought to pass measures to make the job market more flexible, not least, by making it easier to hire and fire individual workers. These proposals have a surprisingly large amount of support among a certain part of French society that simply accepts, uncritically, that the problem is to be found, not in the world economy, but in a supposedly intractable, rebellious and unproductive national culture (if only it were true!). French people, particularly of the middle class, might even react with embarrassment in front of British and American visitors if a strike, among transport workers for example, inconveniences anyone. There is the assumption that this sort of thing should simply not happen in civilised society. On the left, however, the situation is not much better. A transversal populism, which attracts adherents from the right, has emerged that blames everything on the ill intentions of particular actors, especially finance capital, and calls upon the state to reign in the market, as though it were a simple matter of enacting legislation that benefits the 'people'. The last presidential election even saw serious proposals from a left-wing candidate to tax robots. These tendencies on the left and the right are both 'utopian' to the extent that they rest upon a completely erroneous understanding of what is actually happening to capitalist civilisation and what, as a result, is even realistic from a strictly 'political', or managerial, standpoint.

More 'radical' proposals for confronting the problem of work are not much better. Putting aside the issue of economic feasibility, proposals for a 'universal income', currently gaining popularity among far-left circles in France and abroad, do not address the problem of capitalism's constant need for growth, the destruction of the environment and the insipid

nature of consumer culture. It seems to be little more than a fantasy of continuing capitalist society on the basis of pure monetary circulation without the need for labour; as though the valorisation of value could go on without it. Ironically, since the 1970s, this is essentially what is already happening. The creation of money, or profits, through speculation on debt has been the only way of maintaining capitalism in light of the crisis brought on by the Third Industrial Revolution. Perhaps it is not surprising that universal income was for a long time also popular among neo-liberal ideologues and was a pet theory of Milton Friedman. The reality, however, is that the current model of valorisation is completely unsustainable, even if necessary in the medium term, from the standpoint of labour and capital. The whole bubble will inevitably burst when no value materialises. Nevertheless, the idea that capitalism can save us from work is as strong as ever. Much of the far left continues to dream of a consumer paradise made possible by automation. This is despite the fact that it is logically impossible for capitalism to free us from labour, as work and capitalism are effectively one and the same. One wonders, amongst all of these proposals for addressing the famous ‘work-life balance’, what it actually is about capitalism that these so-called ‘anti-capitalist’ critics actually want to do away with, certainly nothing essential.

Historically, human emancipation from capitalism, or ‘revolution’, was always imagined as a paroxysm of frenetic activity. ‘The new world has to be built with all haste! Work, work, work, for the good of future generations! Shift, move, surge as a crowd on the Winter Palace!’ The tendency was always towards one of acceleration and a general intensification of activity that was associated with the qualitative experience of passionate revolt and, ironically enough, work. Walter Benjamin, for his part, suggests, an alternative: ‘Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train – namely, the human race – to activate the emergency brake.’²⁴ The Krisis Group, in their ‘Manifesto Against Labour’, went one step further: ‘Workers of all countries, call it a day!’²⁵ It does seem to me that, given the terrible pace of human existence—the intensification of time and incredibly rapid changes in everyday life—over the course of the past 500 years, humanity would be well advised to take it easy for at least a millennium. The obsession with being always ‘active’—engaged in some kind of toil or other—seems redolent of a subject that cannot recognise the decidedly concrete rhythms of the body and the natural world. Psychological wounds, of which we all bear

the mark from our early formation as 'subjects', will also take many generations to heal. Relearning to cultivate land, to provide for ourselves and to 'work' with one another on a communal basis will also not be something that can be achieved overnight. Morris, in casting a positive future for humanity in terms of an 'epoch of rest', demonstrates a degree of sensitivity to these issues that is frankly all too rare in anti-capitalist circles.

Obviously, 'taking it easy' does not mean that one could, as though with the wave of a magic wand, create a better society. Rather, it means opposing those forces in the here and now that would wish it otherwise. This can only be done through the construction of a mode of life that does not depend upon the mediation of work, value, money and the state. Right now, there are plenty of disparate social movements that, with a better understanding of what is at stake, might serve as the basis for just such a new society. We must not be afraid to take over land for our own cultivation where it is unused or used for commercial crops. We must not let houses sit empty while people sleep in the streets, nor insist people continue to pay rent when there are no longer any jobs to support them. Increasingly, over the course of the century, we will see a deepening of trends that can already be observed today as the 'work society' slowly collapses under the weight of its own technological development. It simply will no longer be possible, for example, to get good food easily. There will be more and more cuts to public health services and, save for an ever-dwindling number of pockets of prosperity, even the mass consumerism of the present may begin to look like a distant dream for many in the most developed countries. The question we are faced with is not one of seizing the state and controlling the market, nor of fantasising about technological solutions, but one of asking how we will respond when neither the market nor the state can provide for even the most basic aspects of human existence that make any kind of life worth living. Will we blindly follow the Hobbesian war of all against all that capitalism has prepared for us, and truly collapse into the looming barbaric nightmare of militarisation, gangs, drought, poverty, anomie and chaos? Or will we construct a society based on communities that finally allow us to discuss, without the absurd constraints of the valorisation of value, how we would actually like to live, in relationship with each other, ourselves and our natural environment? We know for a fact that human beings are capable of living differently because historical and anthropological evidence shows that capitalism is not at all the norm but a radical break with all other forms of society. There may not

be infinite variations for human interaction, but there is certainly a great deal of diversity, forms of social life past, present and imaginable that are more or less desirable.

The ‘critique of value’ has often been interpreted by its critics as a fundamentally pessimistic theory that is uninterested in the development of a different form of social life. It is true that it rejects the notion of a revolutionary ‘subject’ and that it predicts that the laws of capitalism develop in a destructive direction. However, it does so precisely to point out the pitfalls of an anti-capitalist left that has resoundingly failed, over the course of the past 200 years, to mount effective opposition to capitalism. If anything, the workers’ movement, taken as a whole, contributed a great deal to its further development. The cult of labour was, in particular, one of its greatest weaknesses. If the ‘critique of value’ then criticises ‘work’ and the ‘subject’, it does so to lay the theoretical groundwork that will allow current social movements, and those of the future, to develop in a more effective direction: towards a categorical break and not a mere ‘adjectival change’ on the surface of an already collapsing civilisation. The outlook may not be good. Right now, it does seem as though we really will work ourselves to death. Nevertheless, pessimistic predictions are not the same as a pessimistic attitude, particularly when it comes to the possibilities for human intervention in the world. There remains a chance for positive social change so long as there is critical theory and social movements; occasionally, the two will meet. Louis Scutenaire, the Surrealist poet, provides the best summation of our current predicament when he said, ‘But, pessimists, what was it you were hoping for?’⁶ Perhaps though, it is still best to leave Marx with the last word on the matter: ‘The point is not to free labour but to abolish it.’⁷

NOTES

1. Just to underline the ambiguity of Fourier as a critic of work, Zola, upon reading some of his writing, was driven into a pro-work fever: ‘I am reading it right now in amazement, I don’t know what will come from my research, but I want to glorify work and, in so doing, oblige those who profane it, subjugate it and cover it in ugliness and misery to respect it’, cited in Desroche, *La Société festive*, p. 327
2. Graham Robb, *The Discovery of France* (London: Picador, 2008).
3. Morris, nevertheless, retains the term ‘work’ in his utopia.
4. Walter Benjamin cited in Jappe, *The Writing on the Wall*, pp. 9–10.

5. Krisis Group, 'Manifesto Against Labour' (1999), <http://www.krisis.org/1999/manifesto-against-labour>
6. Scutenaire, *Mes Inscriptions* in Vaneigem, *Louis Scutenaire*, p. 116.
7. *MECW*, *The German Ideology*, vol. 5, p. 205. Translation changed.

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INDEX¹

A

- Abundance, 49, 69, 89, 91, 94, 95, 157, 181
Aéroporté collective, 45
Africa, 67, 80
Algeria, 51
Alienation, 7, 13, 18, 29, 32, 42n78, 46, 108, 110, 114, 128, 138–143, 145, 146, 148, 149, 151, 153, 155, 158, 163n11, 169, 170, 177, 179, 183, 194
Alquié, Ferdinand, 106
Althusser, Louis, 38n49
Anarchism, 2, 14, 33, 46, 81, 110–112, 119, 128, 136n87, 176
Anarcho-Syndicalism, 2
 illegalism, 110–112, 128
 individualism, 110–112, 128
Animals, 49
Anthropology, 7, 12, 37n42, 49, 140, 148, 157, 180, 194, 201
Antiquity, 49, 51, 89–90, 93, 149, 165n53, 193
Antisemitism, 11, 65–66, 71, 103n84
Apollinaire, Guillaume, 112
Aragon, Louis, 106, 107, 114–117, 128, 130
Architecture, 60, 116–117, 140
Arendt, Hannah, 41n66
Aristocracy, 9, 18, 33n2, 36n24, 40, 59, 63, 68, 90, 106, 110
Aristotle, 36n25, 98
Art, 26, 45, 56, 89, 97, 105–109, 113, 124–126, 129–131, 132n16, 133n18, 135n50, 136n87, 138–140, 149, 152, 153, 155, 162n10, 163n12, 165n68, 184, 196–198
Arts and Crafts movement, 89, 196
Australia, 67
Automation, 3–4, 46, 91, 99, 114, 154, 156–158, 187, 200

¹Note: Page numbers followed by ‘n’ refer to notes.

Autonomism, 44n95, 178, 190n46
 Avant-garde, 5, 46, 71, 81, 108–110,
 113, 116, 123, 125, 130, 132,
 138, 139, 141, 152–154,
 165n68, 170, 177, 197

B

Bankers, 19, 53, 65
 Barbarism, 17, 49, 54, 68, 99, 201
 Barbusse, Henri, 130
 Barthes, Roland, 56
 Basic income, 3, 26, 61, 186, 199, 200
 Baudelaire, Charles, 112
 Bauhaus, 113
 Belgium, 81, 112, 123, 163n20, 173
 Benjamin, Walter, 200, 202n4
 Bentham, Jeremy, 9
 Berger, Claude, 178, 180, 181, 184
 Biology, 7, 11, 88
 Blanc, Louis, 82–84
 Blanchard, Daniel, 141
 Bohemianism, 6, 107, 109–111,
 133n18, 139, 171, 176, 197
 Boiffard, Jacques-André, 106
 Boltanski, Luc, 5, 170–176, 184
 Bonnot Gang, 112, 128, 129, 134n37
 Bordeaux, 80, 178
 Bordigism, 178
 Boredom, 54, 69, 75n42, 114,
 139, 149
 Bourgeoisie, 2, 4–6, 9, 11–13, 15, 16,
 22–23, 29–31, 33, 48, 56, 64,
 67, 68, 80–83, 85, 87, 90–95,
 97, 101n33, 100, 107, 109–112,
 117–119, 121–123, 128,
 133n18, 135n51, 138, 140, 145,
 149, 150, 152–154, 158,
 168–169, 178, 194, 196–198
 Brazil, 67
 Breton, André, 1, 46, 105–107, 109,
 112, 115–117, 119–123,
 128–132, 136n87, 139, 143, 153

British, *see* Great Britain
 Bruant, Aristide, 162n7
 Brussels, 87

C

Capital, 11, 12, 21, 22, 25, 28–30,
 53, 59, 60, 64, 65, 84, 91, 95,
 96, 110, 120, 133n28, 170, 171,
 179, 183, 191, 199, 200
 Capitalism
 as abstract domination, 15, 16, 24,
 28–29, 64, 66, 145, 147, 174,
 175, 191n57
 as personal domination, 13, 16, 30,
 40n66, 64–65, 147, 151, 175,
 179–180, 194, 198
 spirit of, 5, 170–176, 184
 Capitalists, *see* Bourgeoisie
 Carles, Pierre, 3
 Carouy, Eduard, 112, 134n37
 Cartesianism, 9, 11, 69, 115–118,
 122, 123, 128, 131, 153, 177
 Catholicism, 90
 Cervantes, Miguel de, 89
 Chaplin, Charlie, 134n39
 Charity, 83, 87
 Chiapello, Eve, 5, 170–176, 184
 Children, 2, 18, 20, 26, 27, 39n55,
 48, 52, 55, 58, 60, 62, 70–71,
 73n19, 74n34, 87, 93, 113, 127,
 193, 194
 China, 14, 96
 Christianity, 18, 40n65, 85–88, 90
 Cicero, 90
 Civilisation, 31, 48–51, 54–58, 61–65,
 68–71, 75n40, 90, 92, 93, 108,
 116, 199, 202
 Clair, René, 113–114, 134n39,
 134n40
 Class struggle, 13, 16, 30–31, 97,
 121, 158–159, 164n21, 177,
 178, 181, 185, 191n57

- Colonialism, 24, 49, 51, 66–68,
 71–72, 73n19, 88, 96,
 133n28, 181
 Commodity, 13, 15, 19–24, 29,
 38n49, 41n70, 42n73, 67, 68,
 124, 126, 142–148, 150, 151,
 153, 155, 158, 161
 Communisation, 185, 191n57
 Communism, 23, 52, 75n53, 81, 88,
 93, 105, 125, 127, 129, 130,
 134n40, 140, 142, 146, 154,
 155, 171, 178–180, 185, 186,
 191n57
 Competition, 2, 4–5, 20–27, 31,
 45, 58, 96, 97, 112, 147, 169,
 198, 199
 Comte, Auguste, 89
 Constant (Nieuwenhuys), 154
 Constantinople, 59
 Consumerism, 3, 10, 24, 63, 96, 98,
 99, 114, 126, 142, 143, 151,
 153, 157, 159, 172, 196,
 199–201
 Consumption, 21–22, 63, 65, 82, 95,
 96, 98, 109, 110, 140, 142, 147,
 151, 153, 157, 158, 163n18, 169
 Coriolis, Gaspard-Gustave de, 8–9
 Creativity, 47, 61, 109, 124, 125,
 134n38, 139, 141, 149, 152,
 158, 159, 170–174, 177, 196
 Crèveœur, Jean de, 74n19
 Crisis, 4, 14, 17, 25–26, 31, 95–97,
 99, 76n103, 117, 127, 128, 146,
 152, 154, 156–158, 168, 171,
 175, 176, 178, 180–182, 185,
 186, 191n57, 194, 199, 200
 dotcom, 25, 175
 ecological, 4, 24, 25, 28, 169,
 180–181, 194
 Great Depression, 127, 170
 Long Depression, 95
 OPEC, 25, 156, 157, 175
 2008 financial crisis, 4, 25, 175, 199
 Critique of value, 6, 14–17, 30–33,
 37n42, 38n45, 38n47, 39n57,
 116, 181, 186, 194, 198, 202
 Critique of work
 affirmative, 31–33, 61, 62, 82, 84,
 99, 111, 121, 148, 174–175,
 184, 186, 195
 artistic, 5, 111, 130, 132, 139, 143,
 168, 171–177, 184, 188
 categorical, 6, 15–17, 21, 26–27,
 31–33, 42n79, 47, 48, 61, 64,
 71–72, 143, 145, 146, 148,
 153, 154, 156, 161, 168, 172,
 174, 175, 180, 183, 184, 186,
 188, 191n57, 193–195, 197,
 198, 202
 as intellectual tradition, 1, 4, 108,
 188, 196, 198
 phenomenological, 6, 7, 13, 16,
 31–33, 82, 99, 111, 142, 174,
 184, 187, 188, 194–195, 197
 social, 5, 171–176
 Cuba, 80
 Cybernetics, 25, 147, 156–157,
 163n11, 164n20
- D**
 Dada, 112, 116, 123–124, 152, 173
 Daedalus, 98
 Dali, Salvador, 107
 Darwin, Charles, 37n37
 Debord, Guy, 1, 3, 12, 46, 107, 126,
 137–161, 162n5, 162n6, 162n7,
 162n10, 162n18, 165n53,
 165n54, 165n68, 175, 181, 184,
 189n20, 196
 Deflation, 64
 Degrowth, 3, 181
 Democracy, 3, 13, 141, 145, 153,
 156, 157, 161, 163–164n20,
 171, 182, 184, 187
 Descartes, René, 9, 35n22, 115

Desire, 47, 49, 55–56, 58, 75n48,
111, 115, 118, 135n51, 155,
159, 169
Disability, 43n86, 65
Distribution, 2, 16, 30, 55, 58, 63,
72n5, 96–97
Ducasse, Isidore (le Comte de
Lautréamont), 125–126
Duchamp, Marcel, 123–125, 136n70

E

Ebert, Friedrich, 3
Ecology, 25, 46, 68, 73n8, 164n20,
180–181
Economics, 3, 4, 9, 11–13, 16, 25, 27,
31, 36n25, 37n35, 37n42,
38–39n55, 41n70, 42n78, 50, 53,
62–65, 68, 71, 74n19, 79, 81, 84,
86, 89, 91, 95–97, 108, 116, 130,
132, 140, 142, 144–146,
148–154, 156, 163n18, 168, 171,
172, 177, 179, 181, 184, 185,
195, 198, 199
Eden, 8, 49, 60
Efficiency, 23, 36n25, 41n70,
112–113, 173
Elizabeth II, 9
Ellul, Jacques, 181
Emancipation, 14, 16, 17, 30, 31, 66,
87, 138, 156, 158–161, 200
Engels, Friedrich, 46, 72n5, 79, 80,
100n14, 102n47
England, *see* Great Britain
Enlightenment, 8–9, 36n24, 47, 71,
85, 88, 197
Equality, 13, 52, 58, 63, 110, 119,
169, 171
Eurocentrism, 74n19
Europe, 24, 28, 30, 49, 52, 53, 66,
67, 73–74n19, 80, 81, 89, 91,
98, 112, 133n28, 142, 156,
181, 196

Everyday life, 19, 57, 108, 112, 116,
140, 141, 143, 149–153,
166n70, 167, 169, 170, 176,
179, 200
Exchange, 5, 8, 10, 13, 16, 21,
36n25, 59, 62, 65, 144
Exchange value, 22, 143–145, 148,
155, 164n33

F

Factory, 1, 2, 6, 19, 20, 87, 88, 92,
93, 98, 102n70, 111–114, 117,
120, 122, 123, 134n39, 134n40,
138, 141–142, 149, 167–169,
176, 179, 180, 182, 184,
189n20
Fetishism, 15, 22, 26, 28–30, 38n49,
53, 64, 74n19, 98, 99, 122,
144–147, 159–161, 186–188,
189n20, 194
Finance, 4, 17, 25, 26, 28, 42n80, 65,
68, 107, 175, 199
Fordism, 6, 24, 112–114, 142, 146,
170, 172, 176–178
Fourastié, Jean, 156–157
Fourier, Charles, 1, 11, 45–47, 72n5,
72–73n7, 73n8, 74n34, 75n40,
75n42, 75n48, 75n56, 76n65,
75n66, 77n102, 80–82, 85, 87,
89, 95, 97, 98, 101n26, 102n47,
103n84, 107, 133n28, 139, 141,
163n11, 164n20, 173–175, 179,
196, 197, 202n1
France, 1, 3, 4, 15, 18, 24, 25,
34n10, 36n24, 43n86, 49,
52–54, 61, 66, 67, 74n34,
79–81, 85, 90, 91, 93–94,
100n14, 100n15, 107, 112–113,
123, 125, 127, 130, 141, 142,
171, 172, 178, 181–183, 185,
186, 188, 190–191n49,
195–197, 199

- French thought, 1–2, 5–6, 8, 32,
 33, 46, 71, 82, 108, 131, 174,
 186, 196, 197
 Second Republic, 83
 Third Republic, 81, 84, 100n14
 Frankfurt School, 15, 186
 Frankin, André, 148
 Franklin, Benjamin, 73–74n19
 Freedom, 2, 12, 33n2, 50–52, 60–61,
 67, 70, 84, 88, 91, 93, 98, 108,
 111–114, 120–121, 149–155,
 158, 165n54, 170, 172, 173, 177
 French Communist Party (PCF), 105,
 127–132, 134n40, 136n86
 French Revolution, 36n24, 52, 58, 63,
 91, 93, 197
 Freud, Sigmund, 26, 43n89, 55–56,
 75n48, 112, 118, 135n51
 Friedman, Milton, 200
 Friends of Four Million Young
 Workers, 178–181
 Futurism, 113
- G**
- Gender, 27–28, 32, 37n35, 43n82,
 58, 94, 126
 Gérard, François, 106
 Gorz, André, 185–186
 Graeber, David, 4
 Great Britain, 4, 34n10, 51, 53, 59,
 68, 89, 91, 146, 181, 199
 Growth, 23, 24, 53, 62, 95, 96, 146,
 151, 153, 156, 199
 Guesde, Jules, 80, 83, 100n14
 Guilds, 94
 Gulags, 2, 182
- H**
- Hegel, GWF, 38n48, 105, 112
 Hegelianism, 15, 38n48, 38n49, 128,
 147, 162n5, 162n10
- Henry IV (of France), 90
 Holidays, 6, 18, 52, 89, 90, 94, 96,
 97, 151, 167
 Hollande, François, 25
 Hugo, Victor, 89, 101n44
 Huizinga, Johan, 140
- I**
- Identity, 2, 27–28, 91–93, 98, 99,
 112, 115–116, 118, 121–122,
 127, 131, 137–139, 141, 150,
 182, 187
 Illich, Ivan, 181
 Indigenous peoples, 66–67, 73n19,
 133n28
 Idleness, *see* Laziness
 Industrial Revolution, 3, 53, 54,
 59, 65, 66, 80, 81, 86,
 98, 197
 Second, 25, 112–113, 142,
 146, 153
 Third, 25, 147, 200
 Ivain, Gilles, 163n17
- J**
- Jacob, Marius, 111
 Jappe, Anselm, 2, 15, 31, 36n24,
 38n55, 43n81, 43n89, 56,
 162n5, 186
 ‘June Days’ of 1848, 81, 83
- K**
- Kant, Immanuel, 9, 15, 29
 Keynesianism, 24, 25, 31, 142,
 164n27
 Kock, Paul de, 89
 Kronstadt Rebellion, 136n87
 Kurz, Robert, 7, 10, 14–18, 23,
 29–33, 34n7, 35n17, 37n43,
 38n54, 41n71, 44n95, 198

L

Labour

- abolition of, 1, 7, 31, 32, 138, 139, 143, 150, 153–156, 161, 162n10, 168, 178–180, 183, 185, 193, 198, 202
 - abstract, 10, 19, 20, 26, 39n55, 41n66, 41n68, 41n70, 41n71, 42n73, 42n78, 43n84, 48, 60, 61, 64, 66, 71, 74n19, 101n26, 114, 125, 143–144, 146–148, 158, 160, 161, 180, 187, 188, 191n57
 - alienated labour, 7, 13, 46, 138, 139, 148, 151, 155, 177, 179, 183, 194
 - artisanal labour, 20, 22, 23, 94, 142
 - attractive labour, 50, 55–63, 66–67, 71, 72n5
 - concrete labour, 5, 10–12, 19, 20, 27, 41n68, 41n70, 41n71, 66, 71, 114, 122, 127, 141, 144, 147, 148, 155, 174, 180, 195
 - cult of, 2, 5, 24, 46, 54, 82, 85, 90, 185, 186, 202
 - dead labour (*see* Value)
 - definition of, 2, 7–11, 21, 22, 40n66, 41n71, 119, 132, 146, 187, 193
 - discipline, 3, 34n6, 52, 62, 114, 121, 134n39, 187
 - division of, 7, 24, 25, 55, 101n33, 107, 110, 119, 122, 126, 138, 140, 141, 146, 147
 - domestic labour, 3, 17, 26–28, 43n84, 59, 69–70, 127, 194
 - etymology, 8, 18, 180
 - historical specificity of, 7, 10–12, 16, 29, 32, 36n25, 39n60, 44n91, 46–47, 49, 99, 147, 186, 187, 191, 196
 - labour power, 12, 13, 21, 23, 25, 26, 30, 70, 179, 191n49
 - living labour, 20–23, 30, 143, 183, 187, 189n20
 - as necessity, 2, 4, 10–12, 23, 38n54, 50, 80, 98, 99, 106–108, 115, 119, 124, 126, 127, 148–152, 154, 157, 158, 161, 169
 - ontology of, 8, 11, 12, 14, 15, 17, 20, 21, 31, 32, 41n71, 72, 119, 145, 148, 153, 155, 175
 - rationalisation of, 9, 11–14, 23, 25, 29, 59, 62, 63, 70, 71, 112, 134n38, 138, 141, 153
 - refusal of, 1, 5, 47, 50–51, 65, 67, 94, 106–107, 109–112, 115, 121, 124, 128, 138, 145, 176, 177, 180
 - repugnant labour, 46, 48, 50–54, 60, 65, 66, 72n5
 - resistance to, 1, 3, 4, 111, 176, 182
 - slave labour (*see* Slavery)
 - wage labour, 3, 6, 13, 19, 24–26, 31, 50–54, 60, 62, 67, 81, 83, 85, 92–93, 96, 127, 138, 140–142, 144–145, 148, 153, 154, 159, 170, 174, 175, 178–184, 186, 199
 - work ethic, 5, 9, 11, 18, 24, 40, 46, 56, 80, 81, 85–88, 90, 92, 93, 95, 98, 99, 107, 110–112, 119–121, 138, 168–169, 177, 182, 185
 - work-life balance, 3, 5, 200
- Lacaze-Duthiers, Gerard de, 111
- Lafargue, Laura (née Marx), 79–80
- Lafargue, Paul, 1, 11, 33n2, 79–99, 99n3, 99n5, 100n14, 100n15, 100n20, 101n26, 101n33, 101n44, 102n47, 102n70, 103n84, 107–110, 121, 123, 124, 126, 132n14, 133n28, 196, 197
- Lagarde, Christine, 33n2
- Lasch, Christopher, 43n89

- Laziness, 1, 3, 4, 12, 22, 28, 43n86,
 47, 52–55, 58, 63, 65, 82,
 84–89, 91, 92, 97, 98, 101n33,
 105, 107, 110, 116, 124–126,
 133n34, 135n50, 162n7, 183,
 189n16, 196
- Lefebvre, Henri, 72n7, 128, 166n70
L'Égalité, 80, 83–85, 100n14
- Léger, Fernand, 113
- Leisure, 5, 12, 35n22, 36n24, 61, 63,
 82, 89, 90, 92, 98, 99n7,
 100n15, 114, 126, 149, 150,
 157, 169
- Lenin, Vladimir, 128–129
- Leninism, 141
- Liberalism, 3, 33, 52, 56, 64, 65, 67,
 84, 171
- London, 79, 80, 89
- Louis XVI, 63, 106
- Lukács, György, 147
- Luxembourg, Rosa, 103n76
- Lyon, 80, 81, 92
- M**
- Magritte, René, 118
- Maier, Corinne, 3
- Malthus, Thomas, 49, 53
- Malva, Constant (Alphonse Bourlard),
 133n34
- Management, 2, 3, 9, 30, 36n25,
 44n91, 52, 66, 83, 87, 111, 141,
 147, 159, 161, 167, 170,
 173–177, 184, 185, 188, 191,
 195, 199
- Mandeville, Bernard de, 56
- Man Ray, 116
- Maoism, 14, 178
- Market, 2, 3, 16, 17, 19–25, 31, 32,
 50, 52, 58, 60–61, 64, 65, 84, 94,
 96, 98, 108, 114, 126, 142–144,
 148, 171, 175, 195, 199, 201
- Martin, Jeppesen, 139
- Marx, Eleanor, 102n47
- Marx, Karl, 1, 2, 6–7, 9–16, 20, 22,
 29, 35n17, 36n25, 37n26,
 37n35, 37n37, 37n38, 38n48,
 38n49, 38n54, 46, 48, 49, 72n5,
 75n53, 79–81, 85, 91, 99, 99n5,
 100n14, 101n47, 105, 120,
 145–146, 148, 155, 156, 159,
 178, 186, 188, 195, 196,
 200, 202
- Capital*, 2, 10, 12, 16, 22, 36n25,
 38n49, 81, 146, 148, 186
- Communist Manifesto, The*,
 81, 146
- Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's
 Philosophy of Right, A*, 146
- Economic and Philosophical
 Manuscripts*, 146
- esoteric, 15–16, 35n17, 143,
 186, 195
- exoteric, 7, 9, 12–14, 35n17,
 37n38, 91, 98, 148,
 153, 156
- German Ideology, The*, 72n5, 75n53
- Grundrisse*, 9–10, 72n5, 146, 186
- Marxism, 6, 10–16, 30, 33, 38n45,
 38n55, 42n79, 53, 64, 72, 72n7,
 80, 81, 85, 91, 98, 119,
 127–131, 136n87, 139, 146,
 147, 156, 159, 168, 179, 181,
 186, 196, 198
- Masson, André, 122–123
- May '68, 85, 157–158, 161, 166n88,
 168, 171, 173, 175, 177, 178,
 181, 182, 189n20
- Medicine, 26, 79–80, 88, 101n33,
 106, 180
- Middle Ages, 9, 18, 40n63, 40n65,
 87, 89, 91, 149, 197
- Millais, John, 89
- Mitterrand, François, 25

Modernisation, 3, 13, 16, 23–25, 31, 142, 153–157, 163n17
 Money, 21–22, 24, 28–32, 39n55, 42n73, 62, 64–67, 90, 96, 107, 114, 120, 144, 179, 195, 200, 201
 More, Thomas, 198
 Morris, William, 89, 101–102n47, 111, 125, 143, 196, 198, 201, 202n3

N

Napoleon I, 66, 87, 95
 Narcissism, 43n89, 56, 117, 135n51, 155
 Nature, 2, 4, 7–9, 11, 12, 14, 19, 23, 29, 31, 47–51, 54, 57, 58, 60, 64, 67–70, 88, 99, 107, 108, 127, 131, 145, 148–149, 151–155, 157, 163–164n20, 177, 180, 187, 194, 200, 201
 domination of, 11–12, 14, 23, 29, 30, 44n89, 56, 60, 115–118, 131, 152–154, 186, 194
 metabolism with, 7, 11, 31, 64, 194
 Nazism, 2, 45
 Neo-liberalism, 5, 6, 25, 82, 157, 164n27, 200
 Netherlands, 51
 Newton, Isaac, 45–47, 55, 56
 Nietzsche, Friedrich, 111
 Noble savage, 49, 73–74n19, 88
 North Korea, 2

O

Office, 2, 19, 90, 120, 169, 195
 Overproduction, 95–99, 181
 Owen, Robert, 46

P

Parasitism, 6, 65, 71, 93, 103n84, 107, 111
 Paris, 45–46, 80–85, 105–107, 109–111, 119, 129, 135n55, 137–141, 161, 163n17, 169, 171, 186, 189n16, 197
 Paris Commune of 1871, 80–84, 93, 161
 Parti ouvrier, 83
 Patriarchy, 27–28, 43n86, 69, 72n5
 PCF, *see* French Communist Party
 Peasants, 3, 9, 18, 40n65, 74n34, 91, 96, 110
 Péret, Benjamin, 106
 Phalanstery, 59, 60, 63–64, 68, 70
 Picabia, François, 113
 Piketty, Thomas, 5
 Pinot-Gallizio, Giuseppe, 138–139
 Plato, 90
 Play, 1, 46, 50, 57–58, 61, 71, 72n5, 88, 106, 108, 110, 118, 126, 139–141, 149, 151–155, 158, 161, 163n11, 163n20, 167, 171, 173, 198
 Pleasure, 47, 54–59, 61–63, 89, 95, 107, 142
 Poetry, 71, 105–107, 109, 110, 115, 118, 120, 122–123, 125, 126, 130, 196, 202
 Poland, 52
 Police, 45, 112, 113, 129, 130, 184
 Political economy, *see* Economics
 Politics, 2, 3, 30–32, 36n25, 42n75, 45, 52, 54, 56, 81, 88, 90, 99n3, 101n26, 101n33, 106, 108, 122, 128, 130, 131, 138, 149, 153, 160–161, 163–164n20, 171, 176, 182, 186, 196, 199
 Pol Pot, 14
 Pope, 90, 127

- Positivism, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 38n54,
 40n66, 48, 54, 64, 66, 71, 106,
 115, 127, 129, 132, 148
 Post-modernism, 5, 7, 40n66, 186
 Postone, Moishe, 14–17, 38n54,
 186, 198
 Post-war period, 4, 6, 24, 25, 112,
 125–126, 138, 142, 156–158,
 161, 164n27, 168, 170–173,
 179, 181, 184
 Poverty, 4, 51, 53, 54, 58, 60, 63–64,
 74n34, 79, 87, 89, 92, 95–97, 107,
 109, 160, 172, 177, 191n50, 201
 Pre-modern, 9, 12, 18, 21, 24, 36n24,
 37n42, 40n65, 41n71, 61,
 86–91, 95, 101n26, 108, 125,
 132n16, 144, 148–151, 157,
 164n20, 180, 187, 197, 198
 Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, 89
 Prison, 51, 80, 81, 87, 90, 100n15,
 111, 113–114, 134n37,
 134n40, 179
 Production, *see* Productivity
 Productivism, 2–3, 43n84, 61, 64, 66,
 68, 73n8, 85, 159, 179, 180
 Productivity, 2, 4, 9, 11, 12, 14, 16,
 18, 22, 24, 25, 29, 34n6, 34n10,
 43n84, 53, 54, 60–65, 67–71,
 93, 96–98, 120, 126, 138, 142,
 146–156, 161, 169, 177, 181,
 185, 194, 196, 198, 199
 Profit, 10–11, 13, 20, 22, 26–28,
 42n79, 54, 95, 133n34, 181, 200
 Progress, 2, 9, 11–12, 30, 48, 53, 91,
 98, 116, 150, 157
 Proletarian Literature, 130–131, 136n86
 Proletariat, *see* Workers
 Propaganda, 3, 13, 111
 Property, 15, 16, 30, 50, 53, 80,
 83–84, 148
 Prostitution, 82, 97, 115, 120
 Protest, 3, 80, 81, 120, 183
 Protestantism, 5, 9, 11, 46, 56, 80,
 81, 89, 90, 169, 177, 185
 Proudhon, Pierre-Joseph, 46
 Psychology, 3, 17, 26, 27, 43–44n89,
 55–56, 112, 131, 197, 200
- Q**
- Quevedo, Francisco de, 89
- R**
- Rabelais, François, 89
 Racism, 28, 51, 58, 71, 73n19, 182
 Rationalism, 9, 11, 28, 99, 106,
 115–118, 127, 153, 177
 Recuperation, 174–175, 184, 188,
 191n53
 Reich, Wilhelm, 55–56, 75n48
 Religion, 2, 3, 47–48, 56, 85–90, 93,
 100n20, 108, 122, 131, 196,
 134n40
See also Catholicism, Christianity
 and Protestantism
 Rest, 18, 86, 89–91, 95–98, 113, 154,
 167, 198–199, 201
 Revolution, 7, 16, 31, 52, 79–81, 84,
 91, 93–94, 99, 105, 107, 111,
 117, 118, 122, 126, 128–131,
 134n40, 138, 140, 145, 146,
 150, 153–161, 168, 178, 179,
 182, 183, 185, 186, 189n20,
 196, 200, 202
 Ricardo, David, 9, 37n26
 Riesel, René, 181
 Rigaut, Jacques, 106
 Rights, 1, 31, 32, 47, 50–51, 58,
 60–61, 70, 80–85, 88, 90, 93,
 97, 111, 116, 121, 126, 131,
 135, 169, 182–183, 199
 right to work, 50, 60–61, 81–84,
 93, 97, 182–183

- Rimbaud, Arthur, 82, 109–110, 133n28
- Romanticism, 89, 108, 132n15, 139, 197
- Rossetti, Dante Gabriel, 89
- Ruskin, John, 89, 111
- Russia, 51, 81, 128
- Russian Revolution, 128–129, 160–161
- S**
- Sabbath, 18, 48, 53, 87, 89
- Sade, Marquis de, 56
- Sadoul, Georges, 127, 129
- Saint-Simon, Henri de, 46
- Sanguinetti, Gianfranco, 184
- Scarcity, 12, 49, 50, 124, 180
- Schiller, Friedrich, 108
- Scholz, Roswitha, 17, 26–27, 43n81
- Science, 9, 11, 13, 24, 29, 37n37, 47, 53, 72, 75n56, 88, 129, 141, 146, 154, 157, 164n21, 172, 176, 179, 186
- Scurti, Frank, 45
- Scutenaire, Louis, 112, 123, 202
- Séguy, Roland, 182, 191n50
- Self-management, 161, 176, 184, 185
- Situationist International (SI), 1, 2, 12, 15, 34n6, 45, 46, 72n7, 75n48, 125–126, 130, 132, 137–161, 162n5, 163n11, 163n12, 163n17, 163n18, 163–164n20, 164n27, 165n67, 166n70, 166n88, 171, 173, 175, 178–181, 183–185, 189n20, 191n57, 196
- constructed situations, 140, 153–155, 159, 161, 179, 180
- Slavery, 19, 51–52, 54, 67–68, 90, 91, 93, 111, 120–122, 178–180, 183, 191n49
- Social democracy, 3, 25, 179
- Socialism, 3, 12, 14, 25, 34n7, 46, 63, 80, 82–84, 93, 98, 100n14, 102n47, 125, 131, 143, 164n21, 171, 177, 179, 198
- Socialism or Barbarism, 141, 143, 147, 178
- Socialist Realism, 131
- Social movements, 4, 5, 7, 14, 31, 93, 161, 197, 201, 202
- Sociology, 5, 7, 13, 15, 19, 22, 33n1, 72n7, 161, 170, 176, 187, 195
- Soupault, Philippe, 134n39
- Spain, 36n24, 91, 96, 161, 197
- Spanish Revolution, 161
- Spectacle, 126, 139, 143–154, 157–159, 184
- Stakhanovism, 179
- Stalinism, 128–131, 178, 179
- State, 2, 13, 31, 32, 44n91, 68, 83, 84, 108, 131, 142, 147, 152, 160, 161, 171, 179, 195, 199, 201
- Stirner, Max, 111
- Strikes, 45, 84–85, 109, 121, 167, 176, 199
- Students, 31, 79, 80, 109, 160, 173, 189n20
- Subject, 5, 9, 11, 14–17, 29–32, 36n24, 37n35, 38n55, 39n55, 42n78, 43–44n89, 44n91, 46, 49, 55–57, 64, 66, 72, 81, 91–92, 94, 99, 108, 110, 114–119, 121–122, 130, 131, 135n51, 140, 141, 145, 147, 153, 155–156, 158–161, 168, 173, 182, 183, 185–188, 189n20, 193–195, 200–202
- automatic subject, 15, 29, 64, 147
- homo economicus*, 9, 37n42

- homo faber*, 2, 9, 12, 118, 123, 125, 131, 155
 as object, 17, 30, 145, 183, 188
 revolutionary subject, 16, 94, 168, 189n20
 subject of history, 46, 73, 91, 130, 158, 168, 183, 185, 189n20
- Substance, 5, 17, 18, 20–22, 39n59, 157
- Surplus value, 13, 20, 24, 26, 27, 42n78, 149, 150, 153, 155, 156, 158, 159
- Surrealism, 1, 105–112, 114–123, 125–132, 133n34, 134n39, 135n50, 135n51, 135n54, 136n86, 139–140, 143, 152, 153, 173, 191n53, 196, 202
- T**
- Taylorism, 25, 59, 122, 134n38, 134n39, 146
- Technology, 3–4, 7, 8, 11–14, 17, 22–24, 26, 29–32, 48, 74n19, 90, 91, 95–98, 113, 126, 141, 151, 152, 154, 156, 157, 164n20, 168–169, 173, 181, 184, 185, 187, 191n49, 194, 198–199, 201
- Theft, 13, 60, 111, 133n34, 156
- Thiers, Adolph, 83, 86
- Time, 3, 12, 13, 18–24, 26–27, 29, 40n61, 41n70, 42n78, 58, 59, 61, 62, 74n19, 82, 89–91, 95, 97, 99n7, 100n15, 120, 122–123, 125, 126, 136n70, 141, 143, 149–154, 156–159, 161, 163n18, 164n21, 179, 189n16, 193, 195, 200
 abstract time, 18, 40n61, 59, 123
 concrete time, 18, 40n61
 dead time, 149
 free and leisure time, 12, 61, 82, 89, 99n7, 100n15, 126, 143, 149–154, 158
 socially necessary labour time, 20–23, 193
 time saving, 23, 27, 59, 62
- Totalitarianism, 114, 157, 168
- Totality, 27, 114, 126, 137, 140, 143, 159, 166n70
- Trotsky, Leon, 128–129, 136n87
- Trotskyism, 178, 186
- Tzara, Tristan, 125–126, 129, 132
- U**
- Unconscious, 29, 55, 115, 116, 118, 145, 151, 161
- Unemployment, 3, 4, 28, 53–54, 60–61, 65, 71, 83, 95–97, 123, 127, 169, 175, 176, 181, 182, 189n16, 191n49
- Universal income, *see* Basic income
- USA, 4, 15, 46, 73–74n19, 80, 84, 98, 112, 170, 199
- Use value, 10, 20, 21, 41n71, 42n73, 143, 148–150, 152, 153, 155
- USSR, 2, 14, 52, 105, 106, 128, 131134n40, 141, 147, 157
- Utilitarianism, 9, 11, 36n25, 43n84, 69, 71, 116–117, 127, 130, 140, 154, 157, 170, 177
- Utility, 10–12, 19, 29, 42n78, 51, 116, 117, 148, 155, 177, 180, 197
- Utopia, 2, 33, 55–61, 70, 71, 101n47, 107, 109, 141, 143, 153, 157, 163n11, 163n20, 164n21, 169, 180, 197–199, 202n3
- Utopian Socialism, 1, 46, 80, 141, 164n21

V

- Value (form), 6, 9, 10, 13–15,
20–33, 36n25, 38n45, 30n57,
42n78, 42n80, 43n82, 43n86,
44n91, 49, 53, 60, 61, 64, 65,
70, 71, 97, 99, 100n19, 111,
114, 116, 125, 141, 143–150,
153, 155, 156, 158, 159, 161,
164n33, 169, 172, 181,
186–188, 194, 197, 198,
200–202
- Value-dissociation, 17, 26–29, 39n57,
43n81, 43n82, 43n86, 49, 70,
116, 186
- Vancigem, Raoul, 46, 136n87, 141,
148, 152, 155, 158, 159, 162n4,
163n11, 163–164n20, 173–174,
180, 181, 189n20
- Vincent, Jean-Marie, 186–189,
192n77
- Violence, 13, 14, 66, 68, 81,
105, 106, 123, 128, 133n28,
139, 181

W

- Wages, *see* Labour (wage labour)
- War, 1, 69, 105, 111, 112, 121,
127–129, 136, 149, 152, 156,
181, 201
- Rif War, 129
- WW1, 112, 120–121, 152
- WW2, 45, 127

- Wealth, 2, 9, 13, 21, 22, 36n25,
37n35, 53, 59, 61–65, 95–96,
147, 169, 180
- Weber, Max, 170
- Welfare State, 25, 142
- Wilde, Oscar, 95
- Work, *see* Labour
- Workers, 1–6, 9, 12, 13, 15, 16,
19–21, 23, 25, 29–31, 33,
41n70, 43n84, 46, 50, 52–54,
57, 62, 63, 72, 74n34, 79–89,
91–99, 101n33, 102n70, 105,
110–114, 121–123, 125, 127,
129–132, 134n38, 134n39,
137–139, 141–142, 144, 146,
154, 157–161, 163n11,
167–172, 175, 176, 178–179,
181–185, 187–188, 189n16,
189n20, 190–191n49, 191n57,
199, 200, 202
- Workers Union, 178–184
- Workhouses, 51, 87
- Working class, *see* Workers
- Workshops, 52, 54, 59–60, 71, 81, 83,
97, 127

X

- Xenophon, 90

Z

- Zola, Emile, 131, 196, 202n1