

What's Wrong with Work?

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Contents

Acknowledgements	1-3
Abstract	4
<u>Introduction: How To Think About What's Wrong with Work</u>	5-44
1. Work's Place in Political Philosophy	
2. Work as Politically Significant	
3. Philosophers Working?	
4. Better Work?	
5. Getting To Work	
<u>Chapter One: What is 'Work'?</u>	45-82
1. Real, Conceptual Stakes	
2. Ideology, Feminism and Social meaning	
3. Work Claims as Abbreviative of Other Claims About 'Work'	
4. Creeping Feelings: The Case of 'Emotional Labour'	
5. Additive vs Narrowing Approaches	
6. Better 'Work'?	
7. Conclusion	
<u>Chapter Two: Domination, Politicising Power</u>	83-136
1. The Domination Critique of Work	
2. Tyranny, Democracy, Control	
3. Why Not Workplace Democracy?	
4. Efficiency as Ideology	
5. 'Experimentation': from Above or from Below	
6. Limits and Horizons	
7. Conclusion	

<u>Chapter Three: Recognition, or A Philosopher Goes to Market</u>	137-187
1. What is Recognition: Honneth's Contribution to Critical Theory	
2. Might it Work? Concrete Labour and Recognition's Usefulness	
4. Honneth's Moral Maze	
5. Further Limitations	
6. Why Not Abandon the Moral Market?	
7. Conclusion	
 <u>Chapter Four: Alienation's Muted Return</u>	 188-245
1. Introduction: What is Alienation?	
2. More Than a Feeling: Marx's Alienation	
3. Jaeggi's Revisionary Formalism	
4. Essentialism and Paternalism Perfectionism	
5. The Case for Marx's Alienation (I)	
6. The Case for Marx's Alienation (II)	
7. Conclusion	
 <u>Chapter Five: Ten Things I Hate About UBI</u>	 246-309
1. What are UBIs?	
2. Who Wants a UBI?	
3. Dilemmas: Strange Bedfellows, Trojan Horses, Smugglers	
4. Feasibility and Desirability: Further Criticism from the Left	
5. Universal Basic Choices	
6. Conclusion	
 <u>Conclusion: Thinking Work, Redux</u>	 310-317
 Bibliography	 318-360

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Abstract

This thesis offers a critical re-evaluation of how contemporary political philosophy engages with the institution of work. While work remains a central organising principle of modern life, the possibilities for its critique are often forestalled by the very conceptual frameworks designed to interrogate it. The thesis examines how leading philosophical approaches render work politically inert—not through omission, but through forms of theoretical closure that obscure its structural conditions.

The project proceeds through four conceptual sites—work, domination, alienation, and recognition—and one proposed solution: universal basic income. Each is analysed in terms of how it frames, limits, or enables critique, and how it makes political conflict more or less visible. These are treated as philosophical devices: models that organise the intelligibility of work, for better or worse. In each case, the thesis identifies a distinct mode of foreclosure: the naturalisation and mystification of work's conceptual boundaries (work); the ideological use of efficiency and pragmatism (domination); the formal abstraction of subjective estrangement (alienation); and the idealisation of market relations (recognition). In the case of UBI, the difficulty of adjudicating between competing left-wing horizons is critically examined.

By taking one problem with work to be its conceptual and, thus, political foreclosure, the thesis offers a model of critique that is historically specific, materially grounded, and structurally oriented. It engages debates in non-ideal theory and political realism, asking not only how work ought to be organised, but what, if anything, philosophers can do, especially when critique itself is part of the problem.

Introduction: How To Think About What Is Wrong with Work

Every child knows a nation which ceased to work, I will not say for a year, but even for a few weeks, would perish.

—*Karl Marx*

She works hard for the money,

So hard for it honey,

She works hard for the money, so you better treat her right

—*Donna Summer*

1. Work's Place in Political Philosophy

Why should political philosophers pay attention to work? Five reasons are typically offered for work meriting philosophical attention: it is common (unless we are very lucky we have to work and we have to work most of the time for most of our lives); it may well involve significant harms; these harms may well be becoming both more numerous and more serious; it is socially significant for individuals and for society (it makes up their lives not just in time but in meaningfulness and development); and, when considered at the level of the general activity of a society, it reproduces that society

How could work be harmful? What might be said to be *wrong* with work? Work has been accused of producing and abetting domination, misrecognition (of individuals and of their work

activities), alienation and exploitation. Inasmuch as it is one means through which the distribution of value produced in societies is carried out, it has been considered in relation to distributive justice and inequality. If we are often at work, which we are, our exposure to its harms, should they exist, will be significant.

Harms associated with work might be local to it, but a frequent concern is that they could have effects elsewhere. Do hierarchical workplaces within the capitalist division of labour, for instance, negatively affect the democratic character of society? Does a lack of recognition of certain forms of activity *as* work, particularly work predominantly carried out by women, affect gender equality? These reasons and more have brought philosophers to look at work.

Philosophers, like anyone else, are affected by their contexts. This is to say that: things happening around them will have far-reaching effects on what they do and think. In the case of work, an important context for philosophers of work is a perceived deterioration of working conditions in the advanced industrial economies relative to the work order of the second half of the last century. By ‘work order’, I mean what work is generally like, including the labour process itself, the cultural and political meanings and expectations that people have about it or around it, how it is regulated, where it takes place, and so on. The Fordist work order, in which (some) workers could reasonably expect secure, full-time, long-term employment in manufacturing, where they were able to use their political leverage as organised in unions to reliably secure a good part of the surplus produced by their efforts, with a significant portion of their needs met outside of the market, by public services, has been replaced by a work order characterised by reduced trade union presence in newly-dominant service sectors, a resultantly deepening inequality as workers command less of the surplus, increasingly insecure contractual arrangements, and cuts and conditions imposed on public services and state financial support.

Two points are important here: (1) the Fordist work order delivered this plenty and stability in part through exclusions, expropriations and inequalities, both within and between nations, locking some (women, non-whites, both in the metropole and former colony) out of some or all of its gains; (2) the exact details of this new work order were not settled in advance and are the result of political choices. What post-industrial work looked like was (and remains) open, up for grabs. The work regime that emerged is characterised by bifurcated labour markets, persistent low pay, precarious working arrangements and declining unionisation for many. Rapid technological developments threaten to further erode the quality of work, including through digital surveillance and the threat of automation.

This new work looks, and is, sufficiently different to the old work to invite reflection on what has changed and the political implications of this change. The responses to this new moment, or conjuncture, are many and growing. They range from theories of the precariat and their political hopes, to addressing rising inequality, to considering asymmetries of power in the workplace, and the subjects and work cultures that these produce, to the nature and meaning of new financial forms. These will shape how we make sense of the present, including what we can expect from and should hope for and fear about automation, the connections between (new) work and gender and race, if, and if so, how work could be different.

It is noted frequently and with good humour, that nearly every left-wing book published since 2008 mentions a need to return to talking about capitalism. Capitalism is back. Nearly every paper or monograph in political philosophy and political theory on work in recent years,¹ often,

¹ I take political philosophy (in the sense I understand it here) and political theory to be overlapping or similar enough (despite their different disciplinary histories) that I do not distinguish between them.

but not always, in response to new, bad work begins with the claim that work is under-theorised, relative to other topics, and that it needs, or would benefit from, philosophical attention.

Something being said frequently does not make it untrue. Political philosophy *has* paid less attention to work than it has to other domains, including to domains outside of its most narrow interpretations and focuses (in the state, for instance). Conventionally, work and philosophy do not go together. Philosophy is practised as a result of the avoidance of work, or more, accurately, while someone else is carrying out work. (Even as philosophy has been professionalised and bureaucratised as employment). Philosophy is ennobling, work drudgerous and, perhaps most importantly, something to be done by someone else, over there.

In the history of philosophy, work assumes a variety of different roles. A version of a work as drudgerous is present in Christian views of work as an imposed duty; work is what has to be done, a realm of obligation, not one with the possibility of either enjoyment or freedom. Work also appears as an important theme in Hegel, who holds that people's conscious activity reshapes the world, an idea upon which Marx later expands. Within Marxism, there is a series of debates on the nature of the problem of work, its groundings, the boundaries of work (a particular concern for feminist thinkers), and on strategies for overcoming these. John Locke's account of property as the result of labour mixed with natural resources made use of work, changing its meaning in the process. Contemporary liberalism's approach to work is less conceptually transformative than Locke's and narrower than Hegel's or Marx's, concentrating on how to remove excesses of work that prove particularly deleterious for freedom or for a good life. Rawls, for instance, makes only a few scattered remarks on work.

It is worth repeating that the relative lack of interest on the part of political philosophers in work seems, on the face of it, puzzling.² Work is common, obligatory (effectively), and socially significant. It is significant not just as a site of potential meaning and development in the life trajectories of any of us as individuals, but also as a factor in the reproduction of societies. If work stopped suddenly, we would notice. In this second aspect, as the means of societal reproduction³ there is yet another compelling reason to give work attention. How a society reproduces itself is a fundamentally political one; the collective activity to meet and generate needs and the conditions under which such activity is undertaken seem like problems or sets of problems that should be of interest to political philosophers; as in them the lives of everyone, power relations, and decisions about our collective present and future are implicated.

Yet it is this aspect that is most frequently occluded, even, as I will argue, when attention is given to work. There is a tendency on the part of political philosophy to take capitalist social arrangements for granted (or capitalist socialist arrangements minus neoliberalism's new bad work), which means that the question of work is narrowed, either to be beyond the scope of politics, or to be addressed by questions of distribution of various goods (money, meaning, autonomy) or knock-on effects (on democracy, on equality) of work. While these bring important aspects of work into view, they generally say little about work as an activity and even less about the mode of production. Both of these questions have been left untroubled by philosophical attention.

² Many have pointed this out. For a recent example, see Axel Honneth, 'Democracy and the division of labor: A blind spot in political philosophy' in *The Poverty of Our Freedom: Essays 2012-19*, Polity, 2023, pp. 141-59.

³ I will use 'societal reproduction' to denote the reproduction of a particular society and 'social reproduction' to denote the reproduction of societies in general. This is only for clarity rather than thinking there is any serious virtue in this distinction.

As I will argue, it is the quality of attention as well as its presence or absence that matters. There are different ways of looking, which yield different results. This new outgrowth of thinking about work is due to be given some attention of its own; this dissertation is an attempt at doing so. It asks if this renewed attention to work is adequate to the tasks of diagnosing and challenging the problems of work-under-capitalism.

In the last decade, promising green shoots of a nascent political philosophical critique of work have appeared. There have been several attempts to theorise harms of works and attempts to theorise solutions to those harms from within critical theory, and more mainstream political philosophy, running the gamut of left Hegelians, to pragmatists, to utopians, to Rawlsian liberals, to neo-Republicans, and including—both as a distinct group and as versions of the others—feminists.

In this recent turn to work, it has been considered from and within a variety of different theoretical traditions and standpoints. Feminists have contested the boundaries of work, both in terms of the law, in the case of sex work,⁴ and in terms of the cultural or social meaning of work, especially in relation to its place in anti-capitalist thinking.⁵ This includes thinking about the family and the household as part of capitalist work,⁶ as opposed to a haven outside the

⁴ Juno Mac and Molly Smith, *Revolting Prostitutes*, Verso, London and New York, 2018; Heather Berg, *Porn Work*, The University of North Carolina Press, 2021.

⁵ Selma James, *Sex, Race and Class—The Perspective of Winning: A Selection of Writings 1952–2011*, PM Press, 2012; Mariarosa Della Costa, *Women and the Subversion of the Community*, PM Press, 2019; Ellie Anderson, ‘Hermeneutic Labor: The Gendered Burden of Interpretation in Intimate Relationships Between Women and Men’, *Hypatia*, vol. 38 (1), 2023, pp. 177–197.

⁶ Sophie Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now*, Verso, 2019; M. E. O’Brien, *Family Abolition: Capitalism and the Communizing of Care*, Pluto Press, 2023, Alva Gotby, *They Call It Love: The politics of emotional life*, Verso, 2023; Helen Hester and Nick Srnicek, *After Work: A History of the Home and the Fight for Free Time*, Verso, 2023; Amy De’Ath, ‘Gender and Social Reproduction’, in *The SAGE Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, ed Beverley Best, Werner Bonefeld and Chris O’Kane, SAGE Publications, 2018; Kirstin Munro, ‘“Social Reproduction Theory,” Social Reproduction, and Household Production’, *Science & Society*, vol. 83 (4), 2019, pp. 451–468.

market, as well as discussion of where the limits of the market should be in relation to gendered work practices like surrogacy. It also includes meta-theoretical reflections on the nature of demand making and the relations between theories, movements and ideas.⁷ There is also work that draws out the implications of sociological concepts like emotional labour, bringing women's work into view. Elsewhere, the relationship between gender, race and capitalism has been theorised.⁸ This strand of work thinking reflects on but is also continuous with a set of debates about women, work and women's work in socialist and Marxist feminism in the 1970s and 80s.

Republicans seek to broaden or go beyond liberal accounts of negative freedom with a competing account of freedom as the absence of arbitrary interference, and its presence as domination. They have looked at the workplace in light of a concern with domination.⁹ Conventional republicans argue for enhanced exit via a minimal UBI. Radical republicans argue for a larger UBI and the turning of attention to the economy as a site of domination.¹⁰ This requires a reworking of the republican account of freedom-as-non-domination to include impersonal agents, which has led to a lively debate within republicanism, including within and between republican socialism and socialist republicanism.¹¹ Republicans also draw on

⁷ Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*, Duke University Press, 2011; Alyssa Battistoni 'Ideology at Work? Rethinking Reproduction', *American Political Science Review*, 2024, pp. 1–14, Katrina Forrester, 'Feminist Demands and the Problem of Housework', *American Political Science Review*, vol. 116 (4), 2022, pp. 1278–1292.

⁸ Nancy Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism*, Verso, 2013; Vanessa Wills, 'What Could It Mean to Say, "Capitalism Causes Sexism and Racism?"', *Philosophical Topics*, vol. 46 (2), 2018, pp. 229–246.

⁹ Philip Pettit, 'A Republican Right to Basic Income?', *Basic Income Studies*, vol. 2 (2), 2007, pp. 1–9.

¹⁰ Daniel Raventós Casassas, 'Economic Sovereignty as the Democratisation of Work: The Role of Basic Income', *Basic Income Studies*, vol. 11 (1), 2016, pp. 1–15; Daniel Raventós Casassas and Jurgen De Wispelaere, 'Republicanism and the Political Economy of Democracy', *European Journal of Social Theory*, vol. 19 (2), pp. 283–300; Alex Gourevitch, 'Labor Republicanism and the Transformation of Work', *Political Theory*, vol. 31 (4), 2013, pp. 591–617; Tom O'Shea, 'Disability and Domination: Lessons from Republican Political Philosophy', *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, vol. 35 (1), 2018, pp. 133–148; Orlando Lazar, 'Work, Domination, and the False Hope of Universal Basic Income', *Res Publica*, vol. 27, 2021, pp. 427–446.

¹¹ Tom O'Shea, 'Are Workers Dominated?', *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*, vol. 16 (1), 2019, pp. 1–24.

historical movements for their present conceptual resources, including nineteenth-century workers' movements. The connections between republicanism and other historical movements and figures, including Karl Marx, have also been studied.

Work has been assessed in light of its own goods, their distribution and its effects on other goods or values. This includes the effects of (bad) work on democracy and equality,¹² and on the capacity to find meaning in one's life.¹³ These come from a variety of traditions within normative political philosophy, including Rawlsians, pragmatists and communitarians. Rawlsians have launched cases for UBI,¹⁴ workplace democracy,¹⁵ for redistributed work time,¹⁶ wage earner funds,¹⁷ and for empowering workers.¹⁸ Pragmatists have argued for workplace democracy.¹⁹ Communitarians have critiqued meritocracy.²⁰ Across political and

¹² Julian David Jonker and Grant J. Rozeboom, eds, *Working as Equals: Relational Egalitarianism and the Workplace*, Oxford University Press, 2023.

¹³ Willem van der Deijl, 'Two Concepts of Meaningful Work', *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, vol. 39 (4), 2022, pp. 567–582; Barry Schwartz, *Why We Work*, Simon & Schuster, 2015; David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*, Simon & Schuster, 2018; Catherine Bailey, Adrian Madden, Kerstin Alfes, and Luke Fletcher, 'The Five Paradoxes of Meaningful Work: Introduction to the Special Issue', *Journal of Management Studies*, vol. 56 (3), 2019, pp. 481–499; Adina Schwartz, 'Meaningful Work', *Ethics*, vol. 92 (4), 1982, pp. 634–646; Ruth Yeoman, 'Conceptualizing Meaningful Work as a Fundamental Human Need', *Journal of Business Ethics*, vol. 124, 2014, pp. 235–251; Keith Breen, 'Work and Emancipatory Practice: Towards a Recovery of Human Beings' Productive Capacities', *Res Publica*, vol. 13, 2007, pp. 381–414; Jeffrey Moriarty, 'Rawls, Self-Respect, and the Opportunity for Meaningful Work', *Social Theory and Practice*, vol. 35, 2009, pp. 441–459.

¹⁴ Daniel Chandler, *Free and Equal: What Would a Fair Society Look Like?*, Allen Lane, 2023.

¹⁵ Nien-hê, Hsieh, 'Rawlsian Justice and Workplace Republicanism', *Social Theory and Practice*, vol.31 (1), 2005, pp. 115-142.

¹⁶ Tom Parr, 'Work Hours, Free Time, and Economic Output', *Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 74 (3), 2024, pp. 900–919; Malte Jauch, 'Free Time Across the Life Course', *Political Studies*, vol. 71 (1), 2023, pp. 89–105.

¹⁷ Markus Furendal and Martin O'Neill, 'Work, Justice, and Collective Capital Institutions: Revisiting Rudolf Meidner and the Case for Wage-Earner Funds', *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2024, pp. 306–329.

¹⁸ Martin O'Neill and Stuart White, 'Trade Unions and Political Equality', in *Philosophical Foundations of Labour Law*, Oxford University Press, 2018, Tom Parr, 'Empowering Workers', *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, vol. 52, no. 4, 2024, pp. 397–429.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Anderson, *Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives (and Why We Don't Talk About It)*, Princeton University Press, 2017.

²⁰ Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020; Jo Littler, *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility*, Routledge, 2017; Daniel Markovits, *The Meritocracy Trap*, Penguin Press, 2019.

methodological commitments, competitive labour markets,²¹ the value of work,²² trade unions²³ and workers²⁴ have been theorised as political actors, and questions of class²⁵ and strategy have been analysed, especially from within a recent flurry of renewed academic Marxism. This has involved historical studies of Marx,²⁶ work on his status as a moral thinker,²⁷ as well as accounts of freedom, alienation or other political philosophical concepts that draw on Marxian and Marxist resources.²⁸ In some cases, these studies include empirical research on automation and

²¹ Waheed Hussain, 'Pitting People Against Each Other', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 48, 2020, pp. 79–111; Adrián Herranz, 'The Eclipse of Solidarity: Precarious Work, Agency and Collective Action', *European Journal of Political Theory*, 2024, pp. 1–21; Stuart White, 'Markets, Time and Citizenship', in *Building a Citizen Society*, ed. by D. Leighton and Stuart White, Lawrence and Wishart, 2008, pp. 124–137.

²² James A. Chamberlain, *Undoing Work, Rethinking Community: A Critique of the Social Function of Work*, Cornell University Press, 2018; Anca Gheaus and Lisa Herzog, 'The Goods of Work (Other Than Money!)', *Journal of Social Philosophy*, vol. 47 (1), 2016, pp. 70–89; Jon Elster, 'Is There (or Should There Be) a Right to Work?', in Amy Gutmann ed., *Democracy and the Welfare State*, Princeton University Press, 1988, pp. 53–78; Martin O'Neill, 'On Mondragon: Solidarity, Democracy, and the Value of Work', *Renewal: A Journal of Social Democracy*, 19 July 2019; Michael Cholbi, 'The Duty to Work', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, vol. 21, 2018, pp. 1119–1133.

²³ Martin O'Neill and Stuart White, 'Trade Unions and Political Equality'; Wolfgang Streeck and Anke Hassel, 'Trade Unions as Political Actors', in *International Handbook of Trade Unions*, Edward Elgar, 2003, pp. 335–365; Lucio Baccaro, Chiara Benassi, and Guglielmo Meardi, 'Theoretical and Empirical Links Between Trade Unions and Democracy', *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, vol. 40 (1), 2019, pp. 3–19; David A. Borman, 'Contractualism and the Right to Strike', *Res Publica*, vol. 23, 2017, pp. 81–98; Alex Gourevitch, 'The Right to Strike: A Radical View', *American Political Science Review*, vol. 112, 2018, pp. 905–917; Stuart White, 'Trade Unionism in a Liberal State', in *Freedom of Association*, ed Amy Gutmann, Princeton University Press, 1998, pp. 330–356.

²⁴ William Clare Roberts, 'Class in Theory, Class in Practice', *Crisis & Critique*, vol. 10 (1), 2023, pp. 249–264; Lillian Cicerchia, 'Why Does Class Matter?', *Social Theory and Practice*, vol. 47 (4), 2021, pp. 603–627; Michael A. McCarthy and Mathieu Hikaru Desan, 'The Problem of Class Abstractionism', *Sociological Theory*, vol. 41 (1), 2023, pp. 3–26; Lucas Stanczyk, 'Productive Justice', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 40, 2012, pp. 144–164.

²⁵ Gabriel Winant, 'The Baby and the Bathwater: Class Analysis and Class Formation after Deindustrialisation', *Historical Materialism*, vol. 32 (2), pp. 3–30; Vivek Chibber, *The Class Matrix: Social Theory after the Cultural Turn*, Harvard University Press, 2022; Nancy Fraser, 'Behind Marx's Hidden Abode', *New Left Review*, no. 86, 2014, pp. 55–72; Robert Brenner and Dylan Riley, 'Seven Theses on American Politics', *New Left Review*, no. 136, 2022, pp. 5–28; Walter Benn Michaels and Adolph Reed Jr, *No Politics but Class Politics*, eds. Anton Jäger and Daniel Zamora, Eris, 2023; Matthew Karp, 'Party and Class in American Politics', *New Left Review*, 139, 2023, pp. 131–144.

²⁶ Bruno Leipold, *Citizen Marx: Republicanism and the Formation of Karl Marx's Social and Political Thought*, Princeton University Press, 2024.

²⁷ Vanessa Wills, *Marx's Ethical Vision*, Oxford University Press, 2024.

²⁸ Jan Kandiyali, 'The Importance of Others: Marx on Unalienated Production', *Ethics*, vol. 130, 2020, pp. 555–587; Paul Raekstad, *Karl Marx's Realist Critique of Capitalism*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021; Amy Allen, 'Dripping with Blood and Dirt from Head to Toe: Marx's Genealogy of Capitalism in Capital, Volume 1', *The Monist*, vol. 105 (4), 2022, pp. 470–486.

other features of concrete work.²⁹ Elsewhere, historical approaches have been used to develop or inform theoretical perspectives on work.³⁰

Within Critical Theory, work has been considered in relation to social pathologies, as a means of recognition, in light of alienation, and in connection to reification.³¹ These alienation and reification studies involved something of a return to the concepts and approaches of the first generation of the Frankfurt School.

There is also a cluster of ‘Post Work’ thinkers who contest the boundaries of work in light of feminist concerns and see work as structurally harmful—as with Marxist accounts of work—but who comprise a distinctive left tradition with freedom *from* rather than *in* work as their central demand.³² Their goal: overcoming work and the ‘work ethic’. Their tactics include the

²⁹ James Muldoon, Callum Cant, Funda Ustek Spilda and Mark Graham, ‘The Poverty of Ethical AI: Impact Sourcing and AI Supply Chains’, *AI & Society*, vol. 40 (2), 2023, pp. 529–543; Jason E. Smith, *Smart Machines and Service Work: Automation in an Age of Stagnation*, Reaktion Books, 2020.

³⁰ James Suzman, *Work: A History of How We Spend Our Time*, Bloomsbury, 2021. Andrea Komlosy, *Work: The Last 1,000 Years*, Verso, 2018; Raymond Geuss, *A Philosopher Looks at Work*, Cambridge University Press, 2023; Aaron Benanav, *Automation and the Future of Work*, Verso, 2020; James Muldoon, Mirjam Müller and Bruno Leipold, ‘Aux Ouvrières!: Socialist Feminism in the Paris Commune’, *Intellectual History Review*, vol. 33 (2), 2023, pp. 331–351; Timo Jütten, ‘Competition and Justice in Adam Smith’, *European Journal of Political Theory*, vol. 22 (1), 2023, pp. 3–25.

³¹ Rahel Jaeggi, ‘Pathologies of Work’, *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, vol. 45 (3/4), 2017, pp. 59–76; Rainer Forst, ‘Noumenal Alienation: Rousseau, Kant and Marx on the Dialectics of Self-Determination’, *Kantian Review*, vol. 22 (4), 2017, pp. 523–551; Hartmut Rosa, *Alienation and Acceleration: Towards a Critical Theory of Late-Modern Temporality*, NSU Press, 2010; Axel Honneth, *The Working Sovereign: Labour and Democratic Citizenship*, trans. Daniel Steuer, Polity, 2024; Christophe Dejours, Jean-Philippe Deranty, Emmanuel Renault and Nicholas H. Smith, *The Return of Work in Critical Theory: Self, Society, Politics*, Columbia University Press, 2018; Rahel Jaeggi, *Alienation*, trans. Frederick Neuhouser and Alan E. Smith, Columbia University Press, 2014.

³² Helen Hester and Nick Srnicek, *After Work: The Fight for Free Time*, Verso, 2023; Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*, Duke University Press, 2011; Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*, Verso, 2015; David Frayne, *The Refusal of Work: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Work*, Zed Books, 2015; Helen Hester and Will Stronge, *Post-Work: What It Is, Why It Matters and How We Get There*, Bloomsbury, 2023; John Danaher, *Automation and Utopia: Human Flourishing in a World Without Work*, Harvard University Press, 2019; André Gorz, *Critique of Economic Reason*, Verso, 2010; Peter Frase, *Four Futures: Life After Capitalism*, Verso, 2016; Stanley Aronowitz and Jonathan Cutler, eds., *Post-Work: The Wages of Cybernation*, Routledge, 1997; Christopher Taylor, ‘The Refusal of Work: From the Post-emancipation Caribbean to Post-Fordist Empire’, *Small Axe*, vol. 18, no. 2 (44), 2014, pp. 1–17.

reduction of working time and UBI. An opposing position has been staked out by those who see work as worthy of preserving in a transformed form or who are more tolerant of a transformed work ethic.³³

This dissertation is not a comprehensive assessment of that literature. While there was too little attention in the past, a new problem is the *quality* of attention, in particular the extent to which it is uncritical. This dissertation takes topics and approaches which it takes to be symptomatic, looking at them to reveal the limits of liberal paradigms. These reflections are necessarily also reflections on what is missing from political philosophy's approach more generally because the problems are methodological, and are therefore, more likely than not, replicated across different areas of study. In so doing, it draws on the work of Lorna Finlayson's *The Political is Political*, which outlines the means by which political philosophy excludes radical politics through methodological assumptions and disciplinary norms.³⁴

With this Finlaysonian insight in mind, we can diagnose the recurrent problem by which the radical possibility of a critique of work gets forestalled. This, I will argue, happens because of a commitment (acknowledged or otherwise) to the status quo, a persistent liberal worry about paternalism, or, particularly in contemporary critical theory, a concern with a particularly difficult search for normative groundings that leads to a timidity in some corners about saying something substantive about work.

³³ Jan Kandiyali and Paul Gomberg, 'Communism Shouldn't Be Post-Work', in *Debating a Post-Work Future: Perspectives from Philosophy and the Social Sciences*, eds. D. Celentano, M. Cholbi, J. Deranty and K. Schaff, Routledge, 2024.

³⁴ Lorna Finlayson, *The Political is Political: Conformity and the Illusion of Dissent in Contemporary Political Philosophy*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2015.

2. Work as Politically Significant

In the previous section, I offered five reasons why work might matter for political philosophers: it is common, it plausibly involves significant harms that can be considered politically, these harms may well be becoming both more numerous and more serious given changes to work in a post-industrial context, it is socially significant for individuals and for society, it makes up their lives not just in time but in meaningfulness and development,³⁵ and, when considered at the level of the general activity of a society, it reproduces that society. I take these to be reasons to look at work that do not require existing political commitments in relation to work; they are, neutral, generic, or basic reasons to consider work, or to give it a room in the hallowed halls of political philosophy proper.³⁶ To these, I want to add two further reasons that work might be said to matter and might further be especially politically important. These come from Marx's account of the labour process, in its generic form and as it appears in capitalist societies.³⁷

Marx holds that people are needy beings; they are dependent on their (individual and collective) activity, through acting in/on the world, which contains materials that permit them to meet those needs, to meet their needs. These needs begin as the most basic ones such as food and shelter. To meet their needs, they engage in conscious purposeful activity. The capacities and needs of people are dynamic rather than static, as people develop their capacities, new needs emerge. The result of all this need-meeting and need-making activity is a change in the

³⁵ Though, as we shall see, work-under-capitalism frustrates meaning and development.

³⁶ Some accounts of the importance of e.g. meaning in the workplace might involve claims about the political speciality of work, but this is not a general feature of the reasons to look at work listed so far.

³⁷ There is debate on whether this generic or 'transhistorical' form of the labour process can be said to exist within Marx's thinking. This will be discussed in Chapter Four. For now, it is meant in the most minimal sense—in every society (so far and as far as we can tell) we find conscious, purposive activity that involves the external world and a human agent, that is carried out to meet need, and which has effects on both world and human agent.

environment and a change in people themselves. This is a dynamic process which generates historical change. On this view, work is a social relation.

Under capitalism, this process takes a particular form. The capacity to carry out purposive activity, labour power, is sold by workers. The capitalist labour process, in which labour power—the capacity to carry out activity—is ‘consumed’ by the capitalist, i.e. in which the bought labour power is set to work on fixed capital and raw materials, displays two characteristic phenomena: domination and exploitation.

Marx describes this process as follows:

- 1) The labourer works under the control of the capitalist to whom his labour belongs; the capitalist taking good care that the work is done in a proper manner, and that the means of production are used with intelligence, so that there is no unnecessary waste of raw material, and no wear and tear of the implements beyond what is necessarily caused by the work.
- 2) The product is the property of the capitalist and not that of the labourer, its immediate producer.

This gives us reason to think that work is not only of generic interest as one of many possible avenues of political philosophical inquiry, but because it is politically *special*. Firstly, this is because work has a world-making effect. Acting on the world changes the world, and this also changes the people who carry out the work. Through activity carried out to meet need, new relations, new forms of work, new needs and new modes of production are generated. This places work activity and its coordination at the centre of analysis, giving it a causal, historical

primacy. Secondly, in the capitalist labour process, workers sell their capacity to work ('labour power') to employers. Because it is a capacity that is sold, and because what is at stake for the capitalist is the generation of value (an imperative he cannot opt out of), the result is that employers, through managers (human and robotic), monitor the use of this capacity.

This has important implications for political philosophy. Firstly, if production has a primacy that has been downplayed, our existing models of politics, the political and so on might not be adequate. Rather than look at questions of the state or subsidiary institutions, the way that production shapes society, which is to say, how it conditions forms of life, including what we understand to be politics, might lead us to question the validity of our existing understanding and approaches. Secondly, if the workplace involves such striking relationships of power, there is compelling evidence to bring work, the workplace, the organisation of work and so on, into the fold of political philosophy, even if one does not buy the case about work's centrality implied by Marx's materialism.

From Marx's account of the capitalist labour process, we can see the importance of delineating work-under-capitalism from a more generic account of work. Sometimes this distinction is given labels like 'work' vs 'labour', but, given that in everyday use we use both near interchangeably, I will too. When I want to talk about work as it exists in capitalist societies, I will use work-under-capitalism. I use it to refer to both the actual practical activity as well as how it is organised and coordinated. It refers to the activity carried out for the meeting of needs as organised in capitalist societies.

This definition requires further definitions. The subject of this dissertation is work-under-capitalism, the harms that have been attributed to it, and whether work-under-capitalism and

its harms have been adequately theorised. What is work? Work appears to be something simple. Some might even say that everyone already knows what ‘work’ is—you go to work, you do your work, you get paid. This narrow sense of work—having a job—is not the kind of ‘work’ I am interested in. Instead, by ‘work’ I mean the various forms that society-sustaining activity takes, and particularly the form it takes in capitalist societies. This view looks at how work is arranged and carried out at the level of the social totality *and* at the experience of an individual or group of workers.

At different moments in time, work is arranged in different ways: even if we took the same crop grown on the same patch of land, there will be a great difference between how the production of wheat looks when cultivated by peasants for a feudal lord, or by smallholders, or by workers for a business. This does not even begin take into consideration how the land, the wheat and the people producing it will have themselves been shaped by the accumulation of human activity over time.

Capitalist work arrangements involve, as we have seen, the buying and selling of labour power, because one group has ownership of the means of production (of meeting need), while another is dispossessed. In this way, work-under-capitalism has different features from work carried out under other social orders. But this is not then the only way in which needs are met and society reproduced under capitalism. Various efforts are required to sustain capitalist societies. Some of these are paid and some unpaid. As paid work, this effort involves the purchase of a worker’s capacities for an amount of time in exchange for payment. The product the work creates belongs not to the worker but to the owner of the means of production (which are also the means of social reproduction). In its unpaid form, work-under-capitalism is still society-reproducing activity, does not involve the sale of temporally bound use of capacities, and is

instead effort outside of the market to meet needs. In both of these forms, work is carried out ‘freely’—nobody is directly made to do it. A third category is *directly* forced work, including slavery.

What about capitalism? By capitalism, I mean societies in which the masses of people are separated from the means of reproducing themselves and who must, instead, sell their capacity to work to another, smaller, group which has in their possession the means of reproducing life. As we have already seen, this kind of work activity is not the only way in which capitalist societies are reproduced, but its preponderance is a uniquely capitalist arrangement. An important feature, as Marx points out, is the presence of abstract labour, or that the capacity to work can function as a commodity, equivalent to any other capacity to work, made commensurable with it. The work of a shoemaker or a tanner or a candlestick maker is undertaken not because of the concrete activity of producing shoes or leather or making candles, but because its product can be exchanged for other items. This is both the consequence and precondition of capitalist societies.

Need is another concept that appears simple: people ‘need’ food, shelter, clothes, warmth, in short, things with a physiological basis. But people also ‘need’ things that are not physiologically necessary. What you require will depend on who you are, what you are doing and in what kind of society you live. You or I might *need* an excess of chocolate-shaped eggs at Easter, a medieval peasant does not. That needs are conditioned, constructed, given heft and meaning in and as a result of the societies we live in does not make them less ‘real’, of course. On this view, it is important that need does not operate as a moralised category. ‘Needs’ are not what is good or worthy or proper for us to want, and ‘desires’ or ‘wants’ something surplus to good needs. It is remarkably difficult to draw the line between ‘true’ and ‘false’ needs. All this

does not only apply to needs which go beyond what is ‘essential’ (although what is ‘essential’ is a vexed question in its own right), it applies too to the most basic physiological needs. It is true that people always need shelter, or food, because of the kinds of living creatures we are. But these ‘basic’ or ‘fundamental’ (perhaps ‘inescapable’ might be less-value laden) needs are met in ways which are considered appropriate, good, proper, and so on for that society. We have a *general* need for food, but the expression of that need in its various modalities shaped by the time and place of that hunger.³⁸ A particularly dynamic feature of capitalism is that it generates new needs and new ways of expressing existing ones.

3. Philosophers Working?

So, work is important, possibly *politically* important, it has been turned to recently in political philosophy, but is the attention it has been given adequate to the problems of work-under-capitalism? Before considering this matter of ‘adequacy’, the question of the possibilities and limits of philosophical attention should be answered. If we do not know what philosophy *could* do, how could we know if it is doing it *well*?

Like work, philosophy is both a generic activity and something that has an institutional existence and history, taking different forms in different societies. Philosophical thinking is different from other forms of thinking, it involves thinking about the ways we understand the world, as a form of thinking about thinking. Mary Midgley’s memorable description of philosophy as plumbing is useful here. Cultures, she says, have subterranean systems which

³⁸ See Martin Shuster and Iain Macdonald, ‘Theodor W. Adorno’s “Theses on Need”, A Translation of Theodor W. Adorno’s “Thesen über Bedürfnis”’, *Adorno Studies*, Vol 1 (1), 2017, pp. 102 -104.

are unnoticed until something goes wrong. But rather than dripping through the ceiling, conceptual failures rather than plumbing failures ‘quietly distort and obstruct our thinking’.³⁹ In such blockages, a pressure is felt, and a conceptual change or shift arises to resolve problems of flow. This requires a certain kind of looking, as well as something like poetic vision, it needs ‘the thorough disciplined articulation’, which can be long, boring and difficult, but is necessary.⁴⁰ I am less convinced of the possibility of the blockage really being removed through philosophical activity, but this metaphor is nevertheless helpful for bringing into view what is distinctive about this kind of thinking.

Philosophical thinking has as its object the existing assumptions, ways of understanding, acting and making sense of the world as most broadly understood.⁴¹ It takes a step back and it looks at how all these fit together; in so doing it shows an architecture that normally stays hidden.

In the case of political philosophy, the task might be understood as that of looking at the existing conceptual, theoretical architecture, and assessing its suitability for understanding and contesting political aspects of the world. This could show where existing models were faulty and inadequate. In the case of work, being critical about accounts of work, including of their (assumed, ignored, or, more rarely, present) possible agents of political change along with their capacity to reveal what could be different and how it might be made different, is a useful practice.

³⁹ Mary Midgley, ‘Philosophy as Plumbing’, *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, 33, 1992, pp. 139–51, p. 139.

⁴⁰ Ibid, pp. 140–1.

⁴¹ This is similar to Wilfrid Sellars definition of philosophy: ‘The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term.’ See Wilfrid Sellars, ‘Philosophy and the scientific image of man’, in Robert Colodny, ed., *Science, Perception and Reality*, Humanities Press, 1963, pp. 35–78.

However, even if every single living political philosopher landed simultaneously on the best view of work, or the best critique of existing accounts of work, work would probably not change very much at all. This does not mean there is no point in trying. It remains an important goal to contribute to ways of making sense of the world that could alter the possibilities of action for pertinent political actors, even if this is very rarely achieved, or, perhaps, difficult to measure. If thinking about what is wrong with work does not make sense of work in a way that enhances rather than restricts our capacity to change work, it can then this could serve to undermine the possibility of identifying the harms of work.

To think about thinking about work for the goal of changing it, we will need to take a politically-philosophically distinctive path. This is not an untrodden path, but it is an unconventional one. For this journey, I make various assumptions about the best methods for carrying out this kind of critical philosophical activity. Firstly, bringing our conceptual architecture into view is best done through ways of thinking that see politics not as a realm of applied ethics but as relating to actual practices, institutions, histories and so on. This does not require limiting our sense of what is possible to what is already in the world, but it requires a realism in its theoretical starting points: the world as it is. This approach, of seeing politics as a practical activity and thinking about politics as a way of making sense of that activity rather than of dealing with abstract principles, is advocated for by Raymond Geuss. On Geuss's view, political philosophy should look to historical and social contexts, including how these might produce ideas, bringing into view the actual motivations and behaviours of people, including the ways in which these significantly differ from idealised models. As for our pipes, this means making sure that in our attempts to understand what has gone wrong we consider their histories and their relationship to what is going on around them, to extend the metaphor, to look at the house or city they form part of. It also means being aware of our own fallibility in judgement. On Geuss's view, sound

political judgement, reasoning and so on, are perfectly possible, but given the kind of beings we are, and given how much our ways of thinking are shaped by the same pipes we are trying to bring into view, they are, in practice, rare. Given this, our ambitions should be modest and aided by an ongoing reflection on our own partialities and situatedness.

Secondly, we need to attune ourselves to a particular kind of failure with conceptual plumbing: when our pipes are ‘ideological’. Ideology is not meant here in the sense of a ‘set of (comprehensive) political beliefs’ (e.g. as in the common expression: ‘this [government decision] is about ideology not what is best for the country’). Instead, it refers to a way of understanding society’s pipes. How we understand things, including our models of social phenomena, can be ideological in both the pejorative and the technical sense. This means that these models can support the maintenance of the status quo or some aspect of the status quo by justifying, legitimising, naturalising, or otherwise obfuscating features of social life. For instance, the belief that hard work is rewarding can serve to justify poverty and inequality: had they worked harder, they would be richer, and so they have nobody to blame but themselves. This meritocratic claim is empirical—our society is capable of and reliably does reward hard work—and normative—working hard is good and should be rewarded—at the same time. It also individualises questions of distribution: against inequality? Just work harder! Your lot becomes your own problem, not a shared political question. This is a further obfuscation.

The simplest statement of ideology can be found in Marx and Engels’s declaration that ‘[t]he ideas of the ruling class, are, in any age, the ruling ideas’.⁴² By this is meant that the realm of ideas is not a transparent, universal, rational one, but one shot through with power. This does

⁴² See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, (1845-1846), *The German Ideology*, in *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 5, Lawrence & Wishart, 2010, p. 59.

not mean, of course, that these ideas are simply imposed from above. Instead, the dominant ideology draws on existing ideas within a society, making use of them. Other ideas are possible too, of course. It is not that people are ‘brainwashed’ or tricked into adopting thoughts that are not their own, by a cabal of pernicious individuals but that the stories societies tell themselves, ideas that seem natural and true, ways of thinking, assumptions about how things are and how they should be, constrain people’s ability to see particular political facts about the world. This is the result of historical forces—social being determines consciousness, not the other way round.

Subsequent accounts of ideology have focused on the ways in which it is made and remade not only through ideas but institutions, culture, practices; things that are precognitive or non-cognitive, with meaning mapped onto bodies, for example.⁴³ On this view, ideology is not only a question of conscious belief but various forms of system-sustaining knowledge. Importantly, this means that there are many ways in which people’s knowledge of the world and of themselves can be partial and ideological. This insight runs counter to the dominant liberal paradigm according to which people are seen as rational, sovereign and competent judges of what is good for them, and in which there is, broadly speaking, an optimism about the possibility of bringing the ‘world-as-it-really-is’ into view.⁴⁴ We are situated—in a time, in a place, in a class location—in ways that make seeing and thinking difficult.

⁴³ See Anita Chari, *A Political Economy of the Senses; Neoliberalism, Reification, Critique*, Columbia University Press 2015; Gökbörü Sarp Tanyildiz, *Grounding Critique; Marxism, Concept Formation, and Embodied Social Relations*, Brill, 2024; Matthew Burch and Niclas Rautenberg, ‘Ideology as Modes of Being-With: An Existential-Phenomenological Contribution to Ideology Critique’, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 49 (4), 2023, pp. 385–408.

⁴⁴ See Raymond Geuss, *Outside Ethics*, Princeton University Press, 2005.

The account of ideology I mobilise in this dissertation follows Raymond Geuss's. I take the features of his account to be as follows:

1. Ideology, in the pejorative sense, is a form of knowledge or consciousness that is illusional or 'false'.
2. It can be false by virtue of:
 - a. its epistemic properties,
 - b. its functional (system-sustaining) properties, or
 - c. its genetic properties.
3. The interrogation of these forms of knowledge or consciousness plays an important role in critical social theory.⁴⁵

Most simply, this approach requires taking a sceptical view about the extent to which we can see things as they are. In what follows, I am particularly interested in ideological forms of knowledge or consciousness that are pejorative and functional—those which block or obscure other consciousness or knowledge about the world, and in so doing, sustain the status quo. This does not mean that attentiveness to the partial knowledge we do have should go out the window. It is Tuesday when it is Tuesday, for instance. But built into our ways of seeing and living are all sorts of assumptions about work. The accuracy at which our critical concepts should aim is different to alignment with these existing models, for it should make visible the assumptions of those models and other aspects of ideology. This sort of critique is Marx's project in *Capital*, or at least part of it. Political economists have modelled the world, making sense of human history, human actions and human motivations in ways that occlude the reality of this world. He argues that an idealised, ahistorical model of markets, production and so on, masks the

⁴⁵ Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School*, Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp.4-44. Or, succinctly, in the case of capitalist ideology (the kind of ideology he is typically describing, as someone writing from within capitalism) 'an illusion that is central to capitalism's self-understanding' (Raymond Geuss, *A Philosopher Looks at Work*, p.145).

hidden abode of production. Accuracy, in this mode, means attentiveness to the knowledge of the world that we have and also to the ways in which that knowledge can be ideological.

As Ernst Bloch puts it, the political economy that Marx is critiquing (that of Adam Smith, David Ricardo and other mainstream theorists of his day), ‘conceals surplus value with its theory. ... Here, for the most part, bourgeois economy has become ideology itself, an apology’.⁴⁶ And Marx himself, in the Afterword to the second German edition of *Capital*:

From then on it was no longer a question of whether this theory or that was true, but whether it was useful or harmful to capital, expedient or inexpedient, legal according to its own laws or illegal. In place of disinterested inquirers, intellectual pimps were hired to conduct research; in place of open scientific research, bad conscience and the evil intention of apologetics became the rule.⁴⁷

In this way, mainstream political economy is, per Marx, ideological; it hides the reality of work relations and produces false consciousness.

A third principle for this journey is that of the importance of thinking historically. Placing ideas in history, seeing how they relate to the societies they emerge in, denaturalises them. If ideology is, per Marx, a ‘socially-necessary fiction’, the society that needs it should be brought into view to make this fiction visible. Moreover, on the materialist view of history, ideas—pipes and plumbing—are historically specific: they are thinkable only at particular times. This is not a

⁴⁶ Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol 1, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight, MIT Press 1954.

⁴⁷ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes, Penguin, 2004, p. 97.

matter of ideology in all cases, however historically-informed thinking does allow us to better carry out our task of looking at the models of work that we already have.

Much has, of course, already been written about the virtues of Marx for thinking about work. More will be said throughout this dissertation. Important for now is that what is useful from Marx for our purposes is not the empirical or propositional content of his thinking, but his method. One aspect of this, in the form of ideology critique, has already been outlined. A second is what Georg Lukács described as Marx's 'method', which he also takes to be Marx's best and distinctive contribution. A fundamental part of this is Marx's account of 'totality': 'the all-pervasive supremacy of the whole over the parts is the essence of the method which Marx took over from Hegel and brilliantly transformed into a whole new science'. Marx's materialist methodology is distinguished by its way of understanding and analysing society as a *totality*. This means what must be avoided is abstracting its constituent parts (say, the economy, politics, or culture) and treating them in isolation, and what must be promoted is an understanding of the dynamic relations between them and the impossibility of understanding any of them, or indeed anything, without connecting it to the total, dynamic system.

Accounts of work must, then, render the totality visible, or at least, not obscure it—being able to make sense of a particular slice of the concrete relations of a given social formation without losing sight of its place and role in the wider ensemble of that formation. Or seeing, as Marx puts it, 'distinctions within a unity'.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Quoted in Stuart Hall, 'Marx's Notes on Method, A "Reading" of the "1857 Introduction"', *Cultural Studies* 17 (2), 2003, pp. 113–149, p.128.

There are various ways of understanding exactly how these distinctions within a unity might fit together and significant—and significantly vexed—debates within Marxism about exactly how they might fit together, or what exactly ‘totality’ might be.⁴⁹ The view of totality I endorse here is thin and intended to be agnostic on those vexations. Briefly, it views capitalism as a social formation, a mode of life, in which it is not meaningfully possible to separate out ‘the economy’, ‘working life’, ‘culture’ and so on, as if they were not co-constitutive. The implication of this is, as Stuart Hall puts it, that ‘in the examination of any phenomenon or relation, we must comprehend both its internal structure—what it is in its differentiatedness—as well as those other structures to which it is coupled and with which it forms some more inclusive totality.’⁵⁰

A further implication, per Hall, is a methodological commitment to a Marxist empiricism: ‘the concrete analysis of concrete situations’.⁵¹ In the case of concepts of work, because they require a degree of abstraction, this methodological commitment can be replaced by a weaker demand: for models which do not obscure the relations between the whole and its constituent parts and which impede thinking the concrete totality.

This claim about the importance of the parts and the whole forms the fourth plank of the approach taken in this dissertation. For thinking about work, this means that matters of government policy, trade union demands, the feeling of resignation when an email notification sound chimes, the concepts we have at hand for understanding work, our thinking, our experiences and our activities cannot be understood without understanding capitalism as a

⁴⁹ See, e.g., Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*, University of California Press, 1984.

⁵⁰ Hall, ‘Marx’s Notes on Method’, p.128.

⁵¹ Ibid.

social formation in which its constituent parts cannot be understood absent consideration of the whole.

Marx, famously, holds that social being determines consciousness, rather than the other way around. This leads to a historical approach to thinking according to which particular ideas become thinkable only at particular historical moments. The liberal individual, for instance, is an invention of the bourgeois age, but the political economist imagines such a figure having always existed. Marx also aims to bring into view the entire assemblage of social relations and consider the dynamic relations between them, to see capitalism as a social totality.⁵² These two methodological commitments shape a theory of work that is sociologically informed, that does not occlude the salient dynamics that shape work, and that, by historicising, reveals the limitations of existing ways of thinking.

To assess existing thinking about work and bring work-under-capitalism into view, this dissertation will undertake a realist, historically informed approach drawing on two methodological insights of Marx (ideology critique and ‘totality’).

4. Better Work?

With all this in mind, what criteria might we use to say that a given account of work, or a theory of work, is ‘better’ than another? Important here is that ‘better’ or ‘more adequate’ or ‘more

⁵² See Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, Merlin Press, 1971, p. 27.

useful’ denotes its use for the goal of overcoming the problems associated with work, including those that those theories themselves help identify.

Any model of any sufficiently complex object will leave out some features of that object in the construction of the theory. What is included and what is excluded can make some theories better than others. There are (at least) three ways in which this might be the case. Firstly, the theory could be more accurate, that is to say, it could be empirically better than another in revealing something about the object and/or the world around it. This could be in terms of the completeness of the theory or about some particular detail or aspect of it. Secondly, it could describe its object in a way that makes sense to a larger number of people, it could be more accessible or track more closely how people in general think about something. Thirdly, it could be useful for some particular political purpose. This version of usefulness is similar to Sally Haslanger’s idea of ‘ameliorative concepts’ in which concepts such as ‘race’ or ‘gender’ are revised to make them maximally helpful for political movements and chosen political goals.⁵³ It is this version that I am interested in here.

The third way of being better might stand out as politicising a theory, whereas the others might appear, on the face of it, as value-neutral/non-politicising. While the third option is purposefully political, it is intended to make a theory that is useful for a political goal (and in so doing it might contain aspects of the other two modes of being better), it is not the case that the other two versions are necessarily free of political content. In fact, when it comes to theories or models of something like work, it is likely that there is implicit political content. For example, a theory of work which had as its goal even something seemingly minimal like the

⁵³ Sally Haslanger, ‘Gender and race: (What) are they? (What) do we want them to be?’, *Nous*, 34, 1, 2000, pp. 31-5.

description of the built environment of work, might contain various assumptions about the origins of labour markets, the extent to which they are problematic and so on. As Charles Mills puts it (writing on the idealised or idealising models of society or behaviour in ideal theory, though the same could hold for various versions of a theory): ‘an ideal-as-descriptive-model necessarily has to abstract away from certain features of P. So one will make simplifying assumptions, based on what one takes the most important features of P to be, and include certain features while omitting others’.⁵⁴

What, then, could make one account of a concept better, which is to say, better suited to advancing a chosen political goal? Accounts of something are compressed, condensed, shortened versions of something in which there are assumptions made as shortcuts; it is tedious to write every detail out in full. A comparison to political demands is instructive here. A demand will imply a model of the world and of how it can be changed. Moreover, some demands are made with conscious intentions to draw attention to their model of the world. Of the Wages Against Housework movement’s infamous demand for housework to be paid, Katrina Forrester has argued this represents not a demand for particular policy but an innovation in demand-making, in which demands were ‘themselves agentic movement-building displays of power’.⁵⁵ There are, she argues, three key features of demand-making:

- 1) Demands can disclose social conditions
- 2) Demands can build political constituencies

⁵⁴ Charles Mills, ‘Ideal Theory as Ideology’, *Hypatia*, Vol. 20, No. 3, Summer 2005, pp. 165-184, pp. 166-7.

⁵⁵ Katrina Forrester, ‘Feminist Demands and the Problem of Housework’, p. 1.

- 3) Demands can set the horizon of the world which the social movement making the demand wants to build.

Success of/in demand-making within this model requires all three features to be successfully present.

In politically engaged concepts, those same three features are present, but the second is modified slightly.

- 1) Concepts can disclose social conditions
- 2) Concepts can identify political constituencies
- 3) Concepts contain a political horizon of a world that would no longer contain the problems in (1).

(2) is modified because, by virtue of being directly connected to ‘real’ politics, social movements and their demands are more likely to be able to constitute and cohere rather than merely identify political agents.

In the case of a concept of work better suited, or more useful, for overcoming the problems of work, this means:

- 1) A concept of work can disclose work’s social conditions
- 2) A concept of work can identify, if they exist, political constituencies capable of changing 1)

- 3) A concept of work can point to solutions or political horizons, if they exist, to overcome the harms of work.

1. Disclosing social conditions

The disclosure of social conditions involves the revealing of something which is not obvious or is obscured elsewhere. It reveals something accurate about the world, but this accuracy is not the same as an empirical positivist version of ‘accuracy’. Instead, it means ‘accurate’ in an anti-ideological sense, revealing something otherwise obscured.

A concept should disclose social conditions. This will typically be in the stating of what it takes to be the problem, in its diagnosis and prescription. This politically engaged approach to theorising social phenomena depends on the presence of an existing diagnosis, i.e. the presence of some kind of unwanted thing. We might conceptualise gender for the goal of ending sexist oppression, for instance. But there tend to be additional diagnostic details drawn out in the model. We have a sense that work is bad, and our intention is to hasten an end to its ills. The diagnosis in mind here is not the headline so much as a more detailed case history and a sense of how such a condition came to be. Models of something might appear to only be asking ‘where does it hurt?’, but there are assumptions about how things come to hurt, the dynamics and sources of pain, that are implicit in the seemingly straightforward question.

2. Identifying agents

Social movements make demands and, in so doing, bring together people who might not otherwise be brought together: the housewife isolated and unaware of her shared situation,

proletarians of all countries, residents of a town who want to save the nearby hospital's A&E department. Through their ideas, demands and actions, a social movement aims to bring a selected group together. By contrast, most political philosophers do not tend to think about *how* things could change and *who* would change them, but rather *which* changes are desirable.

We do not need to be able to say something about how a state of affairs could come to exist to be able to say we would prefer that state to another. If someone is hitting me, I do not need to identify a viable agent to stop the hitting to be able say that the situation of not being hit is my preference. But, for something to lead to action, it is better to have some sense of who might be able to act. This is not a necessary feature for the success of politically engaged concepts, but there are some cases in which it happens, and, further, some in which it is useful for advancing political goals (notwithstanding the general difficulty of predictions). If there is an agent capable of changing things, the basis for its selection is likely to be found in the diagnosis of the problem and the political limits that are placed on that.

Traditionally, socialist and Marxist theories of work, including those put forward by philosophers, have had an explicit or assumed transformative political agent: the working class. In early formulations of this claim, Marx and Engels argue that this class is a universal one—it cannot change its own miserable position without changing the world. This is an agent with a progressive historical destiny. The task of theory and philosophy, including in the early formulation of Frankfurt School Critical Theory,⁵⁶ is to hasten such a destiny.

⁵⁶ Max Horkheimer, 'Traditional and Critical Theory', trans. Matthew J. O'Connell, in Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, Continuum, 1972, pp. 188–243.

The political agent, ‘the working class’, only becomes thinkable as a result of the existence of abstract labour, workers as work come into existence and represent themselves, not only as their specific jobs but as workers as such.⁵⁷ They begin to advocate for themselves as such, too, acting as a self-conscious political agent. They are historical, which does not mean belonging to the past, but having a history, they can come into existence (practically and epistemically) and act collectively only under certain historical conditions.

At the end of the twentieth century, when American liberal democracy appeared triumphant and all alternative to this political order and history were finished, the idea that workers have a particular political role seemed to belong to another, dead world. Those conditions appeared to those who found this situation a good one, to be long gone. And, in one way, there was a truth to it—the left had been so significantly defeated, not least in Britain, that a hollowness to radical theory emerged.

Without a viable agentic subject, radical theory is left speaking to nobody: urgently addressing a room of empty chairs. But on another reading, the guarantees of the old subject were never there in the first place, consciousness and action are never automatic. They can develop and they can fail to develop.⁵⁸ Even without a certain, transcendental subject, the left can identify political actors. We do not need to talk about the political horizon we have without thinking at all about how to get there, nor should we. A capacious radical realism could, in some cases, benefit from considering questions of agents (assumed or explicit) and change. There might be good reason for a radical pessimism too, however, there is, the radical pessimist might say, currently no viable agent for bringing about the sort of change we would want, but that does

⁵⁷ Michael Denning, ‘Representing Global Labor’, *Social Text*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2007, pp. 125–145.

⁵⁸ See Stuart Hall, ‘The Battle for Socialist Ideas in the 80s’, *Socialist Register*, vol 19, pp. 1-18.

not mean we should not think about what it is that we want. It is hard to know what will happen, *and* it is hard to know how much we trust our political assessments of any situation: Lenin famously said in early 1917 that he might not live to see the revolution.⁵⁹

If there are agents able to carry out action leading to the political transformations that critics of work want to see, academic writing about the problems of work is, at best, only going to indirectly contribute. This is not to say that there is no positive role for thinking about work and about agents. Reflection on the assumptions made in existing theories and attempts to make new ones can help people make sense of their lives, with possible positive effects on their capacities to act. That this is unlikely does not mean attempts should be avoided. What else can we do, short of abandoning philosophy?

3. Orienting horizons

A theory of work that aims to address harms of work will need to have some sense of the political horizon it seeks. This might seem to run counter to a strong anti-utopian streak within Marxism; would this not be a cookbook for the future? But the intention here is narrower: show a way out of the problem as diagnosed along with a, typically vaguer, sense of how things could be different. A horizon is something you look towards, that directs you, without revealing in advance every single detail. Some details, however, are important: the solution/horizon must be adequate to the diagnosed problem. If, for example, it is the case that the worker is

⁵⁹ V.I. Lenin, 'Lecture on the 1905 Revolution', in *V.I. Lenin, Lenin Collected Works*, Progress Publishers, 1964, volume 23, pp. 236-253. ('We of the older generation may not live to see the decisive battles of this coming revolution.')

dominated and exploited, piecemeal reform that does not challenge structural features that make possible that domination and exploitation are not, on their own, adequate.

As elsewhere in this version of concepts, the descriptive and the evaluative are blended. This is not a problem for politically engaged concepts because they aim to solve a particular goal and are interested in making a model of something adequate to solving it, by bringing problems and solutions that would otherwise be obscured into view.

So far, I have suggested three ways in which concepts can be better than for some political goals than others (disclosing social reality; identifying agents; prescribing solutions). I have included, in places explicitly but primarily implicitly, a set of claims about the relationship of radical social theory to social movements. I will now make these explicit.

Ideas are not generated by philosophers and then distributed and made real in the world by political actors. This ‘trickle down’ model massively overvalues philosopher’s contributions and originality.⁶⁰ The division of labour implied by this—philosophers think, others do—is inaccurate. Thinking about the world, making and thinking about models of the world and of its constituent parts happens all the time by non-professionals. If philosophy can contribute to political struggle, it is through a process of attention to and reflection on such ideas, including those produced by movements and real politics. Such attention should blur or call into question the assumed division of labour between ‘thinkers’ and ‘doers’;⁶¹ movements do not need philosophers to clamber down from high-up abstractions and present their own ideas to them,

⁶⁰ Finlayson, *The Political is Political*, p .143.

⁶¹ See Asad Haider, ‘Socialists Think’, *Viewpoint Magazine*, 24 September 2018, for a helpful discussion of this question. Haider argues that ‘[m]ovements themselves, in all their autonomy, open up a field for new political statements. The statements are advanced within the specificity of the situation’.

but there is something useful in stepping back and carrying out a historically informed reflection on and clarification of the ways in which radical movements see the world, on looking at our own plumbing.

This does not mean idealising any forms of existing radical political activity or movements as *necessarily* generating better ideas than thinkers detached from movements. Indeed, taking ordinary people's ideas seriously means engaging with them and subjecting them to the kind of critique that we should subject bourgeois ideas.

5. Getting to Work

To summarise: there is a modest contribution that philosophers can make to thinking about work. This is found in developing theories of work and subjecting existing theories to critical scrutiny. A good concept of work (the same is true for other critical, politically engaged concepts), does not cut off relevant parts of reality, attempts to avoid or at least minimise ideological illusions, identifies problems, prescribes an adequate solution, might find someone or something that can administer that solution. This does not need to be optimistic—our ideas might not work. To extend the medical metaphor, sometimes a patient dies, or is already dead on arrival. Nor does it assume that 'better' models of work will have any immediate and direct effect on work. If they do, it will be a result of raising consciousness of the possibility of action, not because the models are better. Better models do not, on their own, change things. But there is some use in finding them.

There is a good case to for wanting to trouble the ways in which we work and how we think about them: work-under-capitalism involves exploitation and domination, it produces a web of social relations and activity that, through climate crisis, may very well doom us all. It appears to either create, deepen, depend on or make use of various forms of oppression, exploitation and expropriation. At the same time as it produces extraordinary, historically unprecedented forms of plenty, it produces scarcity and inequality, concentrating power and wealth in the hands of a small number of people. Our work produces the world, but we have no real control over how it is carried out, either at the level of our individual lives (our career trajectories are determined most fundamentally by those of our parents), of our workplaces (where the imperatives of capitalism shape how work is carried out), and of society as a whole (where production and its conditions are directed by the profit imperative). The hegemonic view of work is one in which people are expected to find meaning in work, to measure themselves against their successes, to see successful businesspeople as worthy heroes and those on the sharp edge as losers with only themselves to blame. Of course, the worst excesses of capitalist work are seen as unacceptable, but its foundations are rarely questioned. The success of this view of the world and of work is, at least in part, the product of the defeat of the twentieth century left and the loss of its various sites of meaning-making (workers' clubs, trade unions, industrial production and the community around it). This is not to say that there is no resistance—there are always people who will say ‘No’—but that organised resistance to capitalist work's domination and exploitation, at least in advanced industrial economies, is on the backfoot.

In this dissertation, I contribute to the burgeoning literature on work through a critical assessment of the recent attention paid to the topic. My approach and this dissertation constitute an ideology critique of this turn to work. I argue that even in areas that appear to offer

promising, radical theories of work and its harms, inadvertent and self-imposed limitations appear, hampering efforts to theorise work in order to change it.

I offer a critical evaluation of how contemporary political philosophy engages with the institution of work. While work remains a central organising principle of modern life, the possibilities for its critique are often forestalled by the conceptual frameworks intended to interrogate it. This thesis examines how key philosophical approaches to work render it politically inert, not through neglect, but through forms of theoretical closure that obscure its structural conditions. Here, as elsewhere, the exclusion is methodological and related to disciplinary norms,⁶² as much as it is the product of outward political belief: commitments (stated or otherwise) to the status quo that expresses themselves in a language of ‘efficiency’ and ‘pragmatism’; a moralism about conceptual inclusion; a concern, which I will argue is excessive, about paternalism; and, in the case of critical theory, a hunt for normative groundings that obscures social reality and bakes in political timidity.

My contribution is to show that while many new attempts to theorise work usefully politicise the theme, they remain partial accounts, unable to bring capitalist work relations into view in a way that is more likely to change work for the better. I propose an alternative way forward, advocating an approach that is historical and critical.

In what follows, I am primarily concerned with the experience of work, the *quality* of work, rather than the question of the amount of the surplus that workers can command. This is because

⁶² See Finlayson, *The Political is Political*, for examples of how radical politics is rendered already impossible in actually existing political philosophy in general. Here, I look at how these mechanisms take place within the discussion of work-under-capitalism specifically.

questions of quality of work tend to be neglected both within Marxism⁶³ and political philosophy relative to questions of distribution and equality. I take for granted that there are significant problems with the distribution of the surplus generated by work, and that this can only be overcome by an ‘expropriation of the expropriators’, a revolution in ownership.

The first four chapters of this dissertation consider four major harms of work: misidentification of work as ‘not work’: domination: alienation; and misrecognition. These harms and the thinkers who theorise them are selected because they represent the most promising contemporary efforts to theorise work and are also symptomatic of significant limitations of liberal approaches. In each of these chapters, the dissertation identifies a mode of liberal foreclosure: the obscuring of the political significance of work’s conceptual boundaries; ideological uses of ‘efficiency’ and ‘pragmatism’ (domination); formal abstraction that detaches from historical and structural foundations (alienation); and the idealisation of market relations (misrecognition).

In Chapter One, I look at feminist reconceptualisations of ‘work’ in light of concerns about both the narrowness and the overexpansion of the concept. I consider two ‘work claims’ in detail emotional labour and sex work, arguing that claims to work are also claims about ‘work’ (i.e. about what work is). This move recentres the political dimension of work claims against liberalism’s moralising depoliticisations.

⁶³ See Moishe Postone ‘Necessity, Labor, and Time: A Reinterpretation of the Marxian Critique of Capitalism’, *Social Research*, vol. 45, no. 4, Winter 1978, pp. 739-78, for a discussion of the ways in which what he terms ‘traditional Marxism’ fails to problematise industrial production. While this argument is controversial (there is plenty of evidence to the contrary in Marx’s own writing, for one thing), the weaker claim—that questions of distribution and ownership have been prioritised over the questions of the experience of work and concrete labour is well taken.

Chapter Two assesses how work is theorised within republicanism through a close reading of Elizabeth Anderson's *Private Government*. I argue that while republicanism is able to diagnose problems with work successfully, ideological commitments to 'efficiency' undermine the radical potential of the diagnoses of capitalist work as a form of unfreedom, cutting short their own promise.

Chapter Three examines Axel Honneth's theory of recognition as a framework for understanding harms of work-under-capitalism. While recognition offers valuable tools for analysing status-related suffering and making sense of workplace struggles, I argue that Honneth's idealised account of market norms weakens its critical power. By foregrounding normative integration, Honneth re-politicises the market but in a way that obscures its actual dynamics. In this Chapter, my approach adopts a wider focus rather than the close readings offered in Chapters Two and Four. This is because Honneth has theorised recognition over several decades and as systematic theory, an integrated and complete approach or paradigm, so a systematic treatment is required.

Chapter Four turns to alienation, tracing its revival in contemporary critique and examining Rahel Jaeggi's influential reformulation, which is intended to produce a version of alienation that can diagnose social harms but that avoids commonly accepted pitfalls of traditional accounts of alienation, particularly essentialism and paternalism. I argue that Jaeggi's formalist solution detaches alienation from its structural and historical basis. By returning to Marx's later account of alienation, the Chapter defends alienation as a concept capable of diagnosing systemic injustice and preserving a transformative political horizon.

After assessing attempts to theorise these four harms, I consider the locus of a significant fissure in left-wing approaches to work's harms: the debatable suitability of UBI to address them. The Chapter compares UBI proposals across the political spectrum and especially the various left-wing UBI schemes. It contextualises UBIs and analyses them in their particular histories, including as special forms of demand-making. I argue that there are distinct traditions within left-wing approaches to the problem of work-under-capitalism between which it is difficult to adjudicate and I draw out some of the implications of this problem, especially for non-ideal political philosophy.

I conclude the dissertation with a summary of the conceptual, methodological and political vices identified and suggesting virtues in their place, making use of Marx as an example of how to theorise work without falling victim to liberalism's forestalling of possibility.

Chapter One: What is ‘Work’?*

You always wanted a lover,
I only wanted a job.

—*The Pet Shop Boys*

They say it is love. We say it is unwaged work.

—*Silvia Federici and Mariarosa Dalla Costa*

What is work? Various competing accounts, definitions and legal prescriptions proliferate. Something that seems initially straightforward and with clear boundaries (your job where you are paid to do an activity) becomes complicated: what about unpaid work, what about forced labour, what about leisure? The same concrete activity—digging a hole, for instance—may or may not be considered work depending on the conditions under which it takes place.

A hole-digging hobbyist might not be considered as at work, whereas someone employed to dig, typically would be. But what if this activity is forced, in the most direct sense: someone is made to dig a hole by someone else, and they have no say over it. Is this work? What about if, while the digging is carried out voluntarily, it plays a socially significant role, such that its shared meaning or practical activity was part of the way that households or individuals restored themselves, their energies, their ability to work well the next day, through carrying out this

* A version of this chapter was published as Horgan, ‘Creeping and Ameliorative Accounts of “Work”’, *Theory and Event*, vol. 24 (4), October 2021, pp. 1110–1129.

digging? Would that be work? And what about a situation in which someone who is normally employed digging, or has that as part of their expected job, on their day off, takes part in a spot of leisurely hole-digging, such that it improves their hole-digging capacities, making them a more efficient worker? This analysis would hold for all sorts of other concrete activities too (reading a book; writing a social media post; baking bread; building a table, etc.). The boundaries of work are more complicated than can be accommodated by the simplistic notion that it is payment or wages that makes something work and a lack of payment or wages that makes it leisure. But where, then, should we draw these boundaries?

Some, especially feminists, argue that accounts of work in their traditional forms are too narrow and need to be made inclusive of various activities not typically considered or recognised as such. Proponents of this view have pointed to the harms that come from not having work recognised as work, which include lack of pay, lack of social value and a lack of legal protection. When work that is frequently misrecognised is associated with women, this has effects on gender equality. Others are hesitant about the conceptual expansion of the boundaries of work, worried about what I term ‘work creep’. In the first part of this chapter, I cautiously defend ‘work creep’ through considering the differing goals that work-expanders have. Claims that an activity is work, ‘work claims’, I suggest, involve ideas about that activity and about work. They tend to be abbreviative of other, typically political, claims (whether work should be paid, whether it should be legal, whether it should be ‘recognised’, and so on). This does not make them illegitimate but is, in fact, a common feature of (political) speech, especially emphatic speech—which work claims tend to be.

Given work’s fuzzy and contested boundaries, (how) are we able to adjudicate between competing accounts of work? I argue that we can and in the second half of the chapter, I develop

an account of doing so, drawing on the version of ‘usefulness’ that has been established in the Introduction.

1. Real, Conceptual Stakes

The limits of the category ‘work’ is not a merely conceptual question, if, indeed, there are such things as merely conceptual questions. When we imagine the past, present and future of work, are we inadvertently missing out some crucial element of, participant or actor within, or political possibility of work? How does our understanding of what work is shape the way political theorists and activists (within and beyond the labour movement) theorise work, workers and the workplace? Which activities are included in ‘work’ and which are excluded? Do these exclusions matter, and if so, how?

The conceptual terrain of work has been contested most often by feminists, particularly in the so-called ‘housework debates’ of the 1970s, the ‘sex wars’ of the following decades, and in contemporary debates within feminist political theory about which kinds of activity ought to be considered work.¹ In this chapter, I contribute to these debates. I do not do this through an abstract account of work. Instead, I aim to access something more subterranean—what happens

¹ See e.g. Tithi Bhattacharya ed., *Social Reproduction Theory*, Pluto Press, 2017, Sophie Lewis 2017, *Full Surrogacy Now*, Verso, 2019, Lynne Pettinger, *What’s Wrong with Work*, Policy Press, 2019, Rohini Hensman, ‘Revisiting the Domestic-Labour Debates: An Indian Perspective’, *Historical Materialism*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2011, pp. 3–28; Forrester, ‘Feminist Demands and the Problem of Housework’, Susan Ferguson, *Women and Work*, Pluto Press, 2020. For historical debates: Margaret Benston, ‘The Political Economy of Women’s Liberation’, *Monthly Review*, vol. 71, no. 4, 2019 [1969], pp. 1–11; Nicole Cox and Silvia Federici, *Counter-Planning from the Kitchen*, Falling Wall Press, 1975; Marlene Dixon, ‘Wages for Housework and Strategies of Revolutionary Fantasy’, *Synthesis*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1977, pp. 12–17; Ellen Malos, *The Politics of Housework*, Allison and Busby, 1980; Wendy Edmond and Suzie Fleming, eds., *All Work and No Pay*, Falling Wall Press, 1975; Lise Vogel, ‘Domestic Labor Revisited’, *Science and Society*, vol. 64, no. 2, 2000, pp. 151–170.

when an activity is claimed as ‘work’? How might changing our understanding of what counts as ‘work’ reorient political discussion of work and of capitalism? In short: what is politically at stake in the question: ‘what is work?’

When an activity is (re)conceptualised as work it is endowed with two serious political possibilities, tracking the two ways of seeing work outlined in Section Three, below. The first of these is that it is placed within locally and internationally defined legal framework of rights that can be appealed to and negotiated within and around. The activity is given a legal status and those carrying it out can now act in different ways: they can legally organise, they might have limits on their working hours, and their power might grow from these rights. The second is that it is placed within a rich theoretical legacy of radical political theory of work and of—about and belonging to—the labour movement. Importantly, this does not have to be unidirectional: an inclusion of an activity within broader conceptual-theoretical architectures or in what Raymond Geuss terms a ‘worldview’—dynamic systems of theorising the world in which elements can shift and change without the system collapsing²—changes both the way the activity is understood and potentially that conceptual space or worldview.

These two possibilities can be in tension—take, for example, the ‘Wages for Housework’ movement, within which labour in the home was labelled as work for the purpose of *refusing* rather than simply codifying or legally recognising it. The idea here was that its payment and/or recognition would enable its refusal. This meant demanding the social recognition, in particular from sections of what Selma James termed the ‘male left’, of housework as work, but not

² See Raymond Geuss, *Who Needs a World View*.

always the legal recognition of it as such. Either way, whether something is considered work has a real-world fallout.

In the following sections, I consider two activities normally placed outside of ‘work’—sex work and emotional labour—in light of feminist concerns about the narrowness of conventional accounts of work, on the one hand, and ‘concept creep’ on the other. While these are not the only contestations or semantic expansions of ‘work’,³ they illustrate how the concept has ‘crept’ in multiple directions and how making a ‘work claim’ on behalf of some activity usually implies some other claim about work, (that it is good, harmful, exploitative, that it should be paid, or ‘valued’, or something else entirely). On this reading, it is both a troubling and theoretically enriching aspect of applications of the concept of ‘work’ that claiming an activity *as* work can change the meaning *of* work.

2. Ideology, Feminism and Social meaning

We do not have unfettered access to reality. Our ways of understanding the world are conditioned by it and are social. This shapes how we understand things we encounter and the various meanings we ascribe to them. As Erich Fromm put it: societies ‘develop a system, or

³ For example, Hardt and Negri (in e.g. *Empire*, Boston: Harvard University Press, 2000) push ‘work’ out from what they see as its traditional productive iteration and into the ‘immaterial’ production of feeling, symbols, knowledge. Elsewhere new forms of platform and precarious work have been theorised by: and so on. Or more recent discussion of new forms of platform online work in *Work Want Work*, Mariele Pfannebecker and James. A Smith, Zed Books, 2020; Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, Polity, 2016, Dalia Gebrial, ‘Racial Platform Capitalism: Empire, Migration and the Making of Uber in London’, *Environment and Planning A*, 1 August 2022, pp. 1–25, Sarrah Kassem, *Work and Alienation in the Platform Economy: Amazon and the Power of Organization*, Bristol University Press, 2024. For the view that ‘work’ has changed to appear more as feudal relations, see Jodi Dean, ‘The Neofeudalising Tendency of Communicative Capitalism’, *tripleC* 22 (1): 197-207, 2024.

categories, which determine the forms of awareness. This system works, as it were, as a socially conditioned filter; experience cannot enter awareness unless it can penetrate this filter.’⁴ This is true, too, even of *experience* itself. There is no experience that is unmediated by social factors or categories, even when we are alone.

Now, this does not mean we have no ability to understand and contest those meanings. It merely means that there are significant constraints on our ability to do so. These structural (or structuring) constraints can, at least sometimes, be said to be ‘ideological’, here in the pejorative and technical sense outlined above in the Introduction.⁵ They can support the maintenance of the status quo or some aspect of it by justifying, legitimising, naturalising, or otherwise obfuscating features of social life. On this view, ideology is a ‘socially necessary fiction’, which is built into our ways of seeing and living as all sorts of assumptions about work. These can be ideological in the sense outlined here.

This means that assessing and developing models of work can be seen as a valuable project for the goal of in turn transforming work. This critical approach to concepts is different from an approach which seeks alignment with existing understandings of concepts. Rather than aligning with them, it reveals them: making visible the assumptions of those models and other aspects of ideology. Accuracy, in this mode, means attentiveness to the knowledge of the world that we have, and perhaps most importantly, to the ways in which that knowledge can be ideological.

⁴ Erich Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion: My Encounter with Marx and Freud*, Continuum, 2009, p.87.

⁵ Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School*, Cambridge University Press, 1981.

Socially produced meaning has negative effects. This insight is shared and extended by feminist thinkers to whom the concepts we have at hand and the ways in which we wield them are similarly inapt, partial, misleading or even harmful. On this view, the concepts available to us contain semantic information, which is bound up with and sustains social relations, including oppressive ones. This semantic information can be understood as ‘social meaning’. As Lawrence Lessig puts it, this denotes ‘the semiotic content attached to various actions, or inactions, or statuses, within a particular context’.⁶ Given that we cannot simply opt out of social meanings and that the significance they have for our actions can be oppressive or limiting, there are good reasons for those interested in social justice to investigate this conceptual connective tissue.

If how we see things matters politically but our ability to see things remains constrained, what can we do? ‘We’ here refers to a specific ‘we’: a ‘we’ who want to successfully bring about a changed state of affairs (‘we feminists’, ‘we socialists’, ‘we anti-imperialists’, etc.). One part of a theoretical response to the dilemma is a critique of existing concepts and approaches, another is the development of new ones, with the knowledge that our ability to both critique and reformulate ways of understanding the world remain partial.

We might distinguish further between how to deal with existing concepts according to whether they are hegemonic ones (like those of the political economists Marx critiques) or critical ones, sometimes inherited from struggles of resistance (including resistance to hegemonic concepts). But there is no reason not to hold the concepts that emerge from radical theory and practice to the same scrutiny as are held the hegemonic ones. The idea of an *inheritance*, something given

⁶ Lawrence Lessig, ‘The Regulation of Social Meaning’, *University of Chicago Law Review*, vol. 62, no. 3, 1995, pp. 943–1045, p. 952.

across generations, is apt here. You are given something which you are expected to do something with. Sometimes there is a strongly felt unwillingness to consider changing or refiguring these concepts, combined with a defensiveness against critics and reinventors. Sometimes, an opposite pull takes place—to change what has been inherited without paying much attention to what it actually did or said. Neither the too-quick abandonment of old frameworks nor defensive fealty to them is likely to disclose much about present-day social reality. In their place, a reckoning with the inheritance is needed, looking at the ideas, their historical context, their limitations and their possibilities.

One attempt to formulate new or revised versions of concepts can be found in the work of Sally Haslanger. Guided by the idea that the social world is constituted by social practices, which are themselves bound up with social meaning, Haslanger argues for what she terms an ‘ameliorative approach’ to concepts:

[W]e should be asking not simply what concepts track truth, even fundamental truth, but rather: What distinctions and classifications should we use to organize ourselves collectively? What social meanings should we endorse? Determining what is required for knowledge, or virtue, or autonomy, is not just a matter of describing reality for - as noted before, definition is a political act.⁷

Rather than aiming for neutrality, an awareness of the fact that we are already situated in the world of social meanings results in a commitment to the generation of concepts that are proudly

⁷ Sally Haslanger, ‘Social Meaning and Philosophical Method’, paper presented at the 110th Eastern Division Annual Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, December 2013.

non-neutral—that serve a particular political goal. In this framework, we take a target concept and develop an account of the concept that satisfies a particular normative goal.

The following features characterise ameliorative inquiries:

- 1) pragmatism on the question of truth
- 2) revisionary (not bound to ordinary accounts of a given concept)
- 3) provisional (open to revisions down the line)
- 4) strategic (with a particular emancipatory practical or theoretical goal)
- 5) pluralist (multiple versions of concepts could co-exist)⁸

Ameliorative inquiries do not assume that there is a coherent and accessible ‘true’ version of a concept. They produce concepts that are, as Katharine Jenkins puts it, revisionary: they are not bound to ordinary understanding or use of a concept.⁹ They are also subject to revisions themselves and, in this sense, are provisional. Future ameliorative inquiries can and should generate concepts that are more helpful. They are intended to produce concepts that ‘fit’ for the specific purpose of the inquiry. Haslanger is particularly interested in which accounts of gender and race are most suitable for combatting gender and racial injustice.¹⁰ Following Jenkins, I take ameliorative inquiries to be pluralist—for any given concept, a variety of concepts might fit and benefit a given *strategic* goal. This is not to say that there are not some better-fitting

⁸ Katharine Jenkins, ‘Amelioration and Inclusion: Gender Identity and the Concept of Woman’, *Ethics*, vol. 126, no. 2, 2016, pp. 394–421.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 395.

¹⁰ See Sally Haslanger, *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*, Oxford University Press, 2012.

concepts, or that there are some that could be unsuitable; but multiple versions, in principle, can circulate.

How could an ameliorated concept be better or worse than another on the terms that ameliorative inquiry sets? It might be inaccurate, imprecise, or unhelpful in failing to track a salient element of oppression or to include all the members of an oppressed group. Ameliorative inquiries create concepts that allow us to analyse oppression, injustice, or an unacceptable state of affairs. For this to succeed, they need to track or bring into view elements of that injustice or other state of affairs as well meaningfully include those affected by it.

Ameliorative inquiries are distinct from ideology critique (of the kind Marx carries out against political economy, which is drawn on and elaborated within critical theory) because they have an explicitly positive project of the formation of new concepts, but they share the belief that our knowledge of the world is partial and ideological. Ameliorative inquiries are a type of politically-motivated concept (re)formation. Within them, concepts are formed or reformed to better suit the advancement of a particular goal.

This positive, political orientation—that concepts can be used to advance a particular goal decided on in advance and can succeed or fail in doing so—is a significant insight from Haslanger. What follows here is not strictly speaking an ameliorative inquiry into work, but it is guided by this principle: with no natural kind ‘work’, we can define and assess definitions of work in relation to how they further a political goal.

Further, this means that there is nothing inherently suspect about the politically motivated formation of political concepts (although we could judge otherwise of particular political goals

and the concepts they generate). To put it more broadly, Haslanger's approach indicates that how we decide to cut up reality and contest social meaning is important and that we get to choose where we do so, which is at once exhilarating and a serious responsibility for anyone interested in changing the world.

On Haslanger's view, this implies a strong positive project: 'Philosophy has the power to create culture; we are not just bystanders but producers.'¹¹ I am more hesitant about the ability of philosophers to do very much. Sometimes what feels like producing is just bystanding, or at most, cheerleading. One thing that philosophers *can* do is to draw attention to when something else is happening. In the case of work, by definition, something *is* happening. When an activity is claimed *as* work the social meaning of that activity and of 'work' is contested and, sometimes, a set of political claims is implied. 'Work claims' are frequently made, and differentiating between them can help us to clarify and assess their contestations of work.

As we have seen, at the level of everyday use, the concept 'work' is not straightforward. Even at the level of the typically identified activities or places where those activities are carried out, there are few universally shared features. Moreover, it is not sufficient to say that work is paid activity. We often refer to non-paid activities as work, albeit with moderating prefixes: voluntary work, housework, homework, and so on. Sometimes it means something as minimal as the expenditure of effort, for example when we describe tasks or, indeed, people as 'hard work'. In the eyes of national governments and international bodies, however, there *is* a distinct activity, 'work', legally instantiated and regulated.

¹¹ Haslanger, 'Social Meaning and Philosophical Method', p. 33.

The UN's International Labour Organisation, for example, monitors working practices around the world, and produces its guidelines on work. In so doing, it designates what work is and what it is not. Similarly, national governments define work as a specific legal institution, with rights on both the part of the employer and the employee. In Britain, there is a legal distinction between one's status as an employee, a worker and as self-employed. These correspond to commensurate differences in sick pay, holiday pay rules on dismissal, amongst others. Things like hours of work, minimum pay, freedom of association and employment contracts are legally defined. There are campaigns to have an activity recognised by the law as work so as to guarantee that the people engaging in it can access this specific legal framework. Often these campaigns involve the claim that companies are profiting from insisting workers register as self-employed and rescinding themselves of their legal duties as employers.¹² Legal judgement can involve declarations on what ought to count as work: in 2013, a Swedish family court ruled that a single mother working as a prostitute had no right to her children as her participation in sex work was not a job but a form of 'self-harm'.¹³ In the US, restrictive legal definitions of employee status have been used to prevent workers whose jobs have 'supervisory' elements, defined broadly as 'using judgement' (applied to nurses amongst others) from accessing collective bargaining rights, for the purpose of curtailing the power of organised labour.¹⁴

It is worth stating the stakes of an activity's not being classified as work in the eyes of the law. In the case of, say, someone we might consider wrongly classified as self-employed rather than as an employee, this means the loss of sick pay, the right to not be arbitrarily dismissed, the right to maternity pay, and so on. In the case of an economic activity which is not only not

¹² These kinds of campaign are most common in platform work employers such as Uber and Deliveroo. There is also a campaign for foster carers to be legally classified as workers.

¹³ Juno Mac and Molly Smith, *Revolting Prostitutes*, p. 47.

¹⁴ Jean-Christian Vinel, *The Employee: A Political History*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013, p. 234.

classified as work but is totally or partially illegal—such as prostitution—those who take part face not only the absence of legal protection but the presence of real violence. This includes the threat or actuality of arrest and the seizure of money and the vastly curtailed possibility of reporting crimes against workers. When a state labels an activity ‘work’ it offers chances for legal protection and redress and in some cases for collective worker organising. These protections and opportunities might be partial or limited, but there is clearly a great deal at stake even within these limitations. Claims that work should be recognised as such in law are a distinct set of work claims.

Aside from its legal instantiations, work has a centrality within radical political theory and the trade union movement that lends it an ethical-political register. This subset of work’s social meanings has a normative upshot. Work and the worker are at the centre of much of radical and anti-capitalist social theory. Whether an activity or a person is included in this category is significant.¹⁵ If work is understood as waged labour that takes place outside the home, other forms of work are taken out of view. Elsewhere, the day-to-day meanings of work are made and remade through the activities of trade unions in minor and major clashes with the management of a firm or sector. Ideas about injustice, fairness and responsibility (amongst others) are deployed and in some cases, semantically altered during these confrontations. This particular set of social meanings affords critique of activities described as ‘work’ an epistemic ease, a ready-made and at-hand framework for critiquing unfair social practices. This is not to say that campaigns organised or claims made for the rights of workers are necessarily successful, merely that they are often easily conceptually and epistemically legible. By contrast, frameworks for understanding activities outside of ‘work’ in this narrow sense are less

¹⁵ Sometimes this exclusion is attributed to Marx but the focus on the centrality of workers (understood to be primarily male industrial paid workers) rather than proletarians (a dispossessed class who are separated from the means of their own reproduction) is not his.

well-developed and therefore less epistemically available. Claiming an activity as work places it in this context, enabling these resources to be brought to bear on it.

‘Work’, then, as well as being a practical activity, is a site of a variety of social meanings and also a legally codified institution, which further, given its place in radical theory, possesses an ethical register that is automatically familiar to many people (‘a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay’, etc.) as well as a well-exercised theoretical apparatus. These two instantiations of ‘work’ are not entirely distinct, and can even be co-constitutive, but represent different ways of understanding what kind of thing work is.

How should we approach the teeming, morally and normatively charged terrain of work’s social meaning?

3. Work Claims as Abbreviative of Other Claims About ‘Work’

When people say an activity is ‘work’ they directly or indirectly offer an interpretation of what work is (its legal or social meanings, or in both) as well as of that activity. This is particularly apparent in feminist debates about sex work, the subject of this section. At this point, I want to make clear that in the author’s opinion, affording those who work in the sex industry rights as workers is a more reliable way of reducing harm than criminalising any element of the industry.¹⁶ Beyond making this point, I do not go further into the debates around sex work

¹⁶ Amnesty International, Amnesty International Policy on State Obligations to Respect, Protect and fulfil the Human Rights of Sex Workers, 26 May 2016.

except insofar as to consider how claims that sex work is work are made, and what this means for our understanding of work.

My point is a simple one: claiming an activity as work is usually abbreviative of some other claim(s) about work. When we say that something is work, the descriptive and normative ideas we have about the concept of work are carried across. Thus, when claims that sex work is either work or not work are made, different accounts of the concept ‘work’ are hailed.

Consider the case of women’s work within the home. In *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James argue that the work of the housewife is work. There are two reasons for this. The first they suggest is that it fits into the elaboration of the concept of ‘work’ that they favour. This is a Marxist¹⁷ conception which locates work in the production of surplus value. In the case of the housewife, the product of this work is labour power itself (the main factor in the production of surplus value). The second reason is to make obvious the shared struggle between working-class women and working-class men, and to unite them against the dividing force of the wage.

The context in which this claim to work was made is important. The categories Dalla Costa and James were working with were located within Marx’s critique of political economy as understood in the mid-twentieth-century organised left. To prove something was work, they had to that it produced exchange value. There are a large number of responses to their interventions and to the Wages for Housework movement, which focus on the exact kind of value housework produces (exchange or use) and what this means for its alleged work status.¹⁸

¹⁷ Marx himself does not make this claim. More on this later.

¹⁸ See e.g. Ellen Malos, ed. *The Politics of Housework*, Alison Busby, 1980, for a variety of these accounts.

Secondly, they were writing in the context of a movement for the refusal of work. When they insist that housework is work, they mean that it should be incorporated into the wider working-class struggle *against* work, not merely for better work or better pay. This refusal is clear in the Silvia Federici text ‘Wages Against Housework’. While the formulation was usually ‘Wages *for* Housework’, the ‘for’ is misleading. The immediate political demand was for wages, such that housework could be made visible as work, with a subsequent goal of refusing and transforming it.

Because work has such a variety of social meanings, when we describe something as ‘work’ a particular descriptive and normative content can be implied, sometimes without any of us noticing. In the case above, a quite specific use of ‘work’ (work as productive in the Marxist sense) is at play. Indeed, in most cases, when people say something is ‘work’ they do not mean that it produces exchange value, nor that including something in the category ‘work’ means it should be struggled against. Sometimes saying something is ‘work’ is assumed to mean it involves conscious effort, sometimes that it is difficult or arduous,¹⁹ sometimes that it should be paid.²⁰

Rachel Fraser’s account of rape metaphors and hermeneutical injustice is relevant here. Fraser develops a model for making sense of feminist critiques of rape metaphors. On her account, rape metaphors—both trivial, such as the comparison to losing a football game, and non-trivial, as in the supposed ‘rape’ of a country by colonialism—can bring about or sustain conditions of hermeneutical injustice. This is because in the process of alignment between what she terms

¹⁹ For example, in Sophie Lewis, ‘Cyborg Uterine Geography’, *Dialogues in Human Geography* 2018, Vol. 8(3), pp. 300–316, pregnancy and birth are described as work following Maggie Nelson’s suggestion that ‘labour does you’.

²⁰ Some claims to payment might be more or less acceptable than others.

the source and target domains of a given metaphor, '[c]ertain properties and inference patterns are brought to salience, whereas others are suppressed'.²¹ This can mean that features of semantic association already likely to produce hermeneutical injustice are entrenched, or new ones created.

When activities usually seen as non-work are described as work this is not usually through metaphor. That housework, sex work, or other elements of social reproduction are work are not supposed to be metaphorical. Saying 'X is work' does not mean 'X is not exactly work but the two might have some shared features', as in a metaphor. The activity is being described as work in a pretty straightforward way. However, just as with Fraser's account of the alignment of two 'bundles' of semantic associations in metaphor, the comparison of one activity to another highlights certain elements of meaning and downplays others. This can have effects on the social meaning of a concept. It does not, usually, permanently change the meaning of a concept, and a variety of meanings of a given concept usually circulate, often contradictory ones. However, given that some accounts of a concept are likely to be more helpful than others—they have a better fit for the purpose we have in mind—in line with the ameliorative approach outlined above, some damage might occur through highlighting particular elements of meaning and downplaying others. To illustrate this, we can consider the reasons given for the designation of sex work as 'work'.

The term 'sex work' was first used by the sex worker, activist and artist, Carol Leigh. She describes the term's first moments as follows:

²¹ Rachel Fraser, 'The Ethics of Metaphor', p. 743.

In 1979 or 1980 I attended a conference in San Francisco by Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media. ...

I found the room for the conference workshop on prostitution. As I entered I saw a newsprint pad with the title of the workshop. It included the phrase “Sex Use Industry”. The words stuck out and embarrassed me. How could I sit amongst other women as a political equal when I was being objectified like that, described only as something used, obscuring my role as an actor and agent in this transaction?

At the beginning of the workshop I suggested that the title of the workshop should be changed to the “Sex Work Industry”, because that described what women did. Generally, the men used the services and the women provided them. As I recall, nobody raised objections.²²

As Leigh put it, the term ‘acknowledges the work we do’.²³ Her intention was to stress the activity of the participants, the workers, as something done *by* them rather than *to* them. Semantically, she intended to flag their agency in providing a specific service, in contrast to ‘sex *use*’. As well avoiding the objectification that comes from dividing sex workers from women as a group, ‘[t]he concept of sex work unites women in the industry—prostitutes, porn actresses, and dancers’.²⁴ Leigh’s conceptual intervention is targeted within a feminist debate about agency, but it also elucidates an idea of work as requiring active effort and perhaps skill by those doing it and involving economic transaction.

²² Carol Leigh, ‘Inventing Sex Work’ in *Whores and Other Feminists*, ed. Jill Nagle, Routledge, 1997, p.230.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Leigh's claim for the *workness* of sex work gives little evaluative content about 'work' itself. It could allow for positive, negative, or neutral assessments of 'work'. In other arguments for the status of sex work as work, however, more specific and less open-ended semantic elements of 'work' are drawn out. Take, for example, the argument for sex work as work from professionalism or skill. This often mobilises what Juno Mac and Molly Smith describe as the figure of 'the Erotic Professional'.²⁵ In this argument, the work-status of sex work emerges from claims about skill and often emotional skill: work requires skill and prowess (whether technical, emotional or some other kind), and sex work is work because it does too. As 'Aline' puts it, 'Honesty, openness, sensitivity ... They are qualities much needed in the work/employment known as prostitution, which is not unlike being a counsellor, a psychologist, a good listener. Like doctors or nurses, they try to be sensitive to the men who come to us and also remain emotionally detached.'²⁶

In a society in which work, as an activity, is taken as a given, a natural and ordinary thing, one claim to an activity's work status is stressing how common it is, and how normal those who participate in it are. Work is ordinary and done by ordinary people, and, so this argument goes, so is sex work. In *Revolting Prostitutes*, Mac and Smith remind us that '[s]ex workers are everywhere. We are your neighbours. We brush past you on the streets. Our kids go the same schools as yours'.²⁷ In *Les Prostituées de Lyon Parlent*—Carole Roussopoulous's documentary on the occupation of a church by French sex workers in 1975, usually considered the start of the modern sex workers' movement—women figure their identity and work around elements

²⁵ The term comes from Mac and Smith, see *Revolting Prostitutes*, Ch 1, 'Sex' for a helpful discussion.

²⁶ 'Aline', 'Good Girls Go to Heaven Bad Girls Go Everywhere', in Delacoste and Alexander, *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Industry*, p. 134.

²⁷ Mac and Smith, *Revolting Prostitutes*, p. 1.

of working-class life. They assert themselves as deserving of respect as women, as mothers and as a part of the working class. As well as workers, the acts themselves can be understood as part of a spectrum of gendered expectation rather than an extreme and separate case. For example, ‘sex work for me was a means of survival, an extension of what I’d learned to do as a woman in misogynist environments, and a liberation from “nice-girl-smiling-in-offices”’.²⁸

At play in the invocation of normalcy as the basis for work claims is that this subset of workers and this kind of work are not outside of mainstream society or pathological. Other claims to work have rested on the alleged deviance of selling sex, placing it within a debate about freedom of expression.²⁹ Implicit in the idea of sex-work-as-freedom-of-expression is the idea that economic activity is a viable channel for self-expression and freedom. One of the principles of a market society is the right to sell whatever one wants to. This, the claim goes, should be extended to sex work. Margo St James, sex work activist and founder of COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics, a campaign for the decriminalisation of sex work), suggests that

[w]hatever one thinks of prostitution, women have the right to make up their own minds about whether or not to work as prostitutes, and under what terms. They have the right to work as free-lance workers, just as do nurses, typists, writers, doctors, and so on. They also have the right to work for an employer, a third party who can take care of administration and management problems ... they have the right to a full human existence.³⁰

²⁸ ‘Carole’, in Delacoste and Alexander, *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Industry*, p. 341.

²⁹ This included early organising efforts by COYOTE, see Valerie Jenness *Making it Work: The Prostitutes’ Rights Movement in Perspective*, Aldine de Gruyter, 1993, p. 20.

³⁰ COYOTE, quoted in Valerie Jenness, *Making it Work*, pp. 71-72.

In the (sex) work-as-self-expression iteration, ‘work’ is not just understood as unproblematic, but *positively*, as the key to personal expression and even fulfilment. If we are critical of the exploitative and alienating features of work (whether sex work or work in general), we may well find this claim to work troubling. The semantic exchange elides parts of work that we might find concerning. Other arguments for sex work as work, by contrast, involve the disavowal of such a positive view of work, taking as their starting point the *worker* status of sex workers. That is to say, they are not a boss or manager. Such accounts would allow us to get a grasp on the ‘work’ elements of sex work that might be troubling to anti-capitalists. Similarly, some accounts flag the centrality of economic exchange: ‘[p]eople sell sex to get money. This simple fact is often missed, forgotten, or overlooked.’³¹

Mac and Smith warn against basing claims to work, and therefore sex workers rights *qua* workers, on the purported value of their work: ‘[s]ex workers’ rights should hinge on workers’ rights to safety not on the purported social value of the work.’³² Here, their focus is work in the legal institutional sense outlined above—and it is vitally important to enshrine workers’ rights on the basis of any worker being deserving of those legal rights not because they are professional or ‘skilled’—but there is good reason to consider its relevance to work’s social meaning in general. Not all work is skilled or valuable or necessary, aside from the difficulties we might encounter in assessing what is truly ‘valuable’ or a ‘real’ need. If we carry over ideologically-loaded semantic trappings when making work claims, we can lose a grip on what we might want to criticise about work. If we flag uncritical accounts of work in our claims—work is about professional skills, or an unproblematic avenue for self-expression, or even merely a necessarily positive experience—we can lose or block epistemic access to more

³¹ Mac and Smith, *Revolting Prostitutes*, p. 46.

³² *Ibid*, p. 45.

critical accounts of work. If we think that the economic exploitation involved in work is an important feature, not only to work, but to capitalism as a social formation, then accounts which downplay exploitation are worrisome.

The account of work elaborated by the case against seeing sex work as work is also relevant here. A claim to not-work is also a work claim. Exclusions are also parts of concept-formation. The argument of critics of the sex work paradigm normally runs something like this: prostitution is the instantiation—symbolic and actual—of violence against women as a class.³³ On this view, prostitution has profound and negative effects on all women, and as such should not be considered work because this would legitimise it. So extensive is the harm, that it must be not considered work or afforded legal status as work even when an economic exchange takes place. It is necessarily coercive and damaging and therefore not *work*, but violence or abuse. In this account, for something to qualify as work it has to be non-harmful and non-coerced. Given that coercion is a background condition to all work—an activity, in most cases at least, only entered because of a lack of options, only illusorily ‘free’—a risk of a positive account of work, i.e. which sees it as non-coerced, is that salient features of work are obscured.

For some, claiming something as work is to claim that the activity is a legitimate avenue of self-expression, a positive thing. Elsewhere the claim is more minimal, such that an activity could be considered work without it being accepted as positive. Beyond the various value-claims in the labelling of an activity as work, there is often implicit or explicit normative content. For example, saying an activity is work might mean it ought to be paid, or that a certain

³³ For example, Andrea Dworkin, ‘Prostitution and Male Supremacy’, *Michigan Journal of Gender and Law*, Vol 1, 1993, pp. 1-12, Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, Simon and Schuster, 1975, and Kathleen Barry *Female Sexual Slavery*, NYU Press, 1979. Barry’s book served as the basis for a 1983 UN report that defined prostitution as slavery, see Jenness, *Making it Work*, p. 77.

legal status should be applied to those doing it. In the case of something like the original Wages for Housework formulation, it should be understood as work so that it could be transformed or refused. If one considers work unproblematic or as a valid channel for legitimate self-expression rather than a fundamental and inescapable social institution within capitalist societies, accepting a given activity as work means something quite specific. But if work is understood as an exploitative process of capitalism, the account of work implied in the work-as-self-expression claim is troubling.

It is not a surprise that in making claims to an activity being ‘work’ that people with different beliefs about work (and by extension, capitalism), hail different semantic meanings. Liberals and supporters of the free market have no systematic problem with work; the same is not true for socialists and other critics of capitalism. In the next section, I look at the concept of ‘emotional labour’ and argue that work claims can be ideological when the implicit accounts of work they hail are insufficiently critical. It is not the application of ‘work’ to new domains (which can yield politics both radical and liberal) but the implicit theories of work in these extensions that can be problematic for the goal of transforming work. Work claims are in principle fine, to be encouraged, even, but attention should be paid to what else is being claimed when they are made.

4. Creeping Feelings: The Case of ‘Emotional Labour’

The concerns motivating this chapter coalesce in contemporary discussions surrounding ‘emotional labour’.³⁴ The term was developed by American sociologist, Arlie Hochschild. Hochschild wanted to describe the ways in which a worker was expected to manage her emotions—suppressing certain emotions, inducing others—in the workplace. She analysed air hostesses and bailiffs, two gendered jobs that most paradigmatically involve this kind of effort. It is worth noting that, at least in *The Managed Heart*, Hochschild thinks that emotional labour is only such when it is undertaken in the workplace.³⁵ She uses ‘emotional/affective work’ to describe the management of emotions outside of the workplace. ‘Labour’, on her account, stresses the location of this type of emotional management in the workplace. Outside of Hochschild’s coinage, however, it is used to mean ‘work’ in general, not tied to either paid or unpaid activity. The concept has come to mean something quite broad, usually ‘effort directly or indirectly related to an agent’s emotional state’. It is often used to point to the ways in which this effort is naturalised, invisibilised, unfairly distributed and/or unfairly compensated.

‘Emotional labour’ is an extremely popular concept, from academia to pop psychology to political organising. In this popularisation it has taken on something of a life of its own, being used to describe anything from posting on social media to consoling heartbroken friends.³⁶

³⁴ It is perhaps of interest that the term ‘labour’ is used rather than ‘work’. It seems to me that the labour (rather than work) formulation is supposed to label the activity in question as arduous even drudgerous and certainly unfairly distributed rather than the more semantically open ‘work’.

³⁵ This distinction is mystifying rather than clarifying. Contemporary capitalism is based on a muddying of the waters between leisure and work, the private and the public (distinctions that formed the basis of the golden age of European social democracy), Hochschild’s framework rests on division between public and private that is untenable - contemporary capitalism is tearing this alleged divided down - and moreover, as feminists, we might want to query the idea of a sharp divide between the two realms.

³⁶ Suzannah Weiss, ‘50 Ways People Expect Constant Emotional Labor from Women and Femmes’, *Everyday Feminism*, 2016.

Since the term's inception, its use has expanded in several directions. In a discussion of 'concept creep' in relation to concepts of harm and pathology in psychology, Nick Haslam describes the 'horizontal' and 'vertical' growth of concepts. Ideas like 'abuse' and 'trauma' have been applied to new domains (horizontal creep) and to less extreme phenomena (vertical creep).³⁷ In the case of 'emotional labour', the concept has 'crept' horizontally out of the workplace and into the home, and vertically into tasks that do not require the (compulsory and/or strenuous) *management* of emotions but merely involve some emotion, or that could induce certain emotions. Like Haslam, I do not want to suggest that there is necessarily anything wrong with the expansion of terms *per se*.³⁸ However, in the application of 'emotional labour' to a variety of activities, its meaning—both the *emotional* and the *laborious*—can, and indeed has, shifted.

The popular articulation of the term is best represented by Gemma Hartley, author of *Fed Up: Navigating and Redefining Emotional Labour for Good*. Her article for *Harper's Bazaar*, considered a key source for the popularisation of the concept, describes emotional labour as follows:

For Mother's Day I asked for one thing: a house cleaning service. Bathrooms and floors specifically, windows if the extra expense was reasonable. The gift, for me, was not so much in the cleaning itself but the fact that for once I would not be in charge of the household office work. I would not have to make the calls, get multiple quotes, research and vet each service, arrange payment and schedule the appointment. The real gift I

³⁷ Nick Haslam, 'Concept Creep: Psychology's Expanding Concepts of Harm and Pathology', *Psychological Inquiry*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2016, pp. 1–17.

³⁸ *Ibid*, p.1.

wanted was to be relieved of the emotional labor of a single task that had been nagging at the back of my mind. The clean house would simply be a bonus.³⁹

On this account, emotional labour is expanded *horizontally* into the home and *vertically* into tasks which appear to be primarily cognitive, albeit potentially emotionally inflected, rather than relating directly to the management of emotions. People mean different things when they label an activity ‘emotional labour’. It is not just that it is applied to new domains, but that these applications are made with a lack of clarity about what exactly is being suggested. This semantic confusion is intensified by the existence of a superficially parallel concept in ‘social reproduction’, which conceptualises the paid and unpaid activity of care as (re)producing labour power.⁴⁰ Not all social reproduction is emotional labour and much emotional labour—in both the original Hochschild account and its popularised variants—is not straightforwardly social reproduction. Social reproduction theorises both the individual instantiation of reproduction at the level of the household, and the process of reproduction at the level of the social whole. Emotional labour, by contrast, tends to foreground the application of individual effort, rather than considering how these relate to social reproduction.

Hochschild has expressed concern about the application of ‘emotional labour’ to new and less obviously *emotional* activities: ‘On the whole, I love the idea that people are exploring the realm, and so I welcome that, but I guess I don’t like the blurriness of the thinking.’ She presents one particular use—of calling a maid to run the bath—as particularly troubling, because there is ‘no social-class perspective’.⁴¹

³⁹ Gemma Hartley, ‘Women Aren’t Nags, We’re Just Fed Up’, *Harpers Bazaar*, 27 September 2017.

⁴⁰ See e.g. Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero*, PM Press, 2012, Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory*, Pluto Press, 2017.

⁴¹ Julie Beck, ‘The Concept Creep of ‘Emotional Labor’, *The Atlantic*, 26 November 2018.

We do not need to stick strictly to the accounts of concepts given by those who invented them. Conceptual innovation is an important part of social and political thought. A conservative approach in which the ‘original’ meaning of concepts is preserved on the sole basis that they are the original meanings, or on their originators’ say-so, does not seem justifiable. Extending concepts or using them outside of their original context can reveal things about the concept and the terrain to which it is novelly applied. Conceptual promiscuity should be encouraged, but again, with due attention paid exactly what that promiscuity produces.

The popularised use of emotional labour seems to hail two main accounts of the concept:

- 1) Emotional labour is emotional effort connected to economic activity (directly in the workplace, or indirectly in the home)
- 2) Emotional labour is an unfairly gendered distribution of emotional effort (primarily in the home, but also extended to the workplace)

These two accounts are not necessarily contradictory. Something could be both subject to an unfair distribution and connected to economic activity. The former seems to highlight the economic basis for this kind of work, the latter, the gendered basis. Both accounts have liberal and radical responses. On unfairly distributed emotional labour, one can accept the existence of tasks but demand a ‘fairer’ distribution of them. Recall Gemma Hartley’s notion of ‘emotional labour’. She found that household tasks, experienced as emotional labour on her account, were unfairly distributed. Her proposal was a better distribution of those tasks, including her husband doing more of them, and hiring others, presumably those paid relatively little, to do them for her. The existence of these tasks is taken as unproblematic. While not relating exactly to ‘emotional labour’, a similar approach can be found in a recent suggestion

that the activity of organising conferences, showing people round departments and so on, usually carried out by graduate students, should be recognised as ‘service work’ and therefore compensated.⁴² Here, the labelling of an activity as *work* is intended to point to an unfair distribution. The solution lies in the redistribution or compensation of those tasks without questioning their existence. It is possible to imagine more radical responses to the problem of this distribution, ones that call into question the institutions and structures that bring about an unfair distribution, including the privatisation of domestic life, and gender norms which assume women to be automatically caring.

As for the economic account of emotional labour, we can consider who this activity financially benefits. This can yield structural solutions—care should be communal and publicly funded—or privatised ones, for example individuals who do emotional labour for others should be specifically compensated for it.⁴³

The motivation behind both (1) and (2) appears to be the attribution of a non-natural status to emotional labour. The idea behind both suggestions is that invisibilised activity requires effort. Describing it as *work* brings this to the fore. Both (1) and (2) point to the ways in which emotion management activity is not ‘natural’, drawing attention to the effort behind the appearances of ease. Pointing out the particularly feminine *effort* required in emotion-management seems an important goal, as does showing the ways in which contemporary capitalism requires the

⁴² Caroline Flores, Milana Kostic, Angela Sun, Elise Woodard, Jingyi WU, ‘Compensate Graduate Students for Service Work’, *Daily Nous*, 5 November 2019.

⁴³ The latter case has drawn significant ire for promoting a transaction approach to relationships in which emotional labour or care should be compensated by the other party. The following social media post is typical: THE SLUMFLOWER @theslumflower: a man telling you that he’s ‘a better person because of you’ is not a compliment. it’s a reminder of that invoice you forgot to send him for unpaid emotional labour! no need to be building people who are socio-economically advantaged at your expense. build yourself, Twitter/X, <https://x.com/theslumflower/status/1144963420321701888>, 29 June 2019.

inducement and maintenance of emotional states for production, consumption and reproduction. In the case of women's emotional labour, this effort has two beneficiaries. As Lynne Segal puts it: women's work in the home serves 'the interests and needs of a capitalist society' *and* 'the interests and constructed needs of men.'⁴⁴

There is something useful in unmasking the effort required in what is 'natural'. Both accounts question the existence of certain kinds of emotional effort, but (2) seems to relate only to a regime of gendered oppression rather than work, paid and unpaid. This is not to suggest that (2) is somehow false, or should not be used, so much as that (1) has an aptness for the goals of elucidating, then potentially reducing or destroying, the ways in which capitalist *work* is harmful.

It seems more useful, for the purpose of understanding work-under-capitalism, to have an account of emotional labour that stresses its connections to work over one that brings into view its distribution in the household.

5. Additive vs Narrowing Approaches

The conventional account of 'work'—paid activity done for someone else, outside of the home, usually legally recognised as such—has been criticised by feminist thinkers as too narrow. Given that the legal definition of work and work as an ethical framework exclude activity done primarily by women, feminist theory has sought to reconceptualise 'work'. The feminist

⁴⁴ Lynne Segal, *Is the Future Female*, Virago, 1987, p. 47.

responses to the conceptual narrowness of ‘work’ can be divided into two broad camps. The first of these could be termed ‘additive’—insisting on the inclusion of new kinds of work and, in some cases, modifying the category ‘work’ directly or indirectly in so doing.⁴⁵ The second is the acceptance of ‘work’ as a narrow concept and a suggestion that attention be paid to the exact ways in which ‘non-work’ functions under capitalism, but without modifying ‘work’.⁴⁶

An example of an additive-transformative approach can be found in Lynne Pettinger’s broad conceptualisation of ‘work’ and a shift in the underlying assumptions of our analysis, away from the figure of the nineteenth-century industrial worker and his twentieth-century Fordist counterpart, and towards invisible and hidden work, including slavery, coerced labour and care work:⁴⁷

What concepts for understanding work might have been developed if domestic service was taken as the exemplary form of labour in the nineteenth century, rather than factory work? And what would happen if care work, not industrial production was the start of understanding work? ⁴⁸

We might find that for different kinds of activity, different approaches are required. Johanna Oksala has argued that in the case of commercial surrogacy, an additive approach is

⁴⁵ See Della Costa and James, *Women and the Subversion of the Community*, Cooper and Waldby, *Clinical Labour*, 2014, Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now* 2019, Gemma Hartley, ‘Women Aren’t Nags’, 2017, Lynne Pettinger, *What’s Wrong With Work?*, 2019.

⁴⁶ See Michael Denning, ‘Wageless Life’, *New Left Review*, no. 66, November–December 2010, and Nancy Fraser, ‘Expropriation and Exploitation in Racialized Capitalism: A Reply to Michael Dawson’, *Critical Historical Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2016, pp. 163–178.

⁴⁷ Pettinger, *What’s Wrong With Work*, pp. 36–59.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 58.

insufficient: ‘Rather than being instances of gendered exploitation, they should be viewed as gendered and racialized expropriation.’⁴⁹ She suggests that rather than adding surrogacy into the labour paradigm, we should hold onto a definition of labour (/work) as being contract-bound and active, and that in adding surrogacy to the concept of ‘labour’ we lose sight of the specific dynamics of racial and gendered extractivism within new biotechnologies, and within capitalism generally.⁵⁰

Excluding extractive practices or directly forced work from ‘work’ might keep the different dynamics and power relations within them relative to wage labour in view. It is possible to retain this distinction and at the same time consider how both waged and unwaged or ‘free’ (indirectly coerced) work and forced work are involved in the reproduction of capitalism. In one model of this, Nancy Fraser conceptualises extractive, forced, unwaged, etc. work as a precondition for waged work.⁵¹

One worry with an additive approach is that insufficient care is paid to the semantic shifts in ‘work’ in the application of the concept to new terrains, and that we are left with a concept and subsequent frameworks of analysis that might miss something important. Consider, Pettinger’s account of work:

[Work] is what gets done to make life possible. It’s care work, provisioning work, informal exchange of home-produced goods. It’s voluntary work and domestic work.

⁴⁹ Johanna Oksala, ‘Feminism Against Biocapitalism: Gestational Surrogacy and the Limits of the Labour Paradigm’, *Signs*, 44, 4, pp. 893–916, p. 893.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 884.

⁵¹ See Fraser, ‘Behind Marx’s Hidden Abode’, *New Left Review*; and Fraser *Cannibal Capitalism*, Verso, 2022.

It's forced work and slavery, prison labour and welfare-to-work. It's even the presumption ('production through consumption') and co-creation attached to leisure and lifestyle activities. It's gig work and forced self-employment, in which case it's paid but without the normal extras of a job: employment contracts, employment rights and state regulation.⁵²

An expansive definition of work can be helpful. It can open up lines of enquiry outside of the well-trodden paths of a narrower definition and call into question that definition itself, transforming it. However, if 'work' extends into meaning something like all the preconditions for and instantiations of market-related activity, it can become something like the sum total of human activity in capitalist societies. When expanded in this way, differences between these activities can be obscured. Depending on what the intention of this expansion is, this might not be a problem. If it is expanded to show that capitalism requires activity to reproduce itself, which means activity across waged and unwaged sectors, then this broad account is successful. For bringing the varied concrete experiences of those different sectors and work within them into view, different accounts might be required. This is compatible with the pluralism allowed by Marxian ideology critique and Haslanger's ameliorative approach.

Moreover, it does not seem to me that not to be included in a theory is necessarily oppressive or wrongful, if other aspects of a worldview can make sense of and take seriously the unincluded relations or experience or group of people. In this case, 'work' might be accepted as privileging paid work over non-paid work, but this is an acceptable narrowing. The problem of a lack of attention being given to work which has not been included in 'work' is not solved

⁵² Pettinger, *What's Wrong with Work*, p. 5.

by either the application of existing frameworks to women's work or the expansion of these frameworks but by the generation of insights about it, which may or may not have very much to do with those frameworks. The question then, is not just to include or not to include, but what including does and whether another framework might be better suited to make sense of different things. The assumption that inclusion is a virtue and exclusion a vice, at least when it comes to theories that are only one part of a larger worldview (within which other theories and concepts that might better fit are present), does not seem right.

It is worth noting that the view attributed to Marx, of considering only paid productive work as 'work', is not accurately his view. Marx is interested in how societies reproduce themselves and how needs are met. These require purposive effort, acting on the external world. This is his account of 'work'. This activity takes place in different ways in different societies. He argues that in capitalist societies, it involves, in a historically novel manner, one group selling their capacity to work to another, because of a prior dispossession from the means of their own reproduction. This does not exclude other forms of work from the concept of 'work', although certainly less is said about them.

There is an additional worry that a focus on (conceptual) inclusion might become an idealist trap, obscuring the ways in which associations between kinds of work and gender have their basis in political economy. Alyssa Battistoni has argued that the extent to which theories of unwaged work have been less interested in the *economic* aspects of such work, or the *work* of unwaged work than they have been in a theory of unwaged work as exclusively a question of a conceptual exclusion of women from 'work' can be considered ideological.⁵³ Of course, and

⁵³ Alyssa Battistoni, 'Ideology at Work? Rethinking Reproduction', *American Political Science Review*, 2024, pp. 1–14.

as Battistoni argues, exclusion from the category of work can in principle be both ideological and ‘material’, but debates about inclusion have had an idealist focus, to the extent that an excessive focus on ideology has crowded out other forms of analysis of women’s work. This means that this ostensible critique of ideology has itself become ideological in obscuring the political economic dynamics that produce some work as gendered (not) work. This suggests the importance of a critical consideration of inclusion: inclusion that obscures salient empirical dynamics or smooths over differences might hamper rather than advance emancipatory efforts.

Additive approaches allow us to make the case for those activities outside of work-as-traditionally-understood as harmful or exploitative. Because of the centrality of work and workers within critiques of capitalism and of society more generally, there is a more readily available framework for diagnosing, analysing, and beginning to address harms of work than there are for other activities. There is no reason to be overly prescriptive about ‘work’ if we do not think that there is some straightforward object ‘work’, out there in the world. I do not want to suggest that it is inappropriate to expand ‘work’ to include unpaid work, because there are ways in which it is useful, particularly for constructing novel political agents and emphasising solidarity.

6. Better ‘Work’

Which mode of understanding work then, is ‘best’? Perhaps unsatisfactorily, I do not think there is a single answer or concept that is *the* best. It depends on the context and on the goal. However, one account of work offers, at least for my purposes here, a better approach than the others. This is an account of work as world-changing through need-meeting socially

reproductive activity. It comes from Marx: people act on the world to meet their needs, and in so doing change the world, themselves and their needs. This purposive effort reproduces the societies in which they live and the social relations within it, but through this work, the relations and actors that have the capacities to change those relations also come into existence. This metabolic process of need-meeting and need-making through purposive activity takes different forms in different societies.

How does this broad account of work meet the criteria for conceptual success outline in the Introduction? To recapitulate, these were:

- 1) A concept of work can disclose work's social conditions
- 2) A concept of work can identify, if they exist, political constituencies capable of changing (1)
- 3) A concept of work can point to solutions or political horizons, if they exist, to overcome the harms of work.

This broad version of work as social reproduction makes visible the historically changing dynamics of activity to meet needs. In this sense, it discloses work's social conditions (1). It shows that, against the ideological effects of reification, it is people that produce the world and its relations, and that those people might be able to change what the world is and how it is produced. In so doing, it identifies political constituencies capable of changing work (2). This version of work does not identify a specific problem with work and its solution but reveals the dynamics of capitalist production in contrast to work activity in general by showing that it is not natural but historical, which implies the possibility of a changed reality: its horizon (3). For

these reasons, this broad account of work might be thought to be useful and ‘better’ in the sense that this dissertation is interested in.

In capitalist societies, the form that this broad societal-reproductive work takes is a mix of waged-work, unwaged-work (or work that might be compensated but not in the form of wage, e.g. the payment of benefits to mothers or to carers) and directly forced work. Whether all or only some of this activity should be considered ‘work’ matters less than holding to the possibility of their contestation and the contribution they can make to action.

A narrow view of work as waged work will make visible different social conditions than the broad one. It will bring attention to production and struggle within the firm (1). It will identify a different political constituency: workers, rather than the proletariat as the entire dispossessed class (2). This view of work could involve various different horizons (3), from the importance of workers on boards, to overcoming capitalism. It could include the view that only narrow ‘work’ is worthy of political attention and transformation, but it does not necessarily entail that view. Given this and the possibility of a plurality of accounts, the broad account of work is compatible with using a narrow account where the context calls for it. There may be some situations where this account of work is ‘better’ than the broad account, to be judged on prudential political grounds, but they are compatible, representing different lenses for the same cluster of problems. Where it is best to use one over the other will be for political movements and political actors to determine.

7. Conclusion

I have suggested that when we describe something as ‘work’, the meaning of both that activity and of ‘work’ can shift. This happens within the social and legal institution of work and within the terrain of social meaning. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, we need not be worried about the application of concepts to new domains as long as they retain the kind of meaning we think is important. Rather than argue for a pedantry over what ‘work’ is, it seems better to advocate for care when using concepts with such diverse descriptive and normative baggage and implications. This means paying heed to what happens when they are extended. In the legal case, the wrongful designation of some activities as non-work has serious consequences. In the realm of social meaning, certain accounts of work allow us to get a better purchase on the individual experience of work and the role work and non-work have within capitalism. These accounts tend to be those that foreground exploitation and conscious activity rather than accepting work unproblematically or making it too diffuse. Creeping accounts of work are those in which work is extended in a variety of directions. Given the normative valences of discussion of work, this creep is not surprising. Describing something as ‘work’, bringing into the conceptual fold of ‘work’, is a way to point to an unfair distribution of effort, or to mark something as requiring effort (or skill). By contrast, ameliorative accounts of work are more conscious attempts at conceptual engineering. Work may well creep during ameliorative accounts, but it may also recede—we might want to say that being a landlord is not ‘work’ in our favoured sense. Ameliorative accounts look to a future of struggle around work and non-work: what benefits (legal, conceptual, ethical, and so on) might be gained from calling some activity ‘work’? These are constructed with some future-goal in mind: to change something to do with that activity, to remove some unwanted state of affairs. Because ameliorative accounts

are supposed to be subject to revision, they could be particularly helpful for generating new understandings of work as it itself changes.

In this way, the practice of contesting the boundaries of work is particularly useful for thinking about work. It can disclose a variety of work's social conditions. It can draw attention to political constituencies, including those that are obscured by competitor accounts of work (women, the unemployed, the disabled), and can help bring into view political horizons (although, as we have seen, these are not always radical ones). I have argued that there is nothing wrong with expansions. It is worth saying the converse is true, too. It is only when expansions support these broader conceptual and political goals that expansions are helpful. Inclusion is not always a virtue, and exclusion is not always a vice.

I have suggested that a broad, metabolic account of work, while holding onto the differences between how that activity is carried out within and across any given society, is particularly useful. However, there is no reason that such accounts could not themselves be overruled: they are intended to be suited for a particular purpose, and when they no longer do so—including if actual everyday practices of work change—can be set aside. Let many ameliorative, critical concepts of 'work' bloom.

Chapter Two: Domination, Politicising Power

Don't Forget You're Here Forever.

—*Mr Burns*

The constitutional monarchist wishes to limit the power of the king, but still wishes to have a king; the republican wishes to abolish kingship and puts his trust in the people; the trade unionist wishes to limit the power of the master but still wishes to have masters: the socialist wishes to have done with masters and pins his faith to the collective intelligence of a democratic community.

—*James Connolly*

A critique of work on the basis of unwarranted, unrestrained (or insufficiently restrained) power wielded over workers by their employers (both personally and impersonally, i.e. 'structurally'), that is to say, of 'domination', is a lively, recent development in academic political thought.

In this recent work, domination is theorised primarily but not exclusively by republicans,¹ who are interested in forms of freedom that are more extensive and more expansive than paradigmatic, negative liberal accounts. Drawing on historical, conceptual and normative analysis, contemporary republicanism represents a challenge to accounts of freedom as an

¹ For instance, Elizabeth Anderson is not republican but has republican interests in domination (on egalitarian and democratic grounds) and in historical examples of non-firm based production in the early industrial revolution. Axel Honneth is not a republican but is interested in the effects of a democratic deficit at work on democracy at large.

individual right in looking at the quality and texture of life in societies in the form of the presence or absence of domination.

Because workers' experience and the reality of work-under-capitalism is one of a lack of control—workers sell their capacity to work, which is bundled together with control over that capacity, the deployment of which is then monitored, including by increasingly all-seeing technologies—domination appears to be a useful framework for capturing and politicising experiences of capitalist work. The concept of domination has the further virtue of emerging from workers' movements, and from other struggles for freedom and popular sovereignty, themselves. People know what it is to be under the thumb, personally or impersonally, and have responded to it, both practically and theoretically.

In this chapter, I outline the domination critique of work, in its liberal and its radical forms, and consider a typical solution: limitations on the arbitrary power of employers through increased worker participation in shaping the conditions of their work. Liberals tend to opt for a more limited 'workplace constitutionalism' and radical republicans a beefier 'workplace democracy'. A subset of radical republicans—those that stress its historical and theoretical connections to workers' movements: socialist or 'labour' republicans—tend to stress the centrality of the economy at large as well as advocating for workplace democracy. I first make the case for workplace democracy against objections to it.

I suggest that having successfully politicised the workplace, in some cases in radical ways, some domination critics tend to undermine the radical possibilities of such a move by reinscribing assumptions about the market and capitalism into their proposed solutions to domination. This, I argue, is not a surprise, nor can it be conquered by exhortations to follow

arguments through to their end. The dominating effects of the capitalist market are not adequately grasped by liberals who tend to downplay the extent to which they structure society in general, but this is not a question of understanding alone, but rather a matter of political commitment and priorities, and, as such, the force of argument is unlikely to change minds. I conclude by way of an assessment of the place of republicanism in left-wing, non-liberal accounts of the harms of work, arguing that freedom as non-domination should be considered a precondition for the realisation of other horizons, rather than as a singular political value to be realised.

1. The Domination Critique of Work

Domination refers to a situation in which someone (or more rarely, and to republicans, controversially,² some thing or some structure) either wields or has the capacity to wield power over someone else that is considered problematic, typically in extent or in arbitrariness.

It is through the notion of arbitrariness that democracy relates to domination. To be subject to arbitrary power is to be subject to power that you cannot shape or constrain. You have no say over the power and are subject to the whims of those who wield it. Democracy makes this power-over non-arbitrary. The arrangements that would meet the criteria for being meaningfully democratic and therefore overcoming arbitrariness, are themselves subject to contestation and disagreement. It is clear, however, that the general assumption is that they will likely exceed the mere ability to occasionally elect leaders.

² See Rafeeq Hasan, 'Republicanism and Structural Domination', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 102, no. 2, 2021, pp. 292–319.

Arbitrariness has been theorised most extensively by republicans. Republicans have developed a distinctive notion of freedom: freedom as non-domination. This is more than interference; it is about the possibility of interference. Importantly, you remain unfree even when nobody is interfering with you, if someone (or in some cases, some thing) has the *capacity* to arbitrarily interfere with you, regardless of whether they choose to use it (or of whether it actually happens, as in the case of the impersonal domination). The classical formulation, by Philip Pettit, deals with the capacity to interfere in the affairs of another, on an arbitrary basis.³ This extends beyond liberal accounts of negative freedom, tracking the social dimensions of freedom. The solution, per republicans, cannot come in the form of kinder, gentler power-wielders, who choose not to use this capacity, but in the rendering non-arbitrary of this power.

An instructive contemporary example might come in the form of a landlord in a situation where landlords have significant power over their tenants because of a rental market and legal regime tilted in their favour, as is the case in Britain today. Even though there are landlords who behave kindly and well, tenants can still be exposed to domination: the possibility of rent hikes, evictions, inspections, delays in repairs, and so on. Republicans would be concerned about how these affect the behaviour and lives of tenants. That domination makes people servile and, requires them to contort their personalities and actions, is, they argue, a significant problem and impediment to liberty. While someone may object that by claiming that the power landlords have is juridically non-arbitrary—it is subject to the law, over which tenants have some form of a say—the balance of power is weighted so far in favour of landlords (in terms of letting of

³ Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, Oxford University Press, 1997.

properties and landlords' market power, and their respective lobbying abilities) that this power *is* in effectively arbitrary.

Republicans seek to diminish arbitrary power, and this includes in the workplace. To the republican, the firm should be understood as a source of unfreedom: it is hierarchical, with managers directing, as agents of the owners of capital, the everyday activities of their subordinates. Here, one agent, typically a manager, possesses the capacity to interfere in the affairs of another, typically an employee, on an arbitrary basis. This means there is domination present. This domination is a significant problem for republicans for several additional reasons. Firstly, since people spend much of their time at work, it is an activity that takes up much of their lives. Secondly, because work involves the development of socially significant skills and capacities. Thirdly, because those skills and capacities are not merely important in their own right, but have effects on society at large, particularly as concerns people's abilities to participate in democratic life, increasing the likelihood of arbitrary power over them. Fourthly, because of the significance of the consequences of a common type of interference: sacking the worker. This makes this relationship more important than other plausibly socially significant (in the second and third senses outlined above) ones (associations, clubs, etc.).

An example from popular culture can help bring domination in the workplace into view. In 'And Maggie Makes Three' from season six of *The Simpsons*, Homer decides to quit his job at the nuclear power plant to work at a bowling alley. Economic forces conspire against his bowling-alley dreams (a surprise pregnancy; the failure of a hare-brained scheme to increase the alley's profits) and he is compelled to return to the nuclear power plant. To get his job back, he must beg the plant's owner, Mr Burns, for it. When Homer's old job is restored, Mr Burns puts up a sign by Homer's desk which reads 'Don't Forget You're Here Forever'. Sweetly,

Homer covers up the sign, modifying the text so it reads ‘Do It For Her’, glueing on photos of the newly arrived baby Maggie.

Homer is dependent on his employer, Mr Burns. In the standard neo-republican account of domination, this means that despite the presence of a legal right to quit, the relative economic power of an employer, for example in the context of a cold labour market, leaves employees, per Philip Pettit, ‘defenceless’ against ‘employers’ petty abuse’, and furthermore, subject to their arbitrary power.⁴ Pettit’s preferred solution is a UBI, which shifts the economic balance of power, reducing economic dependency. That Springfield has one large employer makes domination in this vein likely: exit costs are raised and dependency consequently heightened.

A liberal conception of freedom would see no problem with what has happened here. Homer made a choice to try a different career (the choice might be unrealistic, stupid, or anything else, but it was his own choice), when this failed, he chose to go back to his old workplace, where his boss may have behaved impolitely or crudely, but did not violate Homer’s freedom; the arrangement between them was made by contract, voluntarily. But the republican would be troubled by what has happened. This is not because of the choices made, which again, might be judged variously good or bad, but because of the power-over that the employer holds. That the contract was voluntary does not make power-over non-arbitrary. It is not just that the plaque and the forced begging for the restoration of the job are uncouth or cruel (these would be better seen also as an expression of the servility that dominated parties are frequently forced to adopt in relations where domination is present), but that they are the product of domination. Domination’s possible ‘petty abuses’, its symptomatic product.⁵ Even without the plaque or the

⁴ Philip Pettit, ‘A Republican Right to Basic Income’, *Basic Income Studies*, vol 2 (2), 2007, pp. 1–9, p. 5.

⁵ Alex Gourevitch suggests that Pettit only cares about the moment of the labour contract, but this seems slightly misleading: ‘So long as the laborers are not dominated in the moment of contracting, a republican

begging, the relationship would remain problematic; the problem is that exit is constrained and, as an employee, Homer has limited say over conditions of his work. Homer ‘adapts’ to the situation by reminding himself that it is done instrumentally, for his family, but this would also not satisfy a republican. Instead, the solution for Pettit is that dependence on one particular master is overcome by the possibility of finding employment elsewhere should interference take place.⁶ In Springfield, notwithstanding the questionable possibility of securing a family wage in a bowling alley, this is unlikely.

Radical republicans would understand domination as more extensive in the nuclear power plant in multiple respects. On their view, it is not only that possibilities for exit should be enhanced, but that working arrangements within the power plant, and in some cases, the relations, especially property relations, in the wider economy be transformed. To overcome domination, they think, Homer and his fellow nuclear power plant workers would need to be given a chance to participate in the governance of the plant. And further, according to some radical republicans, the productive assets of Springfield should be brought into public ownership to curb the structural domination that comes from the profit motive. Radical republicans can argue that without this, broader economic forces might restrict the possibilities of democracy in any given firm because downsizing, offshoring and pressures on quality of work and hence the enhanced possibilities domination of are always present. They can also argue that if domination is the problem, and structural, impersonal economic domination, the power that employers in general

theory of freedom is indifferent to the background structure of control over productive assets and to what kinds of control laborers exercise over the work activity’. (See Gourevitch, ‘Labor Republicanism and the Transformation of Work’, *Political Theory*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2013, pp. 591–617, p. 599.) Pettit excludes productive assets and control over the labour process from his account of and solution to domination but is concerned with the extent to which relative economic power (as expressed in moments of contracting, i.e. as in exchange) might impact relations in work.

⁶ Philip Pettit, ‘Freedom in the Market’, *Politics, Philosophy & Economics*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2006, pp. 131–149, p. 142.

have over workers, is a permissible kind of republican domination, then the economy must be democratised too.

As we can see, the case for a republican interest in the capitalist workplace is strong and work has become a generative site for contemporary republican thinking. In addition to committed republicans who are concerned with domination at work because they are concerned with domination everywhere, are attracted by republicanism's ability to politicise work, or otherwise generate ideas about work because they are bothered by the present organisation of work. These theorists often draw on the historical resources of actual historical republican thinkers, especially workers and theorists of labour movements. In some cases, these theorists are primarily committed republicans, while in others they are more interested in how republican ideas can be marshalled in support of political claims (for workers' rights, improved work quality, and so on).

Finally, another group who offer domination-based critiques of contemporary work are those who are interested in the deleterious effects that it might have on the democratic character of society, including recently by Axel Honneth in *The Working Sovereign*.⁷ Firstly, in constituting an arena of anti-democratic domination, the conditions of contemporary work might be said to reduce democracy in the sense of being a space in which democracy does not operate. Secondly, in producing servile subjection through domination, it might erode the democratic muscle or will of employees thus spilling over into the officially 'political' arena.

⁷ Axel Honneth, *The Working Sovereign: Labour and Democratic Citizenship*, trans. Daniel Steuer, Polity, 2024.

It is possible for people to be motivated by a combination of these, but they can be said to represent distinct motivations, which are namely:

- 1) Conventional republicans: A concern with overcoming or reducing domination in general, as a principle, which includes (necessarily) domination in the workplace.
- 2) Labour movement republicans: A concern with developing conceptual and normative resources (including through recovery of historical ones) for understanding and politicising domination at work and, in some cases, in the economy.
- 3) Domination democrats: A concern with the possibility that domination in the workplace and, in some cases, the economy could have harmful effects on the overall democratic character of society.

What politics comes out of the identification of this problem? Various solutions have been offered for reducing domination. A variety of different solutions to the problem of domination in the workplace have been proposed: from public ownership of the means of production,⁸ to a minimal set of legal protections boosting easy exit in a competitive labour market.⁹ There is a significant division on the matter of whether the critique of domination in the workplace should commit its supporters to a regime of workplace democracy or to workplace constitutionalism,¹⁰ in which employer power is constrained and workers are shielded from the most harmful aspects of domination, or empowered to contest those in different ways, including by the

⁸ See Tom O'Shea, Social Republicanism, *Political Theory*, 48 (5), 2020, pp. 548-572.

⁹ See Robert Taylor, *Exit Left: Markets and Mobility in Republican Thought*, Oxford University Press, 2017.

¹⁰ Not all who sit in this group would regard themselves as such. Hsieh, for example, rejects the term constitutionalism but proposes a regime similar to Anderson's.

enhancement of worker ‘voice’. By analogy to the state, the difference here might be between a republic, in which citizens (employees) are sovereign, compared to a constitutional monarchy, in which a monarch (employer) is sovereign, but there are constraints on their actions.

In the next section, I consider the approaches these different tendencies take to the matter of worker participation in the firm as a means of reducing domination.

2. Tyranny, Democracy, Control

Everyone is a democrat nowadays. There is a remarkable consensus on this issue perhaps above all others. It is generally agreed that all people should have *some* say in how they are governed.

This convergence is historically recent: property-based, gendered and racialised qualifications for the franchise persisted well into the twentieth century.¹¹ Democratic motivation is strongly held but democracy itself is often under-theorised, functioning more as an impulse, slogan, or article of faith, than as a prescription for how (political) institutions should be organised. There is nevertheless a shared assumption that democracy should be an important governing feature of human social and political life.

¹¹ In 1928, women in Britain gained the right to vote on the same terms as men (by removing property qualifications for women, which had already been repealed for men in 1918). In Switzerland, women gained the right to vote in federal elections in 1970. In the United States, voting bans that had been applied against black people were officially prohibited in 1965, although many forms of suppression continued. Under apartheid, black South Africans were entirely blocked from democratic participation. Despite official commitments to democracy and the broader ‘democratic impulse’, the suspension and destruction of democracy—through stopping elections, interfering in them, or overturning results—in the name of imperialism continues apace.

It is this assumption, this automatic democratic impulse, that is mobilised in arguments against domination in the workplace. Even in cases where the guiding principle is the diminution of domination alone, rather than a more expansive commitment to enhancing participation as a good in itself, that the solution is to bring power under (some) control by those subject to it, points to the strength of this democratic impulse.¹² If arbitrary power is unacceptable in the political realm, why would it be acceptable elsewhere, goes the argument.

As outlined above, republicans are not the only group interested in the contemporary firm and its power dynamics but much of the current interest in power relationships at work is republican in *inflection* even if not fully enmeshed in republicanism proper. This means that a concern with replacing arbitrary power- over with a power- over that has been rendered more acceptable by becoming less arbitrary (or otherwise less extensive in the case of UBI) is common, as are positive values of independence, autonomy and other successful developments of agency. Given the strength of the democratic impulse, it is no surprise that this is typically managed by enhanced democracy, rather than by some other means of legitimating power-over. One such domination democrat is Elizabeth Anderson, who offers a polemical critique of contemporary capitalist work, focused on the US context, in which the solution to domination is to be found in workplace constitutionalism.

Anderson is prepared to go further towards democracy in the workplace than fellow workplace constitutionalists Richard Dagger and Nien-hê Hsieh who argue for an end to employment at will, a common employment contract in the US which permits quitting and firing without notice or reason, and for formalised contestation and consultation respectively.

¹² It also shows that modern democrats use democracy to capture a variety of related but different things (representation, being left alone, privacy, popular governance and more). This means that the solutions to arbitrary power can also be various, depending on what we take count as satisfying ‘democracy’.

Anderson's arguments for workplace 'constitutional design'—pragmatic experiments to reduce domination—are made in her 2015 Tanner Lectures (published as *Private Government: How Our Employers Rule Our Lives*, in 2017) and in a 2015 paper on equality, freedom, republicanism and the workplace. In thinking about the workplace, she argues, theorists, be they free market supporting libertarians or egalitarian liberals responding to them, have focused on the moment of the negotiation of the labour contract at the expense of what happens when a worker actually takes up a post.¹³ Instead, workplace governance is a problem of 'government', not one of contract. There has been a troubling lack of concern, on the part of professional philosophers and the public, she alleges, over this form of government relative to that of the state.¹⁴

Efficient labour contracts, Anderson argues, cannot be fully specified. Instead, they involve an open-ended agreement in which the worker agrees to follow orders. This results in an inherent danger of domination. Because modern complex and large-scale industry requires flexibility of command, it is typically not possible to specify exactly what a worker will do at any given moment in her contract.¹⁵ This means that some form of government is necessary. Anderson's concern is to make this form of government *public* and to tame rather than abolish hierarchy. The current regime of workplace governance results in the potential for 'managerial authority [to] exceed any bounds that could be justified in the public interest and be used to press or humiliate workers and indulge bosses' desires to exercise dominion over subordinates.'¹⁶

¹³ Elizabeth Anderson, 'Equality and Freedom in the Workplace: Recovering Republican Insights', *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 31 (2), 2015, pp. 48-69, p. 50; and Elizabeth Anderson, *Private Government*, Princeton University Press, 2017, p. 132.

¹⁴ Anderson is right to point to the relative (to the state) lack of attention given to the workplace, but she is not the only contemporary thinker whose attention has been drawn to the firm's potential for unfreedom.

¹⁵ Anderson, 'Equality and Freedom', p. 65.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

The evidence that Anderson uses to point to the presence of abuses and domination in the contemporary workplace are striking. She highlights abuses in the poultry industry, the garment industry and restaurant work. 90% of restaurant workers report being subject to sexual harassment. Poultry workers are refused access to bathroom breaks, causing many to adopt a practice of wearing incontinence products. Her focus is the experiences of American workers, but similar practices can be found elsewhere, including Britain: Amazon warehouse workers in the UK report having to urinate in bottles because of inadequate break time.¹⁷ Similarly, a 2019 survey by the trade union, Unite, found that 89% of workers in the hospitality industry had faced sexual harassment at work.

Anderson makes the case for workplace constitutionalism by way of an analogy between the firm and the state:

Imagine a government that assigns almost everyone a superior whom they must obey. Although superiors give most inferiors a routine to follow, there is no rule of law. Orders may be arbitrary and can change at any time, without prior notice or opportunity to appeal. Superiors are unaccountable to those they order around. They are neither elected nor removable by their inferiors. Inferiors have no right to complain in court about how they are being treated, except in a few narrowly defined cases. They also have no right to be consulted about the orders they are given.¹⁸

The government she is describing is the arbitrary and unaccountable government she sees as

¹⁷ ‘Amazon worker: There’s not enough time for toilet breaks’, *BBC News*, 6 September 2018.

¹⁸ Anderson, *Private Government*, p. 37.

common in the capitalist workplace. Polemically, Anderson argues that '[m]ost workers in the United States are governed by communist dictators in their work lives'.¹⁹ That workplace unfreedom should be of concern relies on a parallel case argument. Parallel case arguments (PCAs) for enhanced worker participation in the workplace hold that the similarities between states and firms are such that those who support democracy in the former ought to do so in the latter.²⁰ Anderson's PCA is unusual in that the problem of workplace unfreedom does not require full democracy as a solution. Typically, PCAs take a stronger form, with democracy being required for both or neither. Instead, Anderson's analogy is intended to rile up freedom-loving democrats, but they are not intended to commit them to workplace democracy. PCAs only highlight shared salient features. In Anderson's analogy between firm and state, the shared salient features are command over subordinates and the threat of sanction (firing, demotion, docking pay, etc.) that backs up that command.²¹

In the case of the workplace, these amount to 'private government' because the command and sanction are treated as 'none of your business', and represent unaccountable, arbitrary authority by some other powerful party over some domain of your life.²² Private government, because of its potential for domination, should be made public, i.e. accountable, non-arbitrary. Employers currently have authority over workers' lives in an unaccountable and intrusive way. This authority does not stop at the factory gate, Anderson suggests, pointing to the extension of regulation of off-duty activity, including *inter alia* political activity, the consumption of legal

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 40.

²⁰ The term comes from Joshua Cohen, *Philosophy, Politics, Democracy: Selected Essays*, Harvard University Press, 1989, but has since been deployed by Iñigo González-Ricoy, 'The Republican Case for Workplace Democracy', *Social Theory and Practice*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2014, pp. 232–254; Hélène Landemore and Isabelle Ferreras, 'In Defense of Workplace Democracy: Towards a Justification of the Firm–State Analogy', *Political Theory*, vol. 44, 2016, pp. 53–81.

²¹ In the case of the workplace, these sanctions are 'demotion or discharge'. See Anderson, *Private Government*, p. 59.

²² Anderson, *Private Government*, p. 44–5.

and illegal drugs, and employees' romantic lives.

Anderson addresses some common objections to the PCA in the form of significant possible disanalogies. These are voluntariness and power of sanction. Firstly, the issue of voluntariness is exemplified through ease of exit: workers are fundamentally free to leave their workplaces at any time, but it is not so easy to leave the jurisdiction of a state. Her response to this is that while workers can typically leave an employer, they cannot leave the system of employment as a whole with its attendant risk of domination: '[w]orkers may choose their Leviathan, but only Leviathans are in most people's opportunity set.'²³

A second objection relates to the relative power of the state and the workplace to sanction its subjects. An employer can sack you, but they cannot imprison you, for instance. Gonzáles Ricoy argues that this objection is not dealt with entirely successfully in parallel case arguments, by making a comparison with someone who can pinch you every ten minutes or someone who can pull out your fingernails every ten years. It is not obvious that these are the same powers, he argues, which makes the parallel case come apart. The state tends to have much larger power, including in some cases over life itself, than the firm. The firm, however, has more frequent controlling contact with most people, even if there is less it can actually do to them. While both frequent pinches and infrequent fingernail removals are bad, it is not obvious which is worse. He does not consider this to be an insurmountable problem for Anderson's argument.²⁴ I agree. She satisfactorily shows that both the firm and the state have powers of sanction enough to trouble republicans and democrats.

²³ Anderson, 'Equality and Freedom', p. 59.

²⁴ Inigo Gonzáles Ricoy, 'Review: Anderson, Elizabeth, Private Government', *Ethics*, 2018, pp. 642-646, p. 645.

There is an additional problem here, namely the difference between the reasons for sanction and attention. The frequent pinching and the fingernail-pulling are done for quite different reasons. The state is, with some important exceptions (e.g. children, some migrants, the incarcerated), rarely interested in what most people do most of the time, unless laws are broken. By contrast, the employer has bought control over labour power which means temporary close control over the person who has sold it to them. This control is required to ensure that it is put to cost-effective use. The worker is typically less interested in their employer being able to extract the maximum possible from their labour power. This is likely to mean more *conflict* more of the time, even if the powers of sanction that the firm has are vastly limited. Again, this is not a problem for the PCA Anderson is making, but it does indicate how she tends to underplay the everyday conflict between workers and employers when paying rightful attention to the possibility of the domination of the former by the latter.

Having identified the presence of government in the firm, and implied that it should trouble democrats, because it is private and arbitrary rather than public, Anderson poses her central question: '[w]hat is the form of a legitimate government for private enterprises?'. It is certainly not the dictatorial variety, backed up, as she is right to point out, by a legal infrastructure around the firm and employment contracts set up by the state,²⁵ which is common to many contemporary firms. Instead, republican ideas about constitutional design can help us draw the line between legitimate managerial authority and illegitimate domination.²⁶ Where does this leave the constitution of the workplace? Anderson wants to 'tame' hierarchy, and proposes four constitutional mechanisms to do so:

²⁵ Anderson, *Private Government*, p. 64, here Anderson describes this infrastructure as a 'public good'.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 66.

- 1) Exit
- 2) The rule of law
- 3) Substantive constitutional rights
- 4) Voice

‘Exit’ (simply put, the ability to leave) creates, according to libertarians, competition between firms for potential employees. Anderson is right to complicate this picture, pointing to legal barriers to exit such as non-compete clauses.²⁷ But, she points out, even without current barriers to exit, exit alone is unlikely to provide protection against workplace domination. The rule of law, in the context of the workplace, would reduce the scope of arbitrary power and, to some extent, already exists in the form of standard practice guides and employee handbooks.²⁸ Enhancing workers’ constitutional rights through legislation would act as a raising of the minimal floor, particularly on issues of breaks, safety, and harassment.²⁹ However, constitutional rights alone are likely to be unenforced for the ‘least advantaged workers’.³⁰ While these first three mechanisms would improve the lot of many US workers, whose legal situation is often worse than the baseline within Europe, there is ‘no adequate substitute for recognizing workers’ voice in their government’.³¹ Workers are best protected by worker participation in governance as this allows for adapting rules to local conditions better than national regulations while respecting workers’ freedom and dignity.³²

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 67-69.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² It is not obvious that this is the best arrangement relative to either a beefed up national, legal protection regime for workers, or an enhanced legal regime combine with worker voice. Perhaps Anderson is committed to this model because it best permits the Deweyan experiments that she has in mind, but this is also controversial. It is not clear that this shows that democracy should have primacy, rather than being one several options for reducing domination.

How to incorporate voice? The two dominant approaches within the American workplace, according to Anderson, toward including worker's voices have been workplace democracy and labour unions. Both are dismissed, however, as viable vehicles for voice. The former because its efficiency costs are difficult to surmount; especially because the costs of negotiation between workers with asymmetrical interests appear to be high. The latter because of their fading relevance, their inefficiencies and their adversarial stance towards managers.³³ In place of these two models, Anderson proposes constitutional design of a mixed constitution with representative democracy of some form, potentially along the lines of the German co-determination model, and undergirded by a general approach of experimentation.

Recall that workplace hierarchy, i.e. government, is justified on the basis of efficiency in the firm. It is neither feasible nor desirable to specify all details of employment within the employment contract. Efficient production requires coordination and discretionary managerial authority.³⁴ For Anderson, the analogy between the state and the firm breaks down upon this question of the need for productive efficiency. In states, she argues, nothing close to the same level of coordination is required to supply public goods. There are two ways of responding to this. The first is to defend the analogy and maintain that the differences between the state and the firm are not so significant as Anderson claims, and so the parallel case for workplace democracy would still stand. Or we might judge that the shared salient features between the

³³ Anderson, *Private Government*, p. 70.

³⁴ Anderson takes this point from Coases' theory of the firm. (Ronald H. Coase, 'The Nature of the Firm' *Economica*, Volume 4 (16), 1937, pp. 386-405.) It is certainly true for capitalist firms and perhaps even for all mass scale complex activity. Even Engels defends some form of hierarchy in the workplace on the grounds that without hierarchy, complex large scale production would not be possible: 'Wanting to abolish authority in large-scale industry is tantamount to wanting to abolish industry itself, to destroy the power loom in order to return to the spinning wheel'. (See Friedrich Engels, 'On Authority' [1872], in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 23, Lawrence and Wishart, 2010, pp. 442-445.).

firm and the state should be weighted more strongly than the disanalogies, leading us to defend the stronger form of the analogy. The second is to say that we might have other compelling reasons for supporting workplace democracy regardless of whether the analogy holds.

Why reject workplace democracy? A more demanding version of workplace democracy going beyond enhanced voice is rejected on the grounds that it is inefficient and impractical. Anderson gives a series of pragmatic justifications for this. On her view, the heterogeneous interests of workers mean they may face challenges in designing a democratic system of workplace governance. Furthermore, workplace democracy has traditionally assumed worker *ownership*. This presents two challenges: worker ownership is not seriously viable because the required capital investment is beyond the reach of most workers; and, if owners are distinct from workers, government would have to be made accountable to the owners too.³⁵ Anderson's too-quick rejection of workplace democracy on the grounds of efficiency will be covered in Section Four of this chapter, but it is worth briefly countering the final reason Anderson gives for rejecting workplace democracy: it is possible to unbundle ownership and control,³⁶ and there are ways of representing the interests of both workers and capital owners (and perhaps even additional interested parties such as local communities or consumers).³⁷ These factors may make workplace democracy more challenging to bring about or cause conflict within democratic firms, but they are not reasons enough to reject democracy. Barriers to implementation do not justify a wholesale rejection.

³⁵ Anderson, *Private Government*, p. 131.

³⁶ Joshua Cohen, 'The Economic Basis of Deliberative Democracy', *Social Philosophy and Policy*, Vol.6, 1989, pp. 25-50, p. 49, it might be hard to sustain workplace democracy without ownership, but this is not a reason to entirely reject it

³⁷ Tom O'Shea, 'In Defence of Public Ownership: A Reply to Frye', *Political Theory*, Vol 48(5), 2020, pp. 581-587.

Voice is certainly an important republican mechanism against the potential for domination in the workplace. Having convincingly argued for the presence of workplace tyranny in the contemporary firm on the basis of an analogy between the firm and the state, it is odd to then reject workplace democracy out of hand. If the potential for domination in the workplace is so strong, why remove a weapon from your arsenal immediately? At the very least, the PCA should give us pause to consider fuller democracy in more detail, even if it does not bind us to any given institutional setup.

That the PCA does not imply any institutional set up is relevant here. This might be a problem with PCA type arguments. The PCA does not compel us to adopt any particular institutional form for democracy. In fact, it tends to work with people's prior commitments. While (almost) everyone is a democrat, there are a huge variety of commitments to what democracy actually means. So, those who support deeper, more participatory democracy in society in general might prefer more participatory democracy in the firm. By contrast those who are prepared to tolerate a more limited democracy in the state might do the same. A key difference here might be the reason why someone wants democracy in either the state or the firm. For example, Amartya Sen argues that democracy reduces the risk of famines. This is unlikely to yield a helpful or even a relevant PCA because private government in individual firms does not produce famines. This is perhaps a weakness of this kind of argument by analogy, at least when it concerns democracy: it underspecifies political solutions (how to be 'democratic') and prior political commitments (if these are more than just being a democrat, but relate also to reasons for being one, equality, for instance, or republican freedom as non-domination). These PCAs might be best thought of as thought experiments that provoke an exposed democratic nerve, revealing a lack of democracy in many aspects of our lives, rather than (without further development) concrete plans or compelling reasons for increasing workplace democracy.

This is not to let Anderson off the hook. Her acceptance of ‘efficiency’ as a justifiable constraint or trade-off will be considered in Section Four below, including how this further disarms the radical potential of the politicisation of the workplace.

The next section of this chapter makes the case for active workplace democracy against workplace constitutionalism on the grounds that this best instantiates republican freedom as non-domination.

3. Why Not Workplace Democracy?

To tackle this question, we need to be clearer about the differences between workplace democracy (WD) and workplace constitutionalism (WC). Both hold that workers should have some involvement in the governance of their workplace. There may be some shared features and in practice they may well overlap significantly. However, there are some important divergences between these two workplace regimes.

For both WC and WD, I take ‘government’ of the workplace to mean:

- 1) (Re)allocation of tasks to a given worker
- 2) (Re)allocation of tasks to different teams or divisions
- 3) Surveillance or other recording, measuring and assessment of the work process and its products
- 4) The work processes themselves
- 5) The setting of performance indicators

- 6) Decisions about the future direction of the firm (resource allocation, changes in structure, relocation, etc.)
- 7) Decisions about the purpose of the firm, changes in what is produced, what is invested, etc.

Participation, whether under WC or WD, in most of the above cases is compatible with the ‘debundling’ of ownership and management. The exception here is 7) in which ownership of the productive assets of a firm could legitimately curtail non-owner involvement decisions about the fundamental purposes of the deployment of those assets. Changing a box factory to a biscuit factory seems to require assent from the owners of assets rather than merely allowing all parties to democratically decide together.³⁸ This points to a potential limit of WD without a change in the regime of underlying ownership which will be discussed in more detail in Section Six.

Workplace constitutionalism (WC) involves:

- 1) Worker legal protections backed up by representation in corporate structures.
- 2) Worker participation in workplace governance: this must be more than feedback or consultation, but it is limited in scope and frequency. Hsieh supports some degree of formalised consultation and contestation; Anderson favours formal representation along the German co-determination model.

³⁸ A parallel between the rights of tenants and of landlords might be made here.

Workplace democracy (WD) involves:

- 1) Legal protections, representation and active participation in decision-making on relevant government issues.
- 2) A variety of possible set-ups of participation, but there must be some mass deliberation, with the goal of deepening the democratic involvement of greater numbers of workers and potentially on a greater number of issues.

Standing between WC and WD, then, is not only the degree of democratic participation in any given workplace. Instead, what differs is that WD commits to a principle of increasing meaningful opportunities—of scope and of frequency—for democratic participation. In this way, democracy might be thought of as a process, *democratisation*, which aims to bring about popular—here, worker—sovereignty.

The case for WD has been made on the basis of its effect on the democratic culture of a whole society or nation. I will consider this only briefly because it indirectly relates to the problems motivating this chapter and Anderson's republican workplace constitutionalism. The argument goes that WD potentially allows for the active development of workers' capacity for decision-making as well as their sense of self.³⁹ This has benefits internal to the firm and potentially benefits to society at large. That the governance regime of a workplace can help or hinder the development of these social goods, which are potentially of significance to the democratic culture of society as a whole is another reason that those committed to democracy ought to be concerned with workplace governance. Indeed, extending democracy to the firm has been

³⁹ Cohen, 'The Economic Basis', p. 46.

claimed to make firms compatible with the democratic commitments of nations.⁴⁰

It is possible to overstate this case. We do not know if the effects of democratic participation at work would scale outside the firm and the problem of the development of political-democratic consciousness tied to a given workplace or sector might be a problem. However, it is clear that what happens at work should not be considered as separate and separable from the rest of the life of a community. Whether it does have a strong bearing on democracy in general does not matter for the case for WD *internal* to the firm, and might be better understood as an additional reason in support of WD. There is also a possible psychological variation of this argument: a psychological support argument within the firm, wherein participation makes workers better able to govern their own firms, as well as having effects on the democratic culture of society at large.

On the case for WD internal to the firm, let us return to the state–firm analogy that Anderson makes to pique democratic concern about workplace domination. In this, a government assigns everyone a ‘superior’ whom they must obey. These orders can change at any time, without notice or the right to appeal. Superiors are unaccountable. The orders they give, and their general treatment of inferiors cannot, for the most part, be contested.⁴¹

Would a regime of workplace constitutionalism make such a government satisfactory? The government might have been made technically *public* in the sense of not being entirely arbitrary, but would workers have much sway within it? Would we be satisfied with a hierarchical society in which those at the bottom of the hierarchy were able to elect

⁴⁰ See Isabelle Ferraras, *Saving Democracy through Economic Bicameralism*, Cambridge University Press, 2017, p. 2.

⁴¹ Anderson, *Private Government*, p. 37.

representatives but that the proportion of representatives they were able to elect would not, without making some alliance with the representatives of those above them in the hierarchy, be able to have the numbers for a majority vote? If we would not accept this when it comes to the state, why should it be acceptable in the workplace if the PCA holds? For Anderson, the PCA breaks down on the question of the need for close coordination and efficiency in the workplace, but the empirical evidence on the effects of a fuller regime of workplace democracy is mixed.

If it is possible, which it may well be, to have active democratic participation rather than representation, and given that this is likely to result in less domination (within and beyond the firm), then why not WD? If it turns out not to be possible then this maximalist approach to WD can then be abandoned, in keeping with Anderson's call for 'experimentation' in government design.

WC is attached to reducing the most egregious forms of bad practice rather than increasing non-domination as much as possible. If we weigh trade-offs towards promoting efficiency, and if we assume (for now) that more democracy could be more inefficient, we might end up creating representative democracy that is doomed to fail. This is because the survival of such a representative programme and resisting domination at all might actually *require* an active democratic culture rather than a more passive electoral-representative culture. Representative democratic regimes without a mass democratic culture tend to suffer from democratic deficits, low participation in elections, and capture by narrow interest groups. It could also result in an anti-democratic backsliding. Taken alone, this might not compel us to adopt full WD but might make us weigh trade-offs differently, leaning more towards greater participation than efficiency. We have good reason to be critical of the weighting of the stakes that Anderson has chosen. If we assume, for now, that fuller participation could lead to inefficiencies, this does

not mean we have to dismiss WD.

Moreover, fostering a democratic culture rather than relying on representation and legal protections might be a better way of reducing the risk of workplace tyranny. This requires *active* participation that goes beyond electing representatives. WC risks undermining itself.

I have so far defended WD or WC. Here I consider some objections to this preference: the problems of government interference, worker (lack of) expertise and workers who do not wish to participate in workplace democracy. The objection from efficiency is dealt with in the next section.

The first relates to the libertarian worry that WC/D would mean government interference in private contractual arrangements. As Anderson points out, this government already sets the conditions of engagement for contract-making, the ‘default constitution of workplace governance’, so this objection does not hold. Modern developed economies are complex and need rules to allow for coordination; if there are to be such rules, they should be subject to public scrutiny and democratic control.

The second pertains to worker expertise. The argument normally holds that workers do not possess the relevant knowledge or capacities to participate in the management of the firm. This is harder to address. A convincing line of argument is that management is a genuine skill, the product of training and perhaps of scarce natural talents. In response, it could be argued that while some actual management practice requires training not all of it does. Some of the tasks of management could be redistributed within the firm. It might be the case that some elements of managerial activity are more amenable to democratic control than others, and where they

cannot be shared, democratic levers like recallability, or sortition could be made use of. In some cases, training could form part of the implementation of WD. WD does not bind us to the removal of hierarchy or of command but instead to enhancing democracy within command: it does not mean that everyone becomes a manager. The implementation of WD is made additionally difficult by the fact that work-processes are increasingly broken down into smaller and smaller parts, often across international value chains, and often with workers not knowing how their task fits into the whole. This does not, however, mean it should not be pursued at all. Indeed, if a lack of worker expertise does constrain fully participatory democracy, then we would still have a case for as fully participatory a democracy as possible rather than ruling out participation in advance.

A third objection: what about the workers who merely want to do their jobs and do not want to bother with democratic activity? In his argument for WD, Joshua Cohen addresses this objection like so: '[this] strikes me as having little force, since I do not see what fundamental interests are protected by having the liberty to sell labor for a wage.'⁴² This is convincing; the ability to participate more fully is of greater significance than a right to have to do no more than sell labour power. Moreover, as long as there is not any sanction (such as barring from hiring or promotion, and so on) for non-participation, there is little harm done to the avowed non-participator. The non-participator might be in a similar position to workers who opt out of participating in the social life of a workplace. There are concerns in the case of those who are forced out of participation (say, those with childcare responsibilities that mean they are unable to attend out of hours functions, or the workforce socialises in a pub which might rule out non-drinkers' attendance) but those concerns do not seem as troubling when they are the choice of

⁴² Cohen, 'The Economic Basis', p. 48.

the employee. This might only be instrumentally troubling—we might be troubled that lots of citizens do not want to participate in the few democratic avenues available to them—and take it as a symptom of a broader hollowing-out of democracy. Non-participation might additionally serve an epistemic function, alerting us to deficiencies of the health of democracy in the workplace or more broadly; acting as a sign that something is wrong.

In this section, I have given republican reasons why republicans should support workplace democracy over workplace constitutionalism. Workplace democracy gives a more fertile ground for the resistance to domination because it helps develop workers' agency, and voice without the capacity to back it up is of little consequence. Workplace constitutionalists tend to dismiss workplace democracy far too hastily and take efficiency objections uncritically. It is hard to know what would happen should workplace democracy be introduced, and the empirical evidence from places that already have forms of it does not support the view that it is fundamentally, troublingly inefficient. There is good reason to be cautious about an ideological narrative around efficiency, which could be taken up by management. While not every possible variant of workplace democracy will be compatible with competitive firms, there is certainly a lot more scope for democracy than workplace constitutionalists would claim.

The next section covers the fourth objection to preferring WD over WC, the objection from efficiency.

4. Efficiency as Ideology

The objection to WD from efficiency tout court is typically formulated as follows: democratic firms are inefficient, hampering the ability of firms to compete in markets. This might be because of the difficulty of coming to an agreement between heterogeneous interests. The empirical evidence on whether more democratic firms are more efficient is mixed. Some evidence suggests worker-managed or co-determined firms are more stable,⁴³ and some that this has positive or neutral effects.⁴⁴ There does not seem to be a significant connection between an enhanced democratic role for workers in the management of the firm and the efficiency of that firm.⁴⁵ What is interesting, is that despite awareness of this mixed empirical picture, advocates of workplace constitutionalism seem to assume that the more democracy there is in

⁴³ See David Watkins, ‘Republicanism at Work: Strategies for Supporting Resistance to Domination in the Workplace’, *Spectra*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2015, for a discussion of this. Elsewhere, there is positive empirical evidence: democratic firms tend to invest more in the firm than in paying dividends. This might help secure longer-term survival. (See Nils Redecke, ‘The Politics of Stashing Wealth. The Demise of Labor Power and the Global Rise of Corporate Savings’, *CIS Working Paper No. 101*, February 2019.) Companies with employee representation are less likely to make discretionary cuts to research and development. There is a connection between a greater density of cooperative institutions (collective bargaining coordination, wage coordination and works councils) and the levels of robotisation (i.e. innovation and productivity) seen in 25 OECD countries between 1993 and 2017. (See Toon Van Overbeke, ‘Conflict or cooperation? Exploring the relationship between cooperative institutions and robotisation’, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, vol. 61 (3), 2022, pp. 550-573). For evidence on earnings, see Conny Overland and Niuosha Samani, ‘The Sheep Watching the Shepherd: Employee Representation on the Board and Earnings Quality’, *European Accounting Review*, 31 (5), 2021, pp. 1299–1336. Evidence from Germany suggests that codetermination has no impact on wages, but does increase capital formation. (See Simon Jäger, Benjamin Schoefer & Jörg Heining, ‘Labor in the Boardroom’, *NBER Working Paper 26519*, November 2019) Evidence from China’s capital markets suggests that employee directors reduce underinvestment in non-state owned enterprises. (See Bingyi Huang and Yuting Huang, ‘Does Employee Representation Affect Corporate Investment Efficiency? Evidence from China’s Capital Market’, *China Journal of Accounting Studies*, 10 (1): 2022, pp. 120–44.)

⁴⁴ See Elizabeth Anderson’s reply to Tyler Cowen, in Ch. 7 of *Private Government*, pp. 131-144, especially p. 142.

⁴⁵ Democracy seems positively connected to stability and the long-term horizon of the firm through a positive connection to investment in R&D. Worker democracy similarly provides a way of spreading costs among parties during downturns, rather than simply cutting jobs or pay. There is empirical evidence that trade unions increase productivity (see Erling Barth, Alex Bryson and Harald Dale-Olsen, ‘Union Density Effects on Productivity and Wages’, *The Economic Journal*, 130, 2020, pp. 1899-1936). Here the terms of art of different disciplines and the inherent difficulties of studying intricate organisations like trade unions and workplace democratic institutions in light of complex counterfactuals make decisive evidence difficult to marshal.

a firm, the less efficient it will be. Perhaps this is because different versions of democracy are run together: democracy as comprehensive deliberation, in which all possible elements of a given firm (from the colour of pens upwards) are involved, vs. the collective negotiation of competing interests, typically the competing interests of management and employees, but sometimes fractions of either group. Interests tend to converge around particular issues rather than extend over every single aspect of work. This does not mean that every variant of WD would be ‘efficient’. It is possible to imagine schemes which are wholly or partly inefficient to the extent that they are unviable (i.e. they endanger the survival of the firm), but this does not mean that WD itself is an automatic path to peril.

Despite this, efficiency is used as a given to favour WC over WD. According to the efficiency objection to WD, there are relevant trade-offs and a consideration of those will lead us to favour WC over WD, as WD is claimed to be less efficient than WC.⁴⁶ What, then, is ‘efficiency’? The common-sense understanding of efficiency is the avoidance of waste to maximise desired output(s). In the firm, this typically means keeping unit costs down. Efficiency is not something that is not directly measurable as a unit itself but is more like something inferred from the relationship between inputs and outputs. It is almost always done in service of some other goal. A firm seeks efficiency to maintain profit in a competitive environment. The non-competitive production of a hobbyist making some object—a chair, some jam—can be described as efficient or inefficient, too. The goal might be minimising waste for the purpose of saving time, money, or even just kitchen counter space.

Keeping firms competitive is typically taken to be a legitimate goal for the owners of firms.

⁴⁶ For a typology of the ways in which WD could be less efficient, Gregory Dow, *Governing the Firm: Workers’ Control in Theory and Practice*, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Firms must compete with one another, and their continued existence depends on maintaining a competitive edge, including through efficiency. Unless there is a fundamental change in the economy, and/or the ownership regime underlying it, decreasing or eliminating competition between firms, or reducing or obliterating the many barriers to worker-owned firms, efficiency will remain a ‘legitimate’ consideration. However, advocates of workplace constitutionalism tend to take efficiency trade-offs on faith. They do so in two ways. Firstly, as discussed previously, the evidence for a connection between democracy and inefficiency is unclear. Secondly, the potential for efficiency to be wielded as a justification for management decisions to defend domination and work intensification is not given enough attention; efficiency is also a legitimisation story for management decisions. In this second way, efficiency can be said to be *ideological*.

In what follows, I argue that these justifications, and the story they tell about efficiency, are accepted too quickly.

Consider the following example:

A high ranking executive at Tesla reported: Musk “would say ‘I’ve got to fire someone today,’ and I’d say, ‘No you don’t,’ and he’d say, ‘No, no, I just do. I’ve got to fire somebody,’ ” ... (A Tesla spokesperson disputed this but added that Musk makes “difficult but necessary decisions.”)⁴⁷

Elon Musk’s electric car company, Tesla, is reported to have been run tyrannically, directly by

⁴⁷ Charles Duhigg, ‘Dr. Elon & Mr. Musk: Life Inside Tesla’s Production Hell’, *Wired*, 13 December 2018.

Musk himself. This personal arbitrary power over employees might not be the typical workplace power-over, but this is a difference of degree rather than of kind. In a case like this, adjudicating between legitimate and illegitimate uses of power might appear simple. If Musk's power is seen as the result of the at-will employment system, as having a legal basis, then his not having given a reason because he did not have to give a reason is the problem. But, even without the at-will employment system in place, workers are fired arbitrarily in practice, without reasons being given. (This happens in Britain, where at-will employment is very rare).⁴⁸ It is difficult and costly to actually make use of legal powers that one in principle has, especially for employees. If Tesla workers were protected by contracts which stipulated that reasons had to be given for firing them this would not resolve the issue. As well as the difficulty of using on-paper legal rights, what if Musk or other high-ranking managers at Tesla were able to come up with a justification on efficiency grounds for such bad practice, as they are attempting to do in the quotation above? It remains hard for workers or the public to contest efficiency claims while many workers are kept in the dark about the firm's accounts. Of course, it is unlikely that the case outlined above could pass as coming from legitimate concerns about efficiency, but there is a flexibility to the idea of efficiency that allows it to be used to justify domination. Some laws would find no fault with such an approach either. Workplace democracy would not address this on its own but could increase the power workers had to resist this to the extent that it empowered them and encouraged a lively, democratic culture that made contestation more likely.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ See Philipa Collins, 'Finding Fault in the Law of Unfair Dismissal: The Insubstantiality of Reasons for Dismissal', *Industrial Law Journal*. Vol. 51 (3), 2022, pp. 598–625; and 'A Third of UK Workers may have no protection against unfair dismissal', Institute of Employment Rights, 2021.

⁴⁹ This does not mean that voice and democracy are the only means to do so, the law will likely play an important part in this. This sort of claim, that something is more likely as a result of proposed approach, is hard to prove. This problem, of what I term 'speculative empiricism', will be discussed further in Chapter Five. For now, the point is made tentatively.

Firms can keep information about the finances and competitiveness of their activities away from employees, even from employees who sit on boards or who have consultative and contestatory roles. A related issue is the inherent difficulty with measuring efficiency. It is not just a lack of access to accounts but also because it requires measuring things which are hard to measure (complex counterfactuals, things like a different ‘workplace culture’). Musk can tell us that random firings inspired and motivated remaining workers and thus were efficient. This might even be true, at least in some cases. Some people respond to tyrannical behaviour by submission rather than slowing down, other forms of rebellion, or exit. If this led to the relative share of such employees increasing, efficiency could quite plausibly be driven up. Regardless of this speculation, it is hard for observers or anyone outside of managers and senior leaders to disprove justifications on the basis of efficiency for two reasons: efficiency’s opaque nature and the extent to which efficiency justifications can be used flexibly. While efficiency is a ‘legitimate’ concern for owners and investors, it can be invoked to justify all kinds of bad practices in the context of asymmetry of knowledge and power.

A CEO like Musk threatening to fire employees on the spot, arbitrarily, is rare. A more common way that efficiency plays out in the workplace is through management techniques of measuring and maximising input. Amazon, for example, actively promotes churn in its warehouses, expecting and encouraging a higher turnover of staff than other comparable employers. 3% of its workforce leave each week and the entire workforce is replaced every eight months. This high churn is intended, according to a former HR executive at Amazon, to maintain high performance from workers.⁵⁰ Warehouse workers are cheap to hire and easy to replace. Treating

⁵⁰ See Jodi Kantor, Karen Weise and Grace Ashford, ‘Power and Peril: 5 Takeaways on Amazon’s Employment Machine’, *The New York Times*, 15 June 2021; National Employment Data Brief, ‘Dead-End Jobs: Amazon Warehouses Fail to Provide Long-Term, Full-Time Employment for New Jerseyans’, *National Employment Law Project*, June 2022.

warehouse employees better might well be *inefficient*.

The same could hold for the sexual harassment faced by service sector workers that Anderson rightly points to as evidence of workplace domination. The bulk of sexual harassment that hospitality workers face comes from customers (56% from members of the public compared to 22% from managers).⁵¹ Dealing with third party sexual harassment is costly and difficult.⁵² While a case could be made that sexual harassment might eat into profits—witnessing sexual harassment could discourage some other customers from returning—the prevalence of sexual harassment in hospitality does not seem to actually be a deterrent for most customers. Challenging customers or indeed other employees who are behaving badly and subjecting workers to degrading harassment involves a greater cost (the time of higher-ranking staff, training, in some cases, legal costs). It might help retain staff in the long run but in a context of low hiring costs and a pool of readily available labour, like the hospitality industry, this is not necessarily of concern to employers. In other industries, with higher hiring costs, abuses and domination may not be efficient—for example, if sexist or racist discrimination can cause valued employees to leave the firm.⁵³

Why does this matter for the case for workplace democracy? The promotion of efficiency can have a downward pressure on working conditions, indeed this is usually its effect.⁵⁴ Once efficiency is instantiated as a principle, its trade-offs are not quite so easily reconcilable with a

⁵¹ Figures from Unite the Union's 'We're Not on the Menu' report. See Charlotte Bence, 'Not on the Menu', *Open Democracy*, 1 February 2018.

⁵² Perhaps an under-theorised element in republican thinking about the workplace is the role of customers and how customer behaviour might either form part of domination by manager or might be a form of domination in its own right.

⁵³ Tom O'Shea, 'In Defence of Public Ownership: A Reply to Frye', *Political Theory*, vol 48(5), 2020, pp. 581-587, p. 584

⁵⁴ Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, Monthly Review Press, 1998.

goal of reducing domination.

Let us return to Anderson:

the only justification for workplace hierarchy is productive efficiency. The interest in productive efficiency does not require snooping into or regulating workers off duty lives, since their productivity can be directly observed at work. There is no public interest⁵⁵ in authorising bosses to subject workers to humiliating and degrading work conditions, such as sexual harassment or prohibitions of basic physiological functions such as urination.⁵⁶

Workplace hierarchy is justified by productive efficiency, but just what can be done in the name of efficiency by that hierarchy? How to determine between legitimate and illegitimate uses of managerial power? It is easy to rule out off-the-clock snooping because its connection to efficiency will be tenuous in most cases,⁵⁷ but what degree of surveillance is permissible in the name of efficiency while workers are *on* the clock? Such decisions require trade-offs between the interests of employees and the interests of workers. Broadly put, the employer wants to minimise waste and increase efficiency to ensure that the firm remains competitive and to secure its future existence. The worker may share an interest in the firm's continued existence,

⁵⁵ It is worth noting that the case for permitting domination of workers for increasing efficiency has been made. On some views, it is in the public interest to dominate workers (provided they have exit rights) because it has effects on the economy as a whole that enhance freedom and freedom as non-domination for all. (See e.g. Taylor, *Exit Left* and Harrison Fyre, 'Efficiency and Domination in the Socialist Republic: A Reply to O'Shea', *Political Theory*, vol. 48 (5), 2020, pp. 573–580.)

⁵⁶ Anderson, 'Equality and Freedom in the Workplace: Recovering Republican Insights', p. 67.

⁵⁷ However, there may well be cases when off clock management does increase efficiency. For example, workers who have been drinking over the weekend or during the evening the night before could easily, as anyone who has been hungover can attest to, complete their job more slowly than non-hungover workers.

but many of the possible methods of increasing efficiency might not always be in their interests, for example: enhanced surveillance, reduced control over scheduling, deepened competition between employees.

It is possible to name cases where domination is so unacceptable that it cannot be permitted even in the hallowed name of efficiency. J.D.T Walters, for example, suggests that we can ‘tip the scales in favour of efficiency to warrant a higher degree—but there is a threshold: some cases of workplace domination are so severe that no gains in efficiency could override them.’⁵⁸ He lists, drawing on Anderson, evidence from low paid American workers’ experience: forbidden or irregular bathroom breaks, fear of reporting an injury, abusive managers, fraud, rape, beatings, intimidation, exhausting hours. These, it is suggested, give us good reason to uphold internal voice for workers in firms. While such practices are not uncommon, they are extreme, and often illegal (though rarely do employers face sanction for them). What about cases that are more marginal? Even ‘abuse’ is subjective to some extent. We remain stuck with a problem: how do we determine between legitimate and illegitimate uses of managerial power?

Underneath this problem is another one: who is the ‘we’? The law makes some particularly egregious practices impermissible (though employers are often able to evade action). Legislators have a role to play, albeit a limited one. But who will decide trade-offs? Under the current system of workplace governance, it is owners who typically decide. In the industries and firms with residual union presence, unions may be involved. Their historical presence may still be felt in employment contracts and workplace customs and practices. Workers themselves,

⁵⁸ Jordan David Thomas Walters, ‘On the Efficiency Objection to Workplace Democracy’, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 2021, pp. 803-815, p. 812.

except the small number in unions and working in firms where those unions have influence, have no say. Because these trade-offs affect workers, often significantly and often negatively, they should be able to participate in making these decisions. Moreover, because there is often a substantial difference in interests between workers and employers, a regime of workplace governance that favours ongoing democratic contestation of workplace practices is likely to do a better job of promoting worker voice than workplace constitutionalism. The rights of the owners of capital to secure efficiency must be tempered by the ability of those affected by the domination that such efficiency-seeking techniques require.

What about ideology? Earlier, I suggested that appeals to efficiency can be used ideologically and ‘flexibly’ by employers. How might this work? Ideology here is meant in the same sense that this dissertation has elsewhere mobilised several times: a belief or practice that maintains the status quo by distorting, obscuring, or else naturalising some salient aspect of social reality. Interestingly, Anderson’s account of private government is partly motivated by a concern with ideology and engages in practice that overlaps with ideology critique.

Per Anderson, ideologies are abstract models used to represent and navigate the social world:

An ideology is good if it helps us navigate successfully. To help us, it must identify the normatively important features of the world, and the main causal connections between these features to which people can respond, enabling them to discover effective evaluations of the world, highlighting what we think is good or bad in it.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Anderson, *Private Government*, pp. xx-xxi.

This is a neutral definition. Ideologies are models: they can be helpful, or they can be unhelpful. This is different from the Marxist and Critical Theory model of ideology as a system-sustaining falsehood (whether in explicit belief or otherwise). However, ideologies can have failure modes, according to Anderson. These are: masking problematic features of the world, casting those features in a misleadingly positive light, lacking the normative concepts needed to identify what is problematic about those features, and misrepresenting the space of possibilities, so as to obscure better options, the means to realising them, or their merits.⁶⁰

Models need to be revised when they undermine the interests of ‘identifiable groups’ in ‘serious or gratuitous ways’. This failure mode of ideology-as-model is very similar to much ideology in the pejorative sense.

The model of free trade as autonomy she sees as developed by Adam Smith has a historical afterlife even as it is outpaced by events—Anderson thinks that the industrial revolution and the division of labour undermine its realisation:

Our currently dominant tools for discerning our work lives were manufactured before the Industrial Revolution and originally designed as viewfinders to the future. They were rejected as useless by organized labor movements that arose in recognition of the fundamental irreversible changes in workers’ prospects brought about by the Industrial Revolution. They have been redeployed since the grave decline of organized labor movements, but now as blinders on our actual institutional landscape of work. We need

⁶⁰ Ibid, pp. xxi-xxii.

different instruments to discern the normatively relevant features of our current institutions of workplace governance.⁶¹

As we have seen, per Anderson, employees are subject to arbitrary power. To resolve this problem, that power needs to be made legitimate, or at least employees rendered no longer subject to it. Anderson wants less power over workers and for this power to be legitimate, but she accepts a fairly hard floor on how much power workers must be subject to. The normatively relevant feature she picks up is ‘private government’.

Nicholas Vrousalis argues that advocates for workplace democracy ‘cannot disembark the democratic train at workplace democracy; they must ride it to the very end, and that end is socialism’.⁶² Now, as we will see, the case for broader economic democratisation on the basis of freedom as non-domination is plausible. However, the idea that socialism (in the form of democratic public ownership of the means of production) is the only way of satisfying the problems of workplace democracy, and so propelled by force of argument alone, Anderson and other workplace democrats alone must become socialists, is unsatisfying. Of course, on Vrousalis’ view this is a matter of consistency, but I am interested in the problem from the other side: why is it that some workplace democrats *do* get off the train and in Anderson’s case why is the train disembarked before the stop that reads ‘workplace democracy’?

Here, two ideological (in the standard pejorative sense and as Andersonian ideology-as-model failure mode) sleights of hand matter.

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 41.

⁶² Nicholas Vrousalis, ‘Workplace Democracy Implies Economic Democracy’, *Journal of Social Philosophy*, vol. 50 (3), 2019, pp. 259-279, p. 279.

Anderson gives two reasons for the less stringent demands on workplace democracy than democracy in general:

- 1) Efficiency
- 2) Pragmatism

In the case of pragmatism, one strategy (experimentation from above) is presented as the path of least resistance without evidence. This limits political options but is presented as a non-political, merely technical limitation.

As Anderson explains:

My fundamental reason is pragmatism: there are enough disanalogies between state and workplace governance that our experiences with democratic states do not give us enough information about what arrangements are likely to make sense for the workplace. In most workplaces, employees' activities need to be closely coordinated around both means and ends. Nothing close to that level of coordination among citizens is required to enable liberal states to supply public goods. Furthermore, the traditional model of workplace democracy assumed that workers would own the firm. Worker ownership is far out of reach for most firms, given the size of capital investment needed. It would be imprudent to advise most workers to invest all their savings in their workplace even if they could thereby own them. If owners are distinct from workers, workplace governance will also have to be made accountable to owners to ensure that their investment is not squandered. Finally, as I note in my second lecture, the experiments with workplace democracy that have been undertaken suggest that

designing a viable democratic system of workplace governance is challenging: workers with heterogeneous interests have a hard time agreeing to a common constitution.⁶³

What is ‘pragmatic’ remains contested. It is true that the union movement has limited power but there still might be pragmatic reasons to support a strategy relying on it, for instance because a counterbalance to the powers of capital owners is needed. For example, we can be sure that most firms act to secure their market position. This will rarely have very much to do with enhancing worker voice. In the absence of deeper worker power, who is going to secure it? Anderson suggests that the US Congress could pass legislation to bring about something like co-determination. This is certainly something that could happen, but is this realistic and practical given what we know about entrenched corporate interests and the power those have over various governments? In fact, this seems at least as fantastical as the idea of an enlivened trade union movement. In which case, why use pragmatism or realism being realistic as its justification?

Additionally, this downplays the extent to which trade union power could function as a condition for the enactment of workplace constitutionalism. Indeed, the co-determination model that Anderson favours emerges in a context of high unionisation and an active workers’ movement; the same might apply to other reforms that reduce domination and support workers.⁶⁴

⁶³ Anderson, *Private Government*, pp. 130-131.

⁶⁴ See Orlando Lazar, ‘Work, Domination, and the False Hope of Universal Basic Income’, *Res Publica*, vol. 27, 2021, pp. 427–446; Alex Gourevitch and Lucas Stanczyk, ‘The Basic Income Illusion’, *Catalyst*, vol. 1, no. 4, Winter 2018.

Pragmatism implies an evaluation of the relative chances of success, but these are not given, and often have political commitments baked in. The deployment of this in positive terms—as a virtue, a disposition, and so on—obscures, ideologically, the political choices that are implicit in it.⁶⁵ Moreover, it counts as a misrepresentation of the space of possibilities that Anderson rightly criticises as a bad version of ideology when it appears elsewhere.

Similarly, efficiency appears neutral, perhaps even positive, but it disguises an acceptance of the validity of the pursuit of inter-firm competition.⁶⁶ Moreover, there is reason to doubt that addressing the kind of suffering at work that Anderson wants to bring into view—for example, the denial of toilet breaks, testing for drugs, banning drinking on weekends, even having to put up with sexual harassment—might reduce efficiency. In fact, as I have argued, for some firms, these dominating practices might actually *increase* efficiency. Anderson could reply that even if they do, we should weigh the efficiency trade-off against these especially bad practices, because, they are, on her view, not in the public interest. The good capitalist would reply that they are: they keep down prices. Once efficiency in capitalist markets is accepted, it becomes difficult to draw the line between legitimate and illegitimate practices.

As we have seen, this leaves the advocacy of the limited version of workplace democracy open to attack on the same grounds. Tyrannical workplace regimes may be more efficient, i.e. they bring down unit costs, sweat labour more, and so on. Anderson claims that surveillance and

⁶⁵ Raymond Geuss makes a similar point about the use of ‘flexible’ in precarious labour: ‘[t]o call what is actually “precarisation” of employment “flexibility of the labour market” is a classic instance of ideological obfuscation. That is, it uses a morally neutral or even mildly positive term, such as “flexible”, to cover over something which, if seen correctly, would not obviously recommend itself to us, namely a radical lack of job security’. (Raymond Geuss, *A Philosopher Looks at Work*, Cambridge University Press, 2021, p. 140.)

⁶⁶ Sometimes competition is defended on the grounds that leads to greater abundance for everyone or greater ways of meeting individual preferences. In these cases, it is not the positive value of the market as a force but an acceptance of the capitalist market (perhaps minus some distribution round its edges).

drug testing do not improve efficiency and are not ‘in the public interest’ but firms do not operate in the public interest and such practices could improve their margins. Trade-offs between efficiency and reducing domination and therefore improving working conditions will always take place in firms which compete with each other on the market.

So, why can the train not be ridden all the way to its conclusions? It is worth saying that getting off the train early is a feature of thought in general, not a special property of philosophers’ thinking about workplace democracy. People do not, generally speaking, ‘follow through’. Their ability to judge and to reason is constrained by assumptions and commitments that do not appear to them to be political commitments, though they *are* political commitments. But even pointing to the ideological aspects of Anderson’s rejection of a very robust workplace democracy is not satisfying. It is not that she does not know that her argument would entail something more radical than she proposes: she surely does. She has other commitments (implicitly to the market; explicitly to prioritising forms that maximise her preferred experimentations over others) that matter more. The same is true of other workplace constitutionalists, and of those who think that the most robust workplace democracy could not be realised within capitalist economic relations. Of the latter group, the demands of non-domination are not satisfied by workplace democracy in one firm, even though they might be only logically shown to ‘stop’ there, they require broader economic democratisation.

5. ‘Experimentation’: From Above or from Below

Is it more pragmatic, in the sense of relating to realisable political possibility, to assume that trade unions will not play a significant role in achieving limits on workplace domination? It is worth noting that trade unions have historically been divided on the question of workplace

democracy.⁶⁷ Partly this is because of the use of forms of employee voice to bypass trade unions for decision-making or to delegitimise them in the eyes of workers, but the controversy extends beyond this instrumentalisation of workplace democracy, which cannot be meaningfully said to be workplace democracy of the kind domination critics seek. In a debate on the viability of workplace democracy in 1980, Arthur Scargill and Peggy Kahn argued that if a union, within a system of capitalist economic relations, is absorbed into management and therefore coopted, it is necessarily compromised and incapable of representing workers, making workplace democracy impossible or unrealisable under capitalism.⁶⁸ However, many unions or politicians associated with workers' movements *have* supported forms of workplace democracy, albeit sometimes with caveats, or as one of many policies or approaches to enhance workers' power.⁶⁹

As workers' political institutions, trade unions have had a special role historically in leftist and progressive theorisations of work-under-capitalism. This is also because of the special role afforded to workers in such theories, specifically, that workers are important agents of change, and that through struggle between classes, working conditions and society in general change. In the strongest version of this, workers have a unique historical destiny. This is because they cannot change their own position, which it is in their interest to do,⁷⁰ without changing the entire structure of society. The history of the twentieth century has shown that even if this will eventually be the case, there are ways in which this historical destiny can be constrained or channelled into the maintenance of the status quo. This plausibly calls into question the viability of the strong account of proletariat as the sole radical, historical subject. But it does not call into question the causal importance of class struggle or the political activity of workers in shaping working conditions. Workers, including as workers organised in trade unions, represent the group that has the best chance of having the social power. This includes their

⁶⁷ Challenges to this approach, including arguing for a maintained bargaining relationship between unions and employers alongside a unionist version of workplace democracy have been made, especially (but not exclusively) by rank and file union members.

⁶⁸ Arthur Scargill and Peggy Kahn, 'The Myth of Workers' Control', University of Nottingham, 1988.

⁶⁹ Historical examples include the Lucas Plan, the Bullock Report, the Workers Report on Vickers (see Huw Beynon, *The Workers' Report on Vickers*, Pluto, 1979; Colm Murphy, 'Industrial Democracy, Market Socialism, and Stakeholder Capitalism: Modernisation and Socio-Economic Democracy', in Colm Murphy, *Futures of Socialism: 'Modernisation', the Labour Party, and the British Left, 1973–1997*, pp. 81–120. Cambridge University Press, 2023.)

⁷⁰ The notion of 'interest' will be discussed more fully in Chapter Four on Recognition, but for now, I assume that this means what is good for a group.

ability to strike,⁷¹ their ability to challenge economic domination—from the fact that it is, in most cases, in their interest to do so (unlike many policymakers)—and to change working conditions for the better.

Consider how decisions are already made in the workplace. This, of course, will differ from workplace to workplace. Different scales of operation, different processes and different products as well as different levels of worker skill will all be important factors in how workers relate to management. But workers do not hash out their relationship with their superiors on their own, anew, with each hire. The workplace regulations and the employee handbooks that Anderson points to are important in establishing the norms in any given workplace but there are also ‘bottom up’ or ‘from below’ processes of struggle that are pertinent to the issues of decision-making, including from the collective activities of workers, especially, but not exclusively as organised in trade unions.

If we extend the PCA and imagine that there is something beyond the legislation of the workplace, something that functions like civil society, then there are social norms governing what is acceptable behaviour.⁷² While the employment contract can never be *fully* specified,⁷³ there are ways in which custom and practice shape the process of management. One example of practices which are not necessarily formally recognised by employers (in contracts, handbooks, employment law) but which might constrain the potential for domination of workers are so-called ‘old Spanish customs’. This is a trade union term that refers to an unauthorised worker practice or practices that are tolerated by managers and which benefit the workers. For example, in the case of Fleet Street newspaper printers, the expectation of cash payment in addition to wages when pages were remade as deadlines approached. In a 2009 dispute between Royal Mail and the Communication Workers Union, Adam Crozier, the chief executive of Royal Mail claimed that there had been 1,442 so-called Spanish practices, including overtime paid for work done during normal working hours, which, through his self-

⁷¹ Martin O’Neill and Stuart White, ‘Trade Unions and Political Equality’ in *Philosophical Foundations of Labour Law*, Oxford University Press, 2018; Alex Gourevitch, ‘The Right to Strike: A Radical View’, *American Political Science Review*.

⁷² Trade unions or other groups of workers organised together might be analogous to social movements in a firm-state analogy.

⁷³ There have been attempts to specify as far as possible by unions what conditions are, for example National Rail’s ‘Blue Book’.

proclaimed diligent management, he had reduced to 92.⁷⁴

I am not seeking to defend every single worker-favouring custom on the grounds of republican freedom but rather want to make a point about how custom and workplace legislation come to be. On the bottom-up view, it is class *struggle*, not just over pay, but over the conditions of work, and of control of everyday work practices⁷⁵ that creates legislation, formal and informal practice, i.e. that shapes how workers and management relate to each other every day. This struggle might take place within one workplace over a local issue or at a national level through legislation. Sedimented layers of historical victories and defeats of workers, typically workers as organised in trade unions, produce the workplace of today. The enhanced agency that WD could furnish workers with might better allow for the resistance, both individual and collective, of arbitrary interference. It also shows how the democratic expression of interest is already at play in workplaces. The shop floor is *already* a site of contestation through cooperation around and between different interests. WD, if accompanied by legal rights could give plausibly this contestation a supportive home.

If we view workplace custom and rights as sedimented struggle, a troubling assumption in Anderson's call for experimentation appears. These previous gains for workers had agents who caused them. For her experiments in WC who will be the *experimenters*? Who is the 'we'? Work certainly involves a 'we', in fact, multiple possible 'we's'⁷⁶ (a worker's immediate team, the workers of a given division, workers *and* managers, workers, managers, *and* the board, shareholders, financial backers, workers of the country, workers of the world?) There are heterogeneous interests across these different 'we's'.

Perhaps Anderson has in mind a less attached figure, such as a policymaker, and we have moved out from the workplace where her argument had been deeply embedded onto the loftier ground of ideal theory. This is a significant problem. Anderson and others rightly point out that trade union density has fallen.⁷⁷ But the favourable model for experimentation that she picks

⁷⁴ Tim Webb, 'Post strikes called off as deal is struck on pay and conditions', *The Guardian*, 14 October 2007.

⁷⁵ At the high points of union density and union struggle, workers demanded greater control over the production process rather than economic demands.

⁷⁶ See Geuss, *A Philosopher Looks at Work*, p. 102, for a helpful discussion of the multiple 'we's at work.

⁷⁷ Department for Business and Trade, 'UK Trade Union Membership 1995–2023', 2024. NB while membership of a union rose in 2023 relative to 2022, these two years are the lowest since comparable records

out, German co-determination, could only come into existence in a context of high union density and with the direct threat of strike or other industrial action.

While employers, particularly in more prestigious sectors, are often interested in WC or WD initiatives, regimes of enhanced voice without workers' power to back voice up are likely to be subject to backsliding, favouring consultation over more meaningful participation. Again, it is in significant part for this reason that trade unions in a British context have generally been at best cautious of workplace participation outside of collective bargaining agreements.

In such schemes, there can be an appearance of equality: employers and employees depend on each other, but for the vast majority of workers, their dependence on their employer (e.g. avoiding the sanction of firing or a loss of hours) is greater than their employers on them. This makes the risk of standing up for rights (whether they be legal, contractual, or customary) much harder for workers. (However, the situation of worker dependency is reversed in some rare cases of employees whose exit would involve significant hiring costs because of scarce skills. This includes very specialised technical work and/or when there are shortages in filling positions).⁷⁸ Add to this asymmetry of power an asymmetry of knowledge about the firm (its finances, processes, details of the competitive context in which it is operating), and the possibility of change that WC could bring about looks further limited.

Force decides, as Marx pithily put it, between equal rights.⁷⁹ Voice without some kind of power behind it does not change very much about the ability of employers to dominate employees. Admittedly, these problems also point to the limits of a WD democracy approach. On their own, the psychological development benefits of WD are not likely to instantiate much practical power for workers, leaving the system subject to capture, backsliding and cosmetic rather than meaningful democracy. However, the presence of more open discussion, shared decision making, and possibilities of contestation make it harder for management to rush through

began (1995). Prior to 1995, membership was higher. In 1979, at its peak, 54% of workers were in a union. (See Stephen Machin, 'Union Decline in Britain', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, vol. 38 (4), 2000, pp. 631–645.)

⁷⁸ For instance, due to driver shortages during the pandemic, the hourly median pay for full-time lorry drivers rose 27% between 2020 and 2023 (according to the ONS), because drivers could demand higher pay. See Sarah O'Connor, 'Whatever Happened to the Great Truck Driver Shortage?', *Financial Times*, 19 April 2024.

⁷⁹ Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. Ben Fowkes, Penguin, 2004, p. 225.

policies, processes, or on-the-spot commands that dominate workers. WD is a more fertile ground for generating the kind of worker power required to back up voice than WC which risks undermining itself and is potentially easily subject to backsliding.

Anderson's plea for pragmatic experimentation is incisive, but pragmatism is also required on the issue of the limits of workplace constitutionalism, and on the matter of how to actually realise such changes, and what kind of politics and political action (class struggle) would be required. Holding to a principle of maximising democratic opportunities, weighing trade-offs toward democracy over potential risks to efficiency because a bottom-up as well as top-down defence against tyranny and domination is required, is a better course of action than accepting domination on ideological grounds. More democracy is the better method for preventing domination. There will necessarily be limits to this within privately-owned firms that compete with each other. The next section considers those in more detail, specifically the question of efficiency.

Anderson brings suffering at work-under-capitalism into view. However, having revealed domination at work as a political problem,⁸⁰ including in concrete labour practices, when it and its political nature are commonly obscured, including by dominant liberal accounts of freedom, Anderson retreats. Her lack of self-reflection on the seemingly technical but actually political questions of pragmatism and efficiency is ideological, including in the sense of ideology's failure mode she outlines. This is why, at a crucial moment, she disembarks the democratic train. Having diagnosed a troubling power relation, the train take an emergency extra stop, marked 'trade-offs'.

⁸⁰ Political is used here to mean a question of politics rather than of outside of official 'politics'. It is not used as meaning structural or systemic as it seems that while Anderson intends to show domination or private government to be a structural feature of the modern firm, her analysis does not always permit this, instead being plausibly restricted to bad work and bad bosses.

6. Limits and Horizons

So far in this chapter, I have assumed (contra Anderson) the possibility of ‘debundling’ ownership and control. This would mean that workplace democracy would be possible even without a change of regime in the ownership of firms. However, some labour movement republicans, especially socialist republicans, hold that workplace democracy requires (in the sense meant by Vrousalis described above) changes in broader economic relations, or that absent such changes firm-level democracy would always be at risk of being undermined. Alex Gourevitch describes the economy as involving ‘structural domination’ in the dependence that workers have on employers in general, as well as on their own individual employer.⁸¹ Tom O’Shea points out that without democratisation of the economy, the ownership rights of shareholders ‘constitute a hard limit on worker power within codetermining firms’.⁸² The solution? To maximise the ability of workers to shape their working lives by the removal of the structural domination of the market as well as rendering personal power-over non-arbitrary by firm-level democratisation. This seems important: without a broader transformation of ownership, given inter-firm competition and capitalism’s economic compulsions, there will resultantly be a downward pressure on democracy (as inefficient) and therefore an upward pressure on arbitrary power is also likely, given inter-firm competition and capitalism’s economic compulsions. These compulsions are, as Marx describes, ‘the immanent laws of the capitalist mode of production, through which competition dominates the individual capitalist as external coercive laws, force him to continuously expand his capital in order to keep it’.⁸³

⁸¹ Alex Gourevitch, ‘Labor Republicanism and the Transformation of Work’, *Political Theory*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2013, pp. 591–617.

⁸² Tom O’Shea, ‘Socialist Republicanism’, *Political Theory*, vol. 48, no. 5, 2019, pp. 548–572.

⁸³ Interestingly, Marx describes the capitalist as dominated here too. The capitalist’s agency is compromised by economic power which compels and constrains. There is significant debate within republicanism about whether domination requires a person rather than a structure. Here, I take it for granted that a structure is

This radical reading of republicanism (or, in some tellings, a restoration of its radical, historical popular or populist forms) is critical and capacious enough to bring the salient dynamics of capitalist societies that condition work into view and, furthermore, help to theorise and motivate struggles for republican freedom. But is republican freedom its entire horizon, and if so, is this a problem?

Some radical republicans position republicanism as *comprehensive*. This makes its freedom as non-domination the horizon and the central value or norm for both radical theory and radical praxis. Tom O'Shea argues that republicanism 'provides a more comprehensive account of the threats to our economic liberties' than the alternatives (libertarian, Rawlsian, Marxist).⁸⁴

Others, who are either less committed or are otherwise value-plural republicans, hold that freedom-as-non-domination is important but not the only or ultimate horizon.⁸⁵ If republicans should be socialists, as radical republicans argue, should socialists be republicans? Jan Kandiyali argues that while radical republicanism's account of unfreedom is a useful way for understanding domination of workers by employers, domination by the market and by the ownership structure of capital are better explained by other accounts of freedom. On his view, '[t]he socialist critique of capitalism draws on different notions of freedom: negative, positive,

sufficient. Moreover, on the Marxian economic power model, the distinction between person and structure is fuzzier: structures are enacted by people (even if this happens 'behind their backs').

⁸⁴ Tom O'Shea, 'What Is Economic Liberty?', *Philosophical Topics*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2020, pp. 203–222, p. 221.

⁸⁵ Patchen Markell, 'The Insufficiency of Non-Domination', *Political Theory*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2008, pp. 9–36, p. 23; Sharon R. Krause, 'Beyond Non-domination: Agency, Inequality and the Meaning of Freedom', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2013, pp. 187–208; Jan Kandiyali, 'Should Socialists Be Republicans?', *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, vol. 27, no. 7, 2024, pp. 1032–1049.

and republican'. These are all 'valuable' and a pluralist approach is both possible and more desirable than a singular one.⁸⁶

If this pluralism is accepted over the idea that republicanism is comprehensive, how should the horizon of republican freedom be understood?

A horizon is a metaphor for a particular way of thinking of political goals or endpoints, particularly in radical political theory. It has the advantage of directionality without specificity—allowing for generative visions without succumbing to the pitfalls of unmoored ideal theory or utopianism.⁸⁷

One approach might be to view republican freedom in its radicalised form as an addition to the other possible conceptions of freedom (including those that already circulate in the case of work: disalienation; self-realisation; freedom from work in the post-work sense [as abolition]) and those might be generated through political action and struggle. If the point of ideas is to make action more likely by revealing something important, especially if that thing is ideologically obscured, especially in showing it to actors who can change it, then a plurality of conceptions of freedom or of other political horizons is useful in the way that a plurality of conceptions of 'work' can be. However, freedom as non-domination can be seen as a different kind of conception to others, because it is negative.

Now, it is the case that in some accounts of republican freedom there are positive values, horizons, or other goals. This is as true of the forms of labour republicanism from the American workers' movement that Gourevitch recovers, as it is in the lifeworld of small producers that Anderson sees as obliterated by industrialisation, and in the various attempts at enacting

⁸⁶ Kandiyali, 'Should Socialists Be Republicans', p. 1045.

⁸⁷ Alyssa Battistoni, 'Situated Knowledge, Committed Theory', in 'Visionary Political Theory', *Contemporary Political Theory*, 2023, Vol. 23 (1), pp. 88–113, p. 104.

popular sovereignty that Nabulsi, Leipold and White identify in republican struggles against imperialism and economic domination.⁸⁸ In these cases, values of cooperation and solidarity, autonomy and independence, and democracy and civic participation, of active political life, respectively can be traced. But outside of the positive content contained in these historical examples, there is a case for seeing freedom as non-domination as a precondition for the development (i.e. the actual making possible) of other worthy principles. This would make freedom as non-domination a freedom of a particular and potentially particularly useful kind, standing out in the thicket of many possible and useful conceptions of freedom.

A comparison with Amy Allen's reading of Foucault's account of emancipation, which she takes to be a freedom from a state of domination is helpful here. Emancipation is negativistic, but it establishes a ground on which greater possibilities for freedom emerge: 'transforming a state of domination into a mobile and reversible field of power relations', an 'emancipation without utopia'. This does not mean that there is no power left, but that subjects are given more room for 'practices of freedom, self-transformation, and experimentation'.⁸⁹ We might conceptualise emancipation as a precondition for other forms of freedom and liberation that we are not yet able to imagine or conceive of (on Marx's account because of the principle of historical specificity, on Foucault's because of the fact of our situatedness in power relations without an 'outside', but in any case, suffice to say that there are, to adapt the term, 'unknown unknowns').⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Bruno Leipold, Karma Nabulsi and Stuart White, eds., *Radical Republicanism: Recovering the Tradition's Popular Heritage*, Oxford University Press, 2020.

⁸⁹ Amy Allen, 'Emancipation without Utopia: Subjection, Modernity, and the Normative Claims of Feminist Critical Theory', *Hypatia*, vol. 30, no. 3, Summer 2015, pp. 513–529.p. 518.

⁹⁰ Of course, the case of Donald Rumsfeld's use of 'unknown unknowns' in reference to the alleged presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and the justification for an invasion was not a 'socially-necessary fiction', at least in the sense of Marx's neatest gloss on ideology, but another kind of fiction: a lie.

If a horizon of republican freedom, in the negativistic sense of establishing a massively reduced baseline of domination, is viewed in the same way as Allen's account of Foucauldian emancipation (as being governed less), non-domination becomes a precondition, practically and epistemically, for other forms of freedom. It has a relation to the other forms of freedom that is not just one of mutual computability. In this way, radicalised republican freedom, when taken as one of a plurality of freedom conceptions, can act as a radically motivating political horizon, tracking suffering and frustration in present personal and structural domination, setting a direction of travel for a destination without the pitfalls of specifying utopian detail. Republican freedom becomes the basis for the realisation of other values. This republicanism is very far away from the conventional neo-republicanism of Pettit, but it remains meaningfully 'republican' as a conception of freedom. As a mode of analysing the harms of work it is meaningfully distinct from other approaches outlined in this dissertation (recognitive, feminist-inclusionary, Marxist, dis-alienating, redistributive, post-work).

7. Conclusion

This chapter has looked at recent critiques of work on the basis of domination, primarily those made by republicans or in light of republican concerns. It has traced two major trajectories: a conventional account which places emphasis on 'trade-offs' and establishes constraints on or justifiable versions of domination (these will be made on the basis of other political commitments, sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit), and a radical one which sees the end of domination as requiring a significant overhaul of firms, via democratisation, and of a

transformation of the economy in general. It then made the case for the superiority of workplace democracy over workplace constitutionalism as a solution to domination in the capitalist firm. However, the idea that non-radical republicans must *logically* adopt radical republicanism or socialism is unconvincing, their other principles commit them to signing off early. This point was demonstrated by a discussion of the curtailing and declawing of the radical critique of the workplace developed by Elizabeth Anderson on the basis of ideological notions of pragmatism and efficiency. The matter of pragmatism was discussed further in relation to the weak subject of workplace constitutionalism. Finally, I proposed one way of understanding the relationship of radical republican conceptions of freedom to other conceptions of freedom, arguing that non-domination is a precondition for other forms of freedom. Seen in this way, republican freedom, as James Connolly—a radical republican in many senses of the word—put it, the doing away with of masters, a belief in and a hope for the collective intelligence of the people, provides a standpoint for critiquing work-under-capitalism and a horizon for its overcoming.

Chapter Three: Recognition, or A Philosopher Goes to Market

Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral

—*Bertolt Brecht*

1. Introduction

Work-under-capitalism denies many workers esteem, both self-esteem and esteem from others. The work they do may be looked down on or (wrongfully¹) stigmatised. They may be treated badly at work in a way that constitutes, on some definitions, ‘misrecognition’ or otherwise violates the basis for their self-respect. There are many ‘status injuries’ within contemporary labour markets. For many workers, these are not marginal or time-limited experiences (temporary unemployment, a petty and tyrannical manager who makes their life briefly miserable), they are common to the overwhelming majority of their working lives.² Consider the case of an agency worker who has their shift cancelled at the last minute, sometimes when they are already on their way to or at their place of work. While some of this harm might be visible through an economic lens (in the form of wasted time and money, stress, a lack of power to organise) some aspects, particularly the relational, the psychological the experience of not being wanted, of being turned away, the inability to plan one’s life, broadly status related

¹ There are some jobs that should be stigmatised: arms manufacturer, arms sector lobbyist, or CIA agent, for instance. What is meant here is that work that is not valued within a society’s dominant culture, but which has good grounds to demand better valuation. This poses more questions than it answers (valued, how? good grounds, what?), on which, more later.

² And plausibly their pre-working lives, insofar as education is education for a place in the labour market.

harms, are helpfully drawn out by a recognition approach.³ Class too might be thought of as an impediment to esteem.⁴ Historically, working-class movements have developed counter-hegemonic languages of esteem, dignity and respect, in which their efforts are recognised for the (literally) world-making activities that they are, against a dominant culture which obscures workers' contributions.

What is particularly salient for 'recognition' is to be seen as a worthy, esteemed person, by others and by yourself. Recognition is distinct from the idea that work limits action and therefore self-development and self-realisation (as Marx puts it, that it loses 'all charm for the workman', and turns him into a mere appendage of the machine),⁵ and therefore has harmful psychological and developmental effects (as in alienation, in Chapter Three), although this might be importantly related to it. Recognition has more to do with shared questions of norms, morality, and value (monetary and non-monetary) than fulfilment and meaning. Drudgerous or monotonous work that hampers development could, depending on external factors, i.e. if and how it is socially valued, be either enhancing or undermining of esteem.

This overlaps with some versions of the republican assessment of work-under-capitalism as involving problematic domination (see Chapter Two). Someone who is dominated is likely also someone who suffers status harms. Certainly, some versions of the republican critique of work

³ Thank you to Sacha Hilhorst for this example. For detail and discussion see Sacha Hilhorst, 'Afterlives of Legitimacy: A Political Ethnography of Two Post-Industrial Towns in England', PhD diss. London School of Economics and Political Science, 2024.

⁴ Jennifer Morton, *Moving Up Without Losing Your Way: The Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility*, Princeton University Press, 2019; Didier Eribon, *Returning to Reims*, trans. Michael Lucey, Penguin Books, 2019; Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, Knopf, 1972; Paul Willis, *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Lads Get Working Class Jobs*, Saxon House, 1979; Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, Chatto & Windus, 1957; Michèle Lamont, *The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigration*, Harvard University Press, 2009.

⁵ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol.6, Lawrence and Wishart, 1976, pp. 477-519, pp. 90-91.

draws on or imply a moral outrage at the erosions of dignity of the capitalist labour process or of the market. This is especially the case when they emerge from the concrete historical practices of labour movements, which develop and deploy their own moral languages and meanings to extend and defend workers' rights and power.

Recognition here is not of an activity *as* 'work' (as it was in Chapter One), although a lack of recognition of an activity as work might count as instance of a reduction of esteem or 'misrecognition'.⁶ Instead, recognition is about being seen as or taken to be a particular kind of subject, relative to others.

Recognition is an area of significant theoretical attention, particularly through the work of Axel Honneth.⁷ Over several decades, Honneth has theorised recognition, arguing that it is a model for understanding and evaluating societies, and that it is a paradigm that it is successfully able to provide a normative anchor for critical theory. In his view, it is well-suited for the analysis of work, which he takes to be important for social and critical theory,⁸ and he has throughout the development of his framework brought recognition to bear on work and working practices.

Honneth's vision sees recognition as an intersubjective process through which individuals achieve self-realisation and social integration. In this way, recognition is the basis of healthy subjecthood. Further, historical change, especially via social movements, emerges from

⁶ Honneth notes that care work's lack of recognition *as* work is a form of misrecognition.

⁷ Others have theorised recognition, see eg Charles Taylor, 'The Politics of Recognition' in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann, Princeton University Press, 1994, pp. 25–73; Paul Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, trans. David Pellauer, Harvard University Press, 2005; Emmanuel Renault, *The Experience of Injustice: A Theory of Recognition*, Columbia University Press, 2017.

⁸ See Axel Honneth, 'Work and Instrumental Action', in *The Fragmented World of the Social*, ed. Charles W. Wright, SUNY Press, 1995, pp. 40–46; Axel Honneth, 'Labor and Recognition: A Redefinition', in *The I in the We*, trans. Joseph Ganahl, Polity Press, 2014, pp. 57–58.

struggles over recognition, in response to disrespect. Recognition across different spheres of society gives people a good, healthy life, its denial leads to political action, and as such, shapes societal change.

Recognition seems, on the face of it, to contain resources useful for making sense of psychic harms of work-under-capitalism, especially how these might constrain ‘healthy’ psychological development.⁹ There is a vast body of empirical literature on the ways in which work might be said to cause status-related suffering.¹⁰ Moreover, recognition is attuned to the practices of collective meaning-making of workers including within workers’ political activity. Further, Honneth is interested in work at the level of societal reproduction, potentially bringing into view activities considered outside the fold of work and assessing them in light of recognitive questions. Recognition also appears to offer a theory of political action, as well as potential solutions to the problem of (mis)recognition, namely, in market socialism.¹¹

In this chapter, I outline Honneth’s theory of work and consider its possibilities and its limitations. The usefulness of his theory for understanding work is undermined by a model of the market that obscures economic domination and that takes norms which are contradictory

⁹ Of course, the entire notion of ‘health’ is itself questionable. See e.g. R.D. Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1965; Theodor Adorno, ‘Sociology and Psychology (Part 1)’, trans. Irving Wohlfarth, *New Left Review*, no. 46, 1967. Amy Allen argues that Honneth’s psychoanalytic picture of the self is too positive, see Amy Allen, *Critique on the Couch: Why Critical Theory Needs Psychoanalysis*, Columbia University Press, 2020, p. 19.

¹⁰ Amy Isham, Simon Mair and Tim Jackson, ‘Worker Wellbeing and Productivity in Advanced Economies: Re-examining the Link’, *Ecological Economics*, vol. 184, June 2021; Michele Belloni, Ludovico Carrino and Elena Meschi, ‘The Impact of Working Conditions on Mental Health: Novel Evidence from the UK’, *Labour Economics*, vol. 76, June 2022, pp. 1–16.

¹¹ Additionally, Honneth, in *The Working Sovereign*, argues for changing aspects of working conditions for reasons of political participation in democratic life. This is not about the esteem that is the means of recognition in the market, but about those of the law. While his more recent work considers aspects of the quality of work, it is noteworthy that this is done through a different part of his recognition framework than esteem, pointing to a problem with ‘esteem’ (that it does not sufficiently address quality of work) which will be discussed in this chapter.

and ideological to be coherent and (predominantly) non-ideological. The source of this problem is found in Honneth's very ambitious goal—to provide a normative foothold for critical theory—which, combined with a persistent Marxophobia leads to an ideologically uncritical acceptance of the normative stories which societies tell themselves. I outline Honneth's theory and how it can bring work-under-capitalism into view. I then turn to the question of Honneth's handling of market morals and norms, arguing that this undermines the usefulness of recognition, and I then consider whether this account of the market can be dropped, arguing that Honneth is unable to do because of his grounding and comprehensiveness ambitions.

2. What is recognition? Honneth's Contribution to Critical Theory

In its everyday use, recognition is a form of attentive noticing between people. 'I recognise that I have hurt your feelings', 'I recognise that this might cause logistical difficulties for you' and so on. This is not merely awareness of knowing, but an attention to mutual responsibility and interdependence. People want recognition for something that they have done or something that they are: they want something to be seen by someone else, sometimes rewarded, or, at the very least, not ignored. The distribution of recognition is also present here, too: 'Why have they been rewarded and but not me?', we want not only to be recognised, but not to be under-recognised relative to others. Crucially, one's work can be 'recognised.' These senses of positive, intersubjective *noticing*, and *reward* are carried over into Honneth's framework of recognition.

Honneth's recognition theory is an ambitious project with many strands, developed over several decades, emerging from his reading of Hegel's early writings, of aspects of psychoanalysis,

especially object relations theory, labour history and sociology. Recognition is, on this account, not merely being seen positively by another person but having particular features of oneself *affirmed* by them. This is stronger than the everyday use's positive noticing. Being affirmed is a prerequisite for autonomy. Its success depends not only on early psychological formation, although that has a particularly important role in subject-formation, but also on the continuous presence of mutual recognition throughout the entirety of people's lives.

Honneth's recognition theory has several pillars. Firstly, recognition theory constitutes an account of what it is or what it requires to become a healthily individuated, psychologically mature subject. It forms the foundation of freedom for subjects. Being recognised intersubjectively provides the preconditions for living a fulfilling life. The process of recognition and individuation that takes place particularly in the early years of life allows people to develop as autonomous subjects. As adults, they have ongoing needs for recognition, in various forms: as love, respect, and esteem. While these are all important, it is esteem that is the focus of this chapter, as it most directly concerns work.

The second aspect of the theory of recognition is a sociological account of the spheres of recognition within different societies, including how these develop and change. In modern capitalist societies they are the family, the state and civil society. Each of these spheres has a distinct type of recognition: love, respect and esteem, respectively. Because the spheres are not static but change, the theory of recognition is, thirdly, a theory of historical change. Modern societies contain differentiated spheres, with their own norms and institutions for esteem. These are the family, the state, and civil society. Honneth takes the market to mean civil society. This historical progress is driven by the fourth aspect of the theory—experiences of disrespect or the denial of (full) recognition can cause, under certain conditions, political struggles for

recognition. Through such struggles, practices of recognition are contested and change, and societies themselves change.

Fifthly, recognition theory is intended to be a means to solve a dilemma that Honneth and other contemporary critical theorists see as fundamental: how to ground critical theory without collapsing into either relativism, or with deciding ‘over the heads’ of people what is good for them. Honneth’s solution is through normative reconstruction—the uncovering of the norms ‘tacitly accepted by all participants as underlying the various spheres of action’¹² against which recognition claims are made and which, insofar as they shape what people can expect, condition experiences of disrespect. Through the struggles over, and in light of these norms, it becomes, he argues, possible to see a history of moral progress and a horizon of the future realisation of those same norms.¹³

Honneth’s theory of recognition responds to the ‘over-the-heads’ dilemma by finding something normative in the immanent experience of misrecognition, which has as its sources the violation of moral norms inherent to each sphere of recognition. Misrecognition leads to suffering and (all) suffering contains the idea that, in light of the already-agreed-on norms of that institution, justice has been violated: ‘social suffering and discontent possess a *normative* core. It is a matter of the disappointment or violation of normative expectations of society considered justified by those concerned’.¹⁴

¹² Axel Honneth, ‘Rejoinder’, *Critical Horizons*, 2015, 16:2, pp. 204-226, p. 206.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser, *Redistribution and Recognition: A Philosophical Exchange*, Verso, 2003, p. 129.

This grounding is intended to draw two lines in the sand and thereby avoid the dilemma. Firstly, against a Kantianism that would apply external principles, and secondly against approaches that might be said to be immanent but do not, in his view, constitute a rational, universalisable, normative standpoint, like, for instance, what he terms the Marxist ‘idea of ascribable [class] interest’ or the practices or slogans of the social movements and the resistance of workers themselves when these are not expressed in the normative or pre-normative language of esteem.¹⁵

Recognition theory can, then, be said to be: a theory of historical change, a sociological description of modern societies, a method for diagnosing societal problems, a theory of political action, a psychological story (of ‘healthy development’) and an attempt to remake critical theory. This ambition, this heavy lifting in many directions at once, makes things difficult. A theory of everything is, in some ways, appealing, but it is also problematic. In his reconstitution of critical theory, Honneth opens up an important path and diverges from the one established by Jürgen Habermas, which identifies work with instrumental action, and thus places it outside the scope of moral contestation.¹⁶ Honneth insists that the market (which is the primary but not exclusive site of work) is not only moral in the sense of containing norms, but that it also involves struggles over those norms. This politicisation of the market has the potential to bring back into view some of the classical questions and concepts of first generation Frankfurt School critical theory, like domination, exploitation and alienation. Honneth also attempts a revival of ‘reification’, a guiding concept of the early Frankfurt School, in which it is understood to be a ‘forgetfulness of recognition’.¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 134.

¹⁶ For Honneth, ‘labour relations continue to harbour a potential for normative conflict based on a hidden morality of work’, see David Borman, ‘Bourgeois Illusions, Honneth on the Ruling Ideas of Capitalist Societies’, in *Axel Honneth and the Critical Theory of Recognition*, ed. Volker Schmitz, p. 105.

¹⁷ Axel Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea*, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 17.

This reopening of the market as a site of political and theoretical contestation creates a potentially fruitful environment for the discussion of the ways in which the current order of work might cause harms in relation to recognition. In fact, Honneth has, throughout his work, turned his attention to the question of work and in particular to the social division of labour. The experience of work and in particular of moral claims about that experience is present from Honneth's early writings, and this has persisted into the present where work has become one of his key concerns.¹⁸ His early conception of the recognitive harms of work focuses on an anthropological or craft conception of work, in which a propensity to produce, and to enjoy that production, under autonomous conditions, is frustrated by a division of labour which structurally blocks that kind of activity.¹⁹ By 2010, he has revised this position on the grounds that the demand for organic, self-determined production in the craft conception of work is not sufficiently universalisable—it 'cannot be equally constitutive of all instances required in the economic sphere'²⁰—and therefore remains stuck at the level of a 'mere wish', out of keeping with his projective of normative reconstruction and immanent critique. Instead, the critical conception of work should be one which relies on 'moral norms that already constitute rational claims within the social exchange of services.'²¹ He goes on to suggest that the underlying function of the market is social integration, not efficient production. Following this, there are a series of moral norms underlying modern work.²² These norms constitute 'moral promises' like 'self-respect' and 'a fair day's pay for a fair day's work' and they also emerge from the normative basis of the market. These norms mandate that all adults should work—and in so

¹⁸ See e.g., Axel Honneth, *The Working Sovereign*, Polity Press, 2024.

¹⁹ See Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, Polity Press, 1995.

²⁰ Honneth, 'Labour and Recognition: A Redefinition' in *The I in the We*, trans. Joseph Ganahl, Polity Press, 2014.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

²² *Ibid.* p. 63.

doing they should contribute to the social good—that work should enable their survival, that work should be a source of meaning on the wages from, and capacity to find meaning in, that work. These promises are not, he adds, presently realised, but their possibility appears to guarantee both the reproduction of the market and capitalist society as a whole and the possibility for the reform of the capitalist market and point to the possibility of something different—his preference is market socialism.

The matter of ‘guaranteeing’ is intriguing. How do the norms make the system work? And how can they justify and render more likely its transformation where it cannot live up to or realise those its norms? The legitimacy of the market depends on a set of moral rules or norms that are needed for it to function:

The coordination of merely individual material calculations can only succeed if the subjects involved antecedently recognise each other not only legally as parties to a contract, but also morally or ethically as members of a cooperative community. Without such an antecedent sense of solidarity, which obligates the subjects to do more than merely respect the terms laid down in a contract, the opportunities offered by the market could be used to cheat, to pile on wealth and exploit others.²³

Without this justification and promise of solidarity through mutual recognition, the market would not succeed as a way of coordinating action. The sources of this normativity are the immanent potential in existing relations and institutions. Modern societies depend on institutional frameworks and practices that enable the realisation of social freedom. Social

²³ Axel Honneth, *Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*, Columbia University Press, 2014, p.182.

freedom is freedom that is and can be realised only by and within certain institutions, and which must enable the realisation of that freedom with other people. Honneth takes this view from Hegel: mutually affirming agents intersubjectively enact this freedom in each of the spheres of recognition. In the market, the recognition comes in the form of contribution to the collective good, coordinated impersonally through cooperation in the market. We are confirmed in the desires and aims of someone else, because their existence is a condition for fulfilling our own aims and desires.²⁴

The normativity of the market is the principle of reciprocal recognition through exchange. This ‘embeds’ it in society. The market is socially integrative, it makes people part of a social order through their impersonal contributions in the form of work, of taking a position in the division of labour, creating a sense of social belonging, and actual social belonging. In this sense, Honneth’s theory of recognition is also a functionalist account of norms, drawing on his reading of Hegel, Weber and Durkheim.

When these norms are not met, or when they are violated, people experience suffering and, if certain conditions are met, can turn to action to demand and make real those norms. If a worker is treated badly, then they can experience this as such because of these norms. Moreover, more specific or local principles reflecting the underlying norms develop in the form of notions of fairness and dignity in economic struggles over production and consumption. For the latter, he draws on E. P. Thompson’s analysis of bread riots.²⁵

²⁴ Ibid, pp. 44-5.

²⁵ E. P. Thompson would be resistant to the idea that moral economy analyses could be applied to this abstract account and was clear that his account covers only historical change, rather than a transhistorical principle. This is not necessarily a problem for Honneth, but points to the way that his historical sources (Thompson, moral economy analyses) point in a different direction to the Hegelian-Durkheimian (abstract and integrative) visions of broader social relations. Perhaps they are not fundamentally incompatible, but some straining of the historical material is required for his argument.

The question of the market and morals will be turned to more fully in Section Four. But for now, it is important to note that this view of the market makes it hard to bring the connections between economic relations and the moral and normative content of markets into view. Honneth argues, contra Habermas,²⁶ that the market is not a norm-free sphere of the efficient allocation of resources, but instead contains norms, and further, that these norms are ‘indispensable’ for the ‘modern capitalist organization of work’. The market has a ‘moral infrastructure’.²⁷ But it is not just Habermas’ view of the market that is abandoned here. A basic assumption of first-generation Frankfurt School Critical Theory was that economic relations had profound effects for the ‘rest’ of society. Indeed, so structuring were these structural effects that the distinction between ‘market’ and ‘society’ was itself questionable. This view comes from a reading of Marx, whose own view is not that the market either has or does not have morals in a sense relevant to Honneth’s. Instead, each age will have its own morality, morals, customs, practices and so on, and understand themselves and the world through them—the English bourgeoisie had its Bentham and the RSPCA, its myth of Robinson Crusoe.²⁸ These might be functionalist in a system-sustaining sense, that is they could contribute to the maintenance of that society, but this would be ideologically, rather than in the positive, Hegelian-Durkheimian social-integrationist manner that Honneth claims. This morality as proper to an age, as socially necessary belief, as ideology, presupposes an entwining of the ‘material’ and the ‘moral’ that is lost in Honneth’s account. Rather than immanent norms being realised through struggles for esteem, Marx sees norms as contradictory, relating to the

²⁶ Honneth, ‘Work and Recognition: A Redefinition’, p. 229.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Does this lead to a collapse into relativism? I do not think it does. The norms of each society are not taken to be moral in the sense of telling us something true about them, but rather a necessary (for individual psychology, for the reproduction of that society), the historical specificity principle stands outside relativism and universalism.

practical possibilities of a given society. In the ‘free’ proletarian—who is ‘free’ to carry out wage labour—there is contained the possibility of the truly free producer. This is not about the idealist realisation of an immanent norm but about immanent practical possibilities. Honneth abandons the materialism of the Frankfurt School by depicting historical change as coming from the realisation of immanent norms. This means overlooking fundamental power relations in the market.

In this way, Honneth’s account of norms in the market might be considered as ‘idealised’ in two senses: overly positive in skirting the matter of economic domination, and overly idealistic in the sense of being insufficiently materialist. in ignoring the reality of work-under-capitalism. In this way, Honneth can be said to re-politicise the market but to inscribe into this politicisation politics that obscure the less-than-ideal relations between norms and ‘the economy’.

3. Might it Work? Concrete Labour and Recognition’s Usefulness

Honneth’s later view of recognition vis-à-vis work holds that there are moral norms immanent to the market that constrain it, that these norms embed it into wider society, and that norms immanent to the market serve as a standpoint from which to critique those societies and their ‘recognition orders’, and these norms are operative in workplace struggles (pay, terms and conditions, etc.), which can in turn themselves be understood as struggles for esteem, i.e. for recognition of their contribution to the socially esteemed good.

Recognition seems to offer a useful framework for making sense of frustrations with contemporary work, in particular as workers experience them in the workplace. Firstly, the

recognition framework draws attention to the moral vocabulary through which workers understand and make claims about their treatment and demand better work. If it is the case that the contestation of norms and outrage at disrespect form an important spur to action for workers, a critical theory of work would need to understand it, firstly because of the rightful expectation that critical theory should track closely relevant empirical features of the world, and secondly such that it could be of practical use for political movements. Thirdly, since the experience of work is relational and social, an account of the impersonal domination of the market might need to be augmented by a theory that can make sense of the intersubjective status harms of a capitalist social division of labour, in which people interact with those who are capable of causing harm to their ability to function as an autonomous subject.²⁹ Fourthly, as the possibility of meaningful work or work that guarantees dignity and a liveable wage recedes in the global north because of processes of neoliberalisation and precarisation, a paradigm that foregrounds those aspects of work's unfulfilled promises might be a useful spur to action for workers. Work is supposed to be rewarded, contributions are supposed to be recognised, dignity is supposed to be maintained. That they are not is reason to experience them as enraging.

Most broadly, the advantage of a recognitive framework is that it can make sense of the psychic suffering of contemporary work as both an empirical reality of the capitalist division of labour and as a political framework for encouraging action by workers or others. This dual aspect of disclosing hidden or ideologically obscured aspects of social reality and enhancing the ability of agents to take political action against them are fundamental aspects of critical theory. Despite this, the 'psychologising' aspects of recognition have been criticised. Nancy Fraser argues that

²⁹ Because work is an embodied activity and the capacity to labour—the commodity bought and sold—cannot be separated from the seller, this might mean that some dehumanising aspects of work might best be made sense of it in light of aspects of recognition other than esteem.

status subordination, which she takes to be misrecognition, should be understood as a wrong located in social relations, rather than ‘individual or interpersonal psychology’.³⁰

But, even if the cause of misrecognition is to be found in impersonal social relations, those wrongs are experienced by people personally and relationally. Truly impersonal social relations are not possible. We are situated subjects, formed by our interactions with others within the constraints of structuring social relations. There is no easy way to distinguish, at least at the level of experience, between the personal and the impersonal. Working a low-paid job that is so because of its low-status, perhaps because of associations it has with dirtiness or because it is in some other way considered inferior, is no doubt the result of structural social relations, but it is lived intersubjectively, through the responses of others when you tell them what your job is, through interactions with colleagues, through the built environment of workplaces which separate workers of different status or esteem. Impersonal and structural oppression are concretised individual experience, and recognition brings this into view.

Typically, the worry about psychologising is that it can put a brake on politics³¹—perhaps the status harms of the street cleaner or the unskilled labourer could be solved by therapy!—but this assumes too much about psychologising. Of course, in practice, much actually-existing psychology has been interested in encouraging people, often violently, to accept unacceptable social orders, to resign and accommodate themselves to worlds they find unacceptable, and to imagine that they can become healthy, self-realising subjects, which, given what we know about the limits of a ‘healthy’ subjecthood under capitalism,³² can itself be ideological. But

³⁰ Honneth and Fraser, *Redistribution or Recognition*, p. 31.

³¹ It is a common assumption that politics and psychology are distinct. Given how psychology presents itself, this is not surprising, but another way of theorising psychology and psychologising are no doubt possible.

³² See Amy Allen, *Critique on the Couch*, for a discussion of a non-recuperative approach to bringing psychologising in the form of psychoanalysis back into Critical Theory, around Adorno comments, in his

‘psychologising’ is theoretically compatible with both radical political content and with structural thinking. Indeed, in the encounter between the earlier Frankfurt School and psychoanalysis, such a compatibility was evident. In the case of work, attentiveness to subjectification and psychic harms through the experience of concrete labour, is a strength, not a weakness of recognition theory.

How might these experiences be brought into view by paying closer attention to concrete labour practices? Firstly, through making sense of the relative esteem awarded to different work and what this means for workers. Secondly, by remaining attentive to the specifically moral ways in which work figures in social meaning.

On esteem, work-under-capitalism both creates and hinders opportunities for esteem. Some jobs are esteemed, others are not. As Timo Jütten puts it, ‘in modern capitalist societies social esteem is distributed primarily according to one’s place in the social division of labour.’³³ In modern, as opposed to feudal societies, respect and esteem are distinct: everyone is respected as a person before the law, whereas esteem is given through recognition of activities which are perceived to contribute to the realisation of socially-agreed-on goods.³⁴ If contributions are not recognised, or if socially-agreed goods do not include the activity someone does, or if someone is unable to work, they are denied esteem, which is a precondition for their flourishing. In these cases, the contestation of esteem takes place through asking to be included because of a

critique of revisionist psychoanalysis that, ‘[t]he totality of the so-called ‘character’ is fictitious: one could almost call it a system of scars, which are integrated only under suffering, and never completely’, *Critique on the Couch*, p. 69.

³³ Timo Jütten, ‘Dignity, Esteem, and Social Contribution: A Recognition-Theoretical View’, *Journal of Political Philosophy*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2017, pp. 259–280.

³⁴ Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, p. 122.

wrongful exclusion, asking for the good to be expanded to include the contribution, and questioning the basis of recognition in contribution through participation in/through work.

Jütten points to the comparative nature of esteem as a potential limit of the recognitive paradigm. That work is the primary means through which esteem is distributed offers ways of understanding and critiquing how work is organised, especially as concerns low-paid work and unemployment. However, not everyone can contribute in the same way and therefore not everyone can be recognised. This would be true even if the ideological distortions of esteem orders (the lack of inclusion of unpaid housework, for instance) were rectified. This means that there is necessarily a competition for recognition. The dignity of one person is secured at a cost to the dignity of another. On this view, the positive picture of a struggle for esteem cumulatively producing progressive change looks less than realistic.

A reformed recognition order is compatible with hierarchy and status, and as Jütten points out, competition. In fact, given that it is not possible to accurately track contributions to the social good, esteem will always involve some people being recognised more than others who make an equivalent contribution. If they are competitive, they will engage in fights for esteem, which necessarily cannot be given universally.

The contest for esteem has been worsened by downward pressures on wages and working conditions, particularly within neoliberal conditions and in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. Jütten wonders whether, under the right conditions, this contest for dignity could be lessened. Would, for instance, a Rawlsian social and economic regime conquer the esteem contest by establishing a threshold of esteem sufficient for a dignified life? Jütten is sceptical: comparison and status-enhancing consumption might turn out not to have very much to do with

societal levels of inequality, and a dispersal of productive assets might perversely increase competition.

As well as Rawls' idealised property owning democracy, we can see what a recognition order under a more equal distributive regime might look like by considering social democratic social orders. In the newly 'affluent societies' of the mid-twentieth century, inequality was significantly lower than it is presently, the activities of workers were 'rewarded' by a higher share of the value produced than they presently receive,³⁵ and public services furnished life outside of work with something like a reward for contribution, as did rising expectations of leisure. Differences in status, however, remained. Status and standing, which are hierarchical, are compatible with a 'better' recognitive order in which contributions are made visible and rewarded and the sting is taken out of status injuries. This is because the capitalist division of labour *requires* a hierarchical division of status, including but not only between mental and manual workers,³⁶ men and women, and between white workers and racialised workers.³⁷ The limits of Honneth's trajectory, in which the social division of labour is preserved but with shifted esteem patterns, either by overturning aspects of neoliberal work orders, or by market socialism, is significantly different from a Marxist horizon in which the social division of labour, marked by a fundamental cleavage between the work of planning and the work of producing is *itself* overturned. We might wonder exactly how far a broadening of esteem can go, especially within capitalist societies. In this failure to account the scarce nature of esteem

³⁵ Chris Hayes, 'The Great Divide: Examining Labour Compensation and Dividend Growth', Common Wealth, May 2022.

³⁶ Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, Brill, 2020.

³⁷ James Boggs, *The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker's Notebook*, Monthly Review Press, 1963; Vanessa Wills, 'What Could It Mean to Say, "Capitalism Causes Sexism and Racism?"', *Philosophical Topics*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2018, pp. 229–246; Nancy Fraser, 'Behind Marx's Hidden Abode', *New Left Review*, no. 86, 2014, pp. 55–72.

and plausibly hard limits on universalising esteem within capitalist divisions of labour which *require* difference, this is a problem for theorising harms of work.

Moreover, esteem leaves open questions of how the contribution to the social good is carried out because it is based on the fact of a contribution. Sufficient recognition is more important than how the contribution is made, which is sidelined. It comes after the contribution and recognises it. The worst working conditions might be understood to constitute misrecognition because such is necessarily not esteemed (relative to other work), but this, obviously, leaves out most work. Examples of conditions that could be improved, but whose improvement has been rejected, might also constitute misrecognition. But again, this is not all work. The labour process and questions of the quality of work cannot easily be brought into view without adding in other principles, (craft, [dis]alienation) which Honneth, because of the centrality of normative reconstruction to his project, does not want to do.

Indeed, esteem is compatible with work practices that might be unacceptable, as long as a contribution to the social good does not go unrecognised. In this way, it suffers from an inability to consider questions of the quality of work. Honneth's theory can, of course, accommodate serious violations of dignity via disrespect, but what of harms that do not meet this threshold but could constitute serious sources of suffering? Would the agency worker whose shift was cancelled immediately while they were *en route* to their workplace meet the criteria for disrespect or misrecognition? What of the worker experiencing the 'thousand cuts' of individually minor but collectively significant encroachments on conditions? Plausibly not.

Such workers would suffer but not in a way relevant to the normative principles Honneth thinks guide and justify markets and struggles within them.³⁸

Some status harms and alternative means of overcoming them (in the abolition of the capitalist division of labour) are kept outside of the question of recognition, because of Honneth's focus on the market as a source of and realisation of normativity. Having shown and politicised status harms in the market, especially against a hegemonic culture that individualises and naturalises such suffering, via responsibilisation, the radical possibility of this move is undermined.

Another use of Honneth's recognition framework is to make sense of the moral language in which esteem struggles in markets take place. In his early accounts of work and recognition, Honneth draws extensively on labour historians who argue, against a narrow, economic account of workers' agency, that workers develop and contest moral norms as part of their struggles. He leans especially on historians E.P. Thompson and Barrington Moore, who he argues, show that 'when it came to the motivational sources of resistance and protest, the experience of the violation of locally transmitted claims to honour was much more important [than economic 'interest']'.³⁹ Recent research by historian of deindustrialisation Ewan Gibbs confirms the presence of what Honneth terms a 'reservoir of moral principles' in struggles over workplace closures in the twentieth century.⁴⁰ In his history of the closure of coalfields during Scottish deindustrialisation, Gibbs describes the moral economy analysis of deindustrialisation by those at its sharp end as:

³⁸ Elsewhere in his work, including after the abandoning of the craft conception of work, Honneth brings in ideas about the importance of the humanisation of work, but it is not clear how this connects to esteem. This does not, however, allow Honneth to solve the limits of his paradigm, because of the premium he puts on comprehensiveness, which disbars a pluralist standpoint for each 'sphere'. If the market's recognition practice is esteem, it cannot accommodate these other harms.

³⁹ Honneth and Fraser, *Redistribution and Recognition*, p. 131.

⁴⁰ Honneth, 'Labour and Recognition: A Redefinition', p. 71.

centrally concerned with ‘non-economic norms affecting commercial interactions’, principally community and workforce attitudes to the ownership of jobs and workplaces. They are influenced by critiques of industrial capitalism that developed between the 1920s and 1970s, based on its moral or spiritual effects rather than material outcomes.⁴¹

Gibbs argues that E. P. Thompson’s moral economy helps to make sense of ‘customs and expectations’ that determine perceptions of legitimacy or illegitimacy of actions or approaches during the closures of industrial workplaces.⁴²

As coalfields were shut down, coal workers drew on a set of historical-moral resources, including the collective memories of previous strikes and of closures to resist the worst effects of closures. In particular, they used these to demand (based on previous experiences of and expectation for) transfers to sites that remained open with the possibility of jobs at the same skill level, or early retirement for older or disabled workers. These demands were made not only on the basis of past examples of this kind of treatment but also because of the contribution that coal miners made to society and ‘communitarian claims to economic resources’ in the form of collieries and jobs.⁴³ The nationalised status of the industry meant that ‘[m]oral economy customs evolved as a method by which closures could be legitimated through dialogue with trade union representatives and the provision of collective economic security, usually via job transfers.’⁴⁴

⁴¹ Ewan Gibbs, *Coal Country: The Meaning and Memory of Deindustrialization in Postwar Scotland*, University of London Press, 2021, p. 10.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 12.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 88.

In this case, it seems clear that the moral economy, specifically the expectations and norms that develop through symbolic contestation, collective memory and memorialisation, and political struggle played a significant role in shaping people's responses to economic strife and forms part of the resources they can mobilise against their economic situation. The counterculture that workers developed, and aspects of the dominant ideology could be used and aligned to effectively make demands of employers. Expectations were shaped by, understood in, and articulated through a shared language of contribution and hard graft.

This looks very much like a Honnethian struggle for esteem, specifically for recognition of prior contribution. However, there is a crucial difference between Honneth's perspective and that of E. P. Thompson. Honneth wants to abandon the notion of economic 'interest', which he sees (1) as incompatible with understanding people as moral agents, which (2) would cause problems for his functionalist normative justification of recognition and critical theory. Thompson wants to merely *complicate* the idea of interest, by introducing questions of value, morality, culture, as they develop historically. The presence of a moral means of *expressing* an economic dispute does not prove the causal primacy of the moral, nor its existence as a realm distinct from the economic. The problems that lead to this causal error are Honneth's clinging onto his normative foothold and his one-sided view of the market. In this next section, I further explicate his moral market and then consider other limitations that emerge from it.

4. Honneth's Moral Maze

We have already seen some problems for recognition's ability to theorise and overcome problems with work: a possible failure to account for the necessarily scarce nature of relative esteem, the extent to which Honneth's idealised view of the market could undermine the possibilities that come from its politicisation, the obscuring of the entanglement of material and the moral, and the difficulty Honneth has integrating questions of the quality of work and the labour process into his paradigm.

Honneth wants the market to be *moral*, by which he means not merely containing but structured by moral or normative principles, without which it could not function. For him, in the market:

the coordination of merely individual material calculations can only succeed if the subjects involved antecedently recognize each other not only legally as parties to a contract, but also morally or ethically as members of a cooperative community.⁴⁵

These rules are pre-contractual, they are not a 'merely normative addition to the market economy'.⁴⁶

He claims this against Habermas, neoclassical economists and Marx, who all, he argues, posit that the market does not contain morality or norms. According to Honneth, Marx holds that the market is a site of rational calculation and 'interest', and that it cannot be understood as the basis of the normative embedding via social integration that Hegel and Durkheim describe,

⁴⁵ Honneth, *Freedom's Right*, p.182.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p.181.

because the market cannot, structurally, realise the values that it promises.⁴⁷ It is certainly true that Marx does not think that the market is normatively embedded in capitalist societies (except as *ideology*) or that it is ‘legitimated’ in this. It is true that Marx does not believe the positive, integrationist story that Hegel tells us about civil society and the division of labour. But none of this means that, in Marx’s view, the market does not involve a form of morality. This is different to Honneth’s sense of ‘moral’, but it does not preclude other forms of morality.

Now, this claim is out of keeping with the startling account of the rise of capitalist society that Marx and Engels offer in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) in which the emergent bourgeoisie has trampled over all existing ties and moral modes of their expression:

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his “natural superiors”, and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous “cash payment”. It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation.⁴⁸

Not only has it overturned existing moral norms, but it is also impossible for new ones to emerge and ‘embed’ (in the Hegelian or Honnethian sense):

Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 195.

⁴⁸ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol.6, Lawrence and Wishart, 1976, pp. 477-519, pp. 486-7.

all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned.⁴⁹

Everything is gone and nothing (durable) is left—a nascent capitalist society has destroyed morality and further, has undermined the possibility of new moralities developing.

This historical presentation Marx and Engels give is significantly different to the Hegelian and Durkheimian picture of the rise of the modern division of labour and exchange as the basis for a form of morality in a normative-functionalist or system-integrationist sense. On their view, in the *Manifesto* at least, the market is guided by ‘icy calculation’. As Jason Read puts it, this version of the market is one ‘bereft of *any* meaning, any symbolism’.⁵⁰ This is also how various orthodox economic approaches see the market: rational, calculating, cold and efficient. Presiding over these cool calculations is the law, which is the precondition for equal exchange. This is the strongest possible account of the market as free of moral norms.

This version of the market leaves no room for meaning and symbolic contestation: there is no basis for meaningfully shared norms. There is an inertness to it: no meaning, no contestation, just compelled economic action. By contrast, even in the norm-additive version of the market, a ‘might-is-right’, Thrasymachian vision of market morals, in which ‘[j]ustice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger’,⁵¹ there *are* morals, but these come after, and merely as the result of the economic action. In such cases, whoever wins, whoever is powerful,

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 487.

⁵⁰ Jason Read, *The Double Shift: Spinoza and Marx on the Politics of Work*, Verso, 2024, p. 2. (My emphasis).

⁵¹ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Christopher Rowe, Cambridge University Press, 2012, 338c2–3.

decides, determines, defines. In icy calculation, there is no need for legitimation, ideological or otherwise.

Rather than icy calculation, elsewhere, Marx describes how the moral can be a ‘modus of existence’ but ‘this is always a derived, secondary modus and never the prius.’⁵² On this view, the moral is an expression of something else, or a reflection, or sufficiently determined by it that it has little life of its own.

In yet other places, Marx’s view of morality in the market is significantly different from both icy calculation and mode of existence. Here, Marx thinks there are principles that are ‘moral’, which shape how people see the world, and that these principles are connected to how societies reproduce themselves. Social relations, institutions, etc. do not produce morals that are universalisable forever norms, but worldviews that are historically specific and which can be ideological. Morality is immanent, it emerges from social relations, and it is integrative (although Marx, contra Hegel and Durkheim, does not think that this integration is a straightforward good), but it is not ‘normative’ in the sense Honneth has in mind.

For example, at the end of Chapter Six of *Capital* Vol. 1, Marx vividly and memorably makes a conceptual, textual shift. He has, so far, talked about the abstract exchange, including of the commodity labour power, but to get beyond the categories of political economy, he needs to bring his characters to life:

When we leave this sphere of simple circulation or the exchange of commodities, which provides the ‘Free-trader *vulgaris*’ with his views, his concepts and the standard by

⁵² E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, Merlin Press, 1979, p. 364.

which he judges the society of capital and wage-labour, a certain change takes place, or so it appears, in the physiognomy of our dramatis personae. He who was previously the money-owner now strides out in front as a capitalist; the possessor of labour-power now follows as his worker. The one smirks self-importantly and is intent on business; the other is timid and holds back, like someone who has brought his own hide to market and now has nothing else to expect but—a tanning.⁵³

Here, the sphere of circulation has given the ‘Free-trader Vulgaris’, the classical political economist, a standpoint, a worldview, a way of understanding the world, which is partial and ideological. It is not norm-free. The market, the sphere of circulation, the buying and selling of commodities, however we term it, produces ways of seeing the world, it ‘furnishes’ people with them. Importantly, Marx’s account of history stresses dynamism and the social constitution of individuals. On such an account, various kinds of subjects and ways of understanding people (and the world) become possible at different moments in time, as a result of the kind of society in which they live. This is, as Karl Korsch described it, Marx’s ‘principle of historical specification’.⁵⁴ Social being determines consciousness, not the other way round. This means it can be said to *produce* consciousnesses, including morals and morality. Elsewhere Marx describes capitalism as having a ‘religion of everyday life’.⁵⁵

This view of ideology is different to those which see ideology only as false ideas about society, imposed as an attempt to legitimate a social order. (This is the view which Honneth wrongly attributes to Marx, though Marx’s own account is, at least in places, more expansive.) An important implication of this view is that (moral) understandings of economic relations can and

⁵³ Marx, *Capital*, p. 280.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Stuart Hall, ‘Marx’s Notes on Method’, p.117.

⁵⁵ See Read, *The Double Shift*, for a helpful elaboration of this view of ideology and its implications.

will, indeed *inevitably*, emerge. These are, or can be, ideological but they are more contentful and contestable than legitimisation stories; they shape how we see ourselves and our actions, how we are made as particular subjects. Although it forms the basis of his inquiries in *Capital*—a critique of the categories of one way of seeing economic relations, as its subtitle announces—this implication is not itself significantly further developed by Marx.

E. P. Thompson represents one attempt to make sense of the implications. As we have seen, Honneth uses E. P. Thompson to show how struggles which seem to be economic have a moral grammar. Honneth claims that this permits a dual aspect, economic and moral, but then reasserts a monadic, moral vision, rather than the dual or mixed-together account that Thompson offers. To make sense of Thompson's claims about morality, we need to situate him in the context of debates about class, agency and 'interest'. These are debates internal to Marxism. This is important: Thompson is not arguing that what might be termed 'economic factors' are secondary.⁵⁶ The basic assumption is that 'economic factors' have a special causal place in how to understand the world. The debate is over the extent and meaning of that specialness: what does it mean to say that they 'determine' or 'structure'? Where does this leave politics, culture, contingency and agency? Thompson's intervention is to bring into view class as a dynamic process rather than as an abstracted, completed, external category. Class in the sense of two groups polarised and made distinct by their different relations to ownership (one dispossessed of the means of production, the other in possession of them) does not disappear in this view. Rather, the ways in which this fact is lived, understood, and 'plays out' in place and time is brought into view, recovering agency and contingency and the practical activities of workers, rescuing them from what he terms 'the enormous condescension of posterity'.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ The phrasing 'economic factors' is used deliberately here: the notion of 'the economy' as a distinct realm is a distinctively un-Marxian one.

⁵⁷ E.P. Thompson, *The Making Of the English Working Classes*, Vintage, Random House, 1966, p. 12

Thompson's historical research, especially *The Making of the English Working Classes* (1963) and theoretical essays, especially the 'The Poverty of Theory' (1978), a polemic against Althusser's theory of ideology, restores to morality its contradictory and dynamic possibilities. On this view, morality is not system-integrationist and therefore justified, justifiable, and universalisable (contra Honneth, Durkheim, Hegel), nor is it system-integrationist *and therefore* ideological, and either illegitimate or irrelevant (per, on his accusation, Althusser).

Thompson argues against a mechanical understanding of the relationship between the economy and morality or culture, preferring an organic one:

The tradition inherits a dialectic that is right, but the particular mechanical metaphor through which it is expressed is wrong. This metaphor from constructional engineering (similar to the boxes and building terms beloved by some sociologists) must in any case be inadequate to describe the flux of conflict, the dialectic of a changing social process. A vegetation metaphor—"this idea is rooted in this social context" or "flourished in this climate"—very often serves better, since it entails the notion of organic growth.⁵⁸

There is, he argues, a dynamic interaction between culture (morality, ideas, etc) and the economic context they grow in.

Values, as he puts it,

are lived, and they arise within the same nexus of material life and material relations as do our ideas. They are the necessary norms, rules, expectations, &c, learned (and

⁵⁸ Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*, p. 367.

“learned” within feeling) within the “habitus” of living; and learned, in the first place, within the family, at work, and within the immediate community. Without this learning social life could not be sustained, and all production would cease. This is not to say that values are independent of the colouration of ideology; manifestly this is not the case, nor how, when experience itself is structured in class ways, could this be so?⁵⁹

Here Thompson lands on a similar point to Honneth: the continuation of social life depends on the transmission of values, but this is not because the system is justified through the values but a more prosaic point, that norms are system-maintaining because they coordinate and inspire action. They do not, contra Honneth, *actually justify* the system (or have any ability to function as a source of justification in general), nor are they a ‘false’ ideological justification of the system. Rather, they are something more subtle: they are sets of local, historical (hence not able to work as general justification) practices that are necessary to human motivation, and, for better or for worse, reproduce the system. This is significantly different from Honneth’s point that they justify and integrate social orders and therefore are thereby indispensable because they would otherwise be called into question. Thompson’s norms are not transhistorically normative or normative beyond their application as local norms. They are a more hybrid model of the economic and the moral, where the two are blended together. In this hybrid model, interests and dynamic class relations, and attempts to make sense of both of these, produce morality as thought, custom and experience. Capital seeks to impose its morality and ideas on workers, including, as he demonstrates, in the introduction of time discipline and tracts against laziness, but ‘it cannot succeed at all unless there is some congruence between the imposed rules and view-of-life and the necessary business of living a given mode of production.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 175.

Moreover, values no less than material needs will always be a locus of contradiction, of struggle between alternative values and views-of-life.’⁶⁰

Morality, he puts it, cannot be explained away ‘as class interests in fancy dress’. Instead, examination of struggles over value, as a form of interest, as a form of a way of life, as a property of productive and other social relations, is required. Like Honneth, Thompson sees the prospect of ‘utilitarianism’ in the (vulgar Marxist) ‘interests’. What Thompson means is that interest cannot be ‘subsumed’ to ‘scientifically-determinable material objectives’.⁶¹ What Honneth means is: ‘within Marxism a certain tendency toward utilitarian anthropology always predominated, allowing a unified interest to be collectively ascribed to a social class’.⁶² This does not give room for ‘explanation of subjects’ moral explanation of society’ and relies entirely on ‘instrument-rational interests’, leaving subjects ‘not as moral actors, marked in advance by a number of normative claims and corresponding vulnerabilities, but as rational-purposive actors, whose particular interests could be ascribed accordingly.’⁶³

Honneth is right to criticise an entirely mechanical model of human action in which the roles of contingency, agency and ordinary people’s beliefs and ideas are not considered causally salient. But this ‘mechanical Marxism’, however, seems more of a spectre than a reality. Even if versions of it appear in every generation of Marxist thinkers,⁶⁴ many Marxist theories of ‘interests’ do not imagine workers as little more than responsive machines, lights turned on and

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 176.

⁶² Honneth and Fraser, *Redistribution and Recognition*, p. 129.

⁶³ Ibid, p. 128.

⁶⁴ For a discussion of contemporary class reductionism see Gabriel Winant, ‘The Baby and the Bathwater: Class Analysis and Class Formation after Deindustrialisation’, *Historical Materialism*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2024, pp. 3–30; Michael A. McCarthy and Mathieu Hikaru Desan, ‘The Problem of Class Abstractionism’, *Sociological Theory*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2023, pp. 3–26.

off by power relations. That economic factors have a special causal role (they are ‘primary’, ‘determining’, etc.) does not obliterate contestation over meaning and morals.

It is possible to have an ‘economistic’ account of political struggle that leaves room for the experience of moral economy and culture. These are not incompatible approaches. For example, Erik Olin Wright argues that class interests, along with shared experiences and collective capacities to act are *generated* by class mechanisms as well as by other relations of power and culture. Interests do not stand above action and actors; they are formed by them. *through* their action. Note that this does not produce, without additional political steps, a ‘collective subject’. Nor does it imagine the economic relations or ‘base’ as like for like, exactly determining the ‘superstructure’, that is to say ‘mechanically’ and totally. Wright is not the only person to hold this view, and in fact, a non-mechanical view of ‘interests’ is far more typical than a model in which class leads to interest which leads to consciousness which leads to action.⁶⁵ While it is possible to analytically separate ‘economic and ‘cultural/moral’ factors, this is not felt at the level of experience; they are entwined.

Four distinct views about the relationship between the market and morality can be traced:

- 1) The market cannot ever ‘have’ morals. (Call this the icy-calculation view).
- 2) The market can be said to ‘have’ morals in the sense that people have ideas, experiences, etc. that are about the market and which are moral, but these are post-hoc, epiphenomenal ways of making sense of economic activity (Call this the ‘never-the-prius’ or ‘fancy-dress’ view).

⁶⁵ See e.g. William Clare Roberts, ‘Class in Theory, Class in Practice’, *Crisis & Critique*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2023, pp. 1–25.

- 3) The market has morality in the sense of (2) but rather than being post-hoc or moral expressions of economic actions ('fancy dress'), the moral and the economic are interwoven, either at the level of experience or sociological causation (or both). This might still permit the economic to 'condition' the moral. (Call this the dynamic or open view).
- 4) The market has morals, and these are fundamental to social integration (this can be either a positive or negative fact). (As a functionalist social-integrationist view, this can be either strong or weak in terms of how system-necessary the norms are, do they merely help shore it up, or are they essential.)

What comes first, 'materiality [the economic]' or 'morality': food or ethics? On Honneth's view, an antecedent morality is required to make suffering and esteem legible. This affords primacy to the moral, even if he might claim a dualism. On Thompson's view, morality and materiality are co-constitutive, albeit distinct. Morality is more than a mode of expressing 'interest', with a strong primacy of the economic, but it is not antecedent, nor is it sufficient as a way of understanding why people respond to economic, or moral-economic strife in the way they do. Morality is embedded in the market, but as a worldview, as part of the fabric of life, not as either a legitimisation story or norms which are themselves legitimate and legitimating. It does not embed the market in society, and it complicates the distinction between 'market' and other spheres, without recourse to the assumption of a like-for-like reproduction of the 'base' in culture, politics, etc.

The open or dynamic view of the connection between market and morals (3) is neatly summarised by Thompson:

[e]very contradiction is a conflict of value as well as a conflict of interest; that inside every “need” there is an affect or “want”, on its way to becoming an ought (and vice versa).⁶⁶

Class struggles are also value struggles, Thompsons says. But Honneth is less interested in the class aspect of class struggle. Esteem struggles are distributive struggles, but are they class struggles? They do not need to be for Honneth’s project. Honneth is keen to point to his status as a radical reformist⁶⁷ and defend himself as a left Hegelian against charges that he is a right Hegelian.⁶⁸ But the theory of ‘interest’ as economic and extra-economic in Thompson that he leans on assumes a significant role for class as a force or dynamic in history rather than merely experiences of inequality and desires for redistribution.

Honneth’s model of the market is overly positive in that it does not consider how norms can be ideological, and it is one-sided in that overstates the primacy of the moral, to the extent of obscuring the material. Another limitation of Honneth’s model of the market is that it does not account for the threat that so-called economic domination poses to market norms. In a recent attempt to theorise why, despite encountering so much opposition and producing so much consternation, capitalism continues to exist, Søren Mau argues that an important aspect of capitalist social reproduction has been relatively neglected. He adds to ideology and violence (in the form of prior and ongoing primitive accumulation) a third form of power, what Marx terms ‘mute compulsion’ or ‘economic power’. The implication here is that the norms Honneth sees as embedding and guaranteeing the market might not in practice be the force that really

⁶⁶ Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*, p 363.

⁶⁷ See Honneth, *The Working Sovereign*, p. X.

⁶⁸ Axel Honneth, ‘Rejoinder’, *Critical Horizons*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2015, pp. 204–226.

embeds them. Economic domination means that people must act in certain ways whatever they might think about what they're doing or the legitimacy of the market.

Economic domination, Mau argues, acts on the environment in which subjects find themselves. It circumscribes their courses of action, meaning the buying and selling of labour power and vertical and horizontal competition between workers and capitalists on the one hand and between capitalists and other capitalists on the other. Economic power, he points out, 'is rooted in the ability to reconfigure the material conditions of social reproduction'.⁶⁹ This is not the sealed-off non-moral space of Habermas' account of the market, nor is it icy calculation. Mute compulsion is compatible with an account of morals and norms as being present in the market. However, social domination continues, and reproduces itself, by inscribing itself in the very environment of those subject to it, by setting what actions are possible for them. This power to direct action can ride roughshod over the law, over norms, over other institutions of modern societies. Nancy Fraser conceptualises the power of the market, which might be understood as broadly analogous to economic domination, as something that cannibalises other aspects of modern societies, from care to democracy.⁷⁰ If the norms and morals do not work in the way Honneth says they do, if rather than norms reproducing society, it is the destruction of norms that capitalist societal reproduction requires, then his picture of the mechanics of the reproduction of capitalist societies might be said to be overly idealised in another, additional way.

What does this mean for Honneth? His vision of the market is idealised and idealising. He is credulous about the extent to which the market produces non-ideological norms and overly

⁶⁹ Søren Mau, *Mute Compulsion*, Verso, 2023, pp. 4-5.

⁷⁰ Nancy Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism*, Verso, 2023.

rosy about its system integrationist properties. Economic domination means that the market has an inbuilt tendency to undermine the possibility of achieving the norms it produces. As we shall see, his theory, however, cannot accommodate any other view of the market because he needs it to be productive of the relevant normativity for his vision of social freedom, and to be able to ‘ground’ critical theory.

5. Further Limitations

In this section, I consider three additional limitations of recognition’s usefulness for theorising work-under-capitalism that emerge from his account of the market and the place of this in his wider project of normative reconstruction as a renewed basis for Critical Theory. As we have seen, his idealistic view of the market is premised on a critique of Marx for alleged one-sidedness in his treatment of the economy, however the picture of the market Honneth that produces is itself one-sided. It means that the political economy of labour markets, the domination this implies, and the structuring constraints it has on action are obscured, alongside the ideological potential of the market’s morals. I consider these failures in connection to claims I have made already in this dissertation about how concepts can be better or ‘more useful’.

The further limitations are:

- 1) Recognition runs the risk of undermining the politics required to address misrecognition by underdetermining them.
- 2) Recognition struggles to include exploitation, ideologically preserving an unrealisable notions of ‘fairness’.

- 3) Honneth's sociological account of political action is inattentive to economic relations that 'condition' the shape of that action in a way that undermines his theory of political action.

Problem one: Does this underdetermine politics?

How is misrecognition solved? Each of the three spheres of recognition has its own mode of addressing absences or deficiencies. But in the market, recognition struggles tend to take the form of struggles for higher pay, over terms and conditions of employment and over the extent to which workers can have a say over decisions. That they tend to take that form does not mean that is the only form or possible solution that could be imagined, though if the idea is that norms underpinning the market, especially the notions of 'fair pay' and a 'liveable wage' spur people to action, it is perhaps not a surprise that they tend to take those forms.

In his earlier writings, Honneth does not offer a political path forward to realise the norms he claims are present in the market. He describes the forms these struggles take but not how the recognition order could or should be itself transformed. Some of this hesitancy comes from a Deweyan pragmatist anti-utopianism, which focuses on societal learning processes. But a lack of a sense of direction or conditions for the realisation of the norms immanent to the market might still be a weakness. Is non-monetary recognition plausible or acceptable? Or does esteem have to be given via/within exchange? Is it possible to realise the norms within capitalism or would another way of organising society be required? There are reasons, including those given by Honneth himself, to doubt the possibility of realising these norms within capitalism. When pushed, Honneth addresses a potential future resolution directly. The market would be retained but in the form of market socialism, rather than as a capitalist market. The details are light, again because of his understanding of struggles for social freedom (and therefore of historical

change in general) as experimental learning processes, the outcome of which cannot be seen from the present.

Market socialism describes various ways of organising social labour that involve markets but with ownership regimes that differ from capitalist ones. It includes both really existing variants and theoretical schemes. In socialist Yugoslavia, for instance, worker-controlled and publicly-owned firms operated under market coordination.⁷¹ John Roemer has argued for market coordination and publicly-owned firms.⁷² This form of socialism is distinct from both central planning and capitalist markets; the market rather than the state coordinates, and there is some aspect of public ownership (this could be via the state, workers within them, or on a cooperative model, or some mixture of both).

Honneth notes that his preferred form of market socialism would involve the abolition of power imbalances between market participants, the humanisation of work⁷³ and the establishment of discursive intermediary bodies as institutional requirements. All of this, he adds, has as an obvious precondition, a situation of post-capitalism.⁷⁴

So, there *is* a political future which could realise the moral norms he sees as immanent in society, it is just that it is not useful to prejudge what they might be beyond broad brushstrokes. Why is market socialism appealing? Because, on Honneth's view, taken from Hegel,

⁷¹ See Darko Suvin, *Splendour, Misery, and Possibilities: An X-ray of Socialist Yugoslavia*, Haymarket Books, 2017.

⁷² John Roemer, *A Future for Socialism*, Harvard University Press, 1994.

⁷³ Again, here a principle other than contribution seems to be at play in the demand to humanise work. As we have seen, esteem is not about the quality of work but about recognising contribution. Has Honneth restored parts of his early craft conception of labour into his positive vision? It seems likely that he has, because without additional standards, recognition cannot bring concrete labour practices into view.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 224.

contribution-esteem is made possible through the impersonal exchange of the market in which diverse singular interests are coordinated and made collective. The market is, therefore, needed for social freedom, but the capitalist market is not able to deliver the social freedom it promises. This cuts off (perhaps too quickly) alternative non- or post-capitalist arrangements of social labour from realising the norms of the market and its function (social integration). It does, however, successfully fend off the accusation that Honneth is pollyannaish about the nature of the capitalist market; the problem is capitalist markets, not markets per se.

A further problem remains. Producing a post-capitalist future is an extraordinarily difficult task. No doubt Honneth is aware of this, and he is very pessimistic about the possibility of even changing working conditions: 'the currently existing relations of production make any proposals for a thoroughgoing improvement of the organisation of labour appear mere wishful thinking'.⁷⁵ Of course, bringing about a post-capitalist world is not something Honneth would have to do alone. But his account of capitalism and of political struggle needs to best serve this immense task. This task amounts to no less than an 'expropriation of the expropriators' as Marx pithily puts it, but Honneth's theory does not seem apt to support this task. If critical theory is to support political movements, it needs to contribute to the 'self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age'.⁷⁶ As we have seen, it can do this by (1) adequately describing the world in light of politically salient empirical facts and experience of suffering; (2) helping to identify political constituencies that might have the potential to change the world; (3) developing (without unwarranted utopianism) a political horizon of a world that would no longer contain the problems identified in (1).

⁷⁵ See Honneth, 'Labour and Recognition'.

⁷⁶ Nancy Fraser, 'What's Critical about Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender', *New German Critique*, no. 35, 1985, pp. 97–131, p. 97.

Does Honneth's account of recognition in relation to work shed light on social reality, help create political coalitions, and make visible a political horizon? In the rest of this section, I consider limitations to recognition theory that might constitute barriers to this.

Problem two: Can recognition accommodate exploitation? Or does it ideologically preserve unrealisable notions of 'fairness'?

We have seen that as it stands, because it sees abstract labour as having a positive social integrationist function, recognition theory is not particularly well-suited to making sense of economic domination.

There is also another aspect of the experience of work and of power relations in the market that is lost in the choice decision to see the market as a moral, socially integrating sphere: exploitation. It is worth nothing that Honneth's account of recognition does offer one route to make sense of exploitation through the moral norm of 'fair pay'. If workers are not given fair pay, then they are being exploited, it might be possible to argue. However, given that various possible arrangements could be said by employers and employees to be 'fair' and moreover that since the standard of a 'living wage' is itself politically contestable and socially determined, this leaves those wanting to make claims for better pay on shaky ground.

However, there is a second sense of exploitation which does not have to do with that is independent of the violation of moral norms. To understand that sense of exploitation, we have turn to Marx. For Marx, exploitation is not a moral complaint but rather a technical feature of capitalism. In the capitalist mode of production, workers sell their embodied capacity to labour on the market. The price of their pay is set by the socially set costs of reproducing this capacity.

When the value they produce in the labour process exceeds the costs of the reproduction of their labour power, what he terms ‘surplus value’ has been generated. This surplus belongs to the capitalist who is, typically, unperturbed by the fairness or unfairness of the situation, or who might think the existing distribution of value is ‘fair’: if competition between firms means that they have to lower wages, is the demand to keep them the same ‘unfair’?

This is one way in which the norms that are ‘in’ the market might be said to be ideological. Honneth notes that there the market’s norms do have an ideological aspect in that they obscure housework, which constitutes some of what he terms ‘socially necessary labour’ as not ‘work’ because it is (largely) carried out outside of the market.⁷⁷ How can we guarantee that other norms of the market are not also potentially ideological? It is not clear on which grounds Honneth could confidently answer this.

Further, in opting for an integrationist rather than an ‘efficiency’ (moral-free) model of the market, Honneth appears to have substituted a Marxian analysis of class and exploitation for a Hegelian, Durkheimian and Weberian one which will, relatively to Marx’s, downplay *class* conflict. Without conflict and exploitation, recognition looks less like a comprehensive theory of both work and of society.

⁷⁷ Honneth and Fraser, *Redistribution and Recognition*, p. 141.

Problem three: Is this an adequate theory of workers' collective action?

As we have seen, the idealised conception of the market overstates the primacy of the moral. This presents a problem for the sociological theory of historical change that appeared to be a virtue of Honneth's theory.

Struggles for recognition, on Honneth's account, are a progressive force in history. Struggles change recognition orders and change societies, pushing change forwards from the outraged suffering of those who are not recognised in line with the norms in each sphere of recognition. As a theory of historical change, this account has been criticised for being overly positive,⁷⁸ and in so doing, not being sufficiently attentive to issues of empire and coloniality connected to the idea of progress.⁷⁹ While recognition's macrohistory might be questionable, in this section, I want to also question the *microhistory*, or the assumed sociology of political action that Honneth's recognition theory involves.

To briefly summarise his account: struggles for recognition begin first in a negative form—as the *experience* of humiliation or disrespect. But underneath these and following a reconstruction of the normative principles underlying social life, it becomes apparent that these negative experiences emerge from a normative demand for withheld types of recognition.⁸⁰ Disrespect is *only* experienced as a violation of normative principles of which subjects are aware (more or less completely). This seems compelling enough: when you are mistreated or dehumanised, it can come with an outrage that contains compressed normative material. 'We

⁷⁸ See Kristina Leopold, 'Examining Honneth's Positive Theory of Recognition', *Critical Horizons*, 20 (3), pp. 246-61.

⁷⁹ See Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, Columbia University Press, 2017.

⁸⁰ Axel Honneth, *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, Polity Press, 2007, p. xii.

are not robots’—the slogan of a recent trade union fight against treatment by Amazon seems to confirm this possibility.

But it is not just that normative demands form a basis or precondition for suffering which leads to struggles for recognition. In the case of the market, Honneth argues that ‘motivationally what weighed much more heavily than their material plight was that ways of life and achievements, which in their eyes were worthy of respect, were not recognized by the rest of society.’⁸¹ In many places, he uses historical evidence from Thompson and Barrington Moore to make his case. But the situation seems more complicated and messier. For one thing, while, as this historical research and more recent work on ‘moral economies’ shows, the existence of a moral economy within and through which claims and practices about fairness and work are made, deposited and remade is highly plausible (as this historical research and more recent work on ‘moral economies’ shows), this does not prove its causal primacy. The entangled norms and ‘economic’ model laid out above has the benefit of making room for the moral without relying on a functionalist normativity, in which principles are generated and realised.

It seems just as plausible that the causes of struggles for recognition are economistic in the narrower sense but are experienced in relation to a set of cultural and subcultural norms that are used more or less instrumentally to understand what has happened and demand change. Another option might be to see the economistic and cultural as entirely hybrid—the economic is lived through the cultural and vice versa. Class struggle, (or more narrowly, struggles over control of and for a share of the value produced in the capitalist labour process), is at once a struggle for meaning and values as it is for the ‘economistic’ gains it offers. It is, as Walter

⁸¹ Honneth and Fraser, *Redistribution and Recognition*, p. 131.

Benjamin put it, both for rough and fine things.⁸² Demanding extra pay is about both esteem *and* actually getting the money in your bank account. Being paid more means being the kind of person who is paid more (a socially esteemed one, per Honneth) and *actually* being paid more. The political economy of work shapes meaning in the sense of values, the practical structuring of work and the forms that resistance can take.

Honneth's commitment to the normative significance (to society, and to his theory) of market norms, means that he cannot accept the possibility that norms are either expressive of interests, or so jumbled together with them that it is hard to meaningfully tell them apart.⁸³

While workers might use moral economy norms to make demands and make sense of what is happening to them, it seems overly idealised and indeed idealist to see these as having a primacy above and beyond other potential causes. But as Honneth is committed to the primacy of the moral-normative nexus, he is not willing to accept either a mixed or hybrid causality. While this means the moral economy that is missed in more mechanical accounts of 'interest' remains to be seen,⁸⁴ it hides economic interests.

There are at least two ways in which Honneth's sociology of workplace political action is questionable: firstly, in its comprehensiveness, and secondly, in its blindness to constraints or structuring forces behind action. Honneth outlines two kinds of distribution struggle, which he takes to be recognition struggles. The first is for provision at a universal level, for recognition

⁸² Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, Schocken Books, 1968, pp. 253–264.

⁸³ Honneth says he thinks they are connected, but this is incompatible with his view of moral primacy, which does not give room to interest, and which has antecedent norms as the basis for even the feeling of economic suffering.

⁸⁴ Honneth and Fraser, *Redistribution and Recognition*, p. 131.

as an equal citizen, which pertains to the sphere of the state. The second is recognition for their individual contribution to the social good, which takes the form of esteem, typically as wages. In both cases, moral norms push people to make demands. But in the second case, Honneth himself is forced to point out that many forms of everyday workplace resistance do not contain the normative content he has in mind.⁸⁵

One important kind of workplace resistance that does not seem to easily fit in his picture relates to the matter of control. Recall that labour power is sold to the employer bundled with control over the workers' capacities. This means that there is a market-mediated push and pull, a power relation within which the worker wants to retain some energy or other capacity for themselves, and the capitalist typically wants to maximise value produced, using various strategies to do so. When struggles like this emerge—over the pace of a factory line, for instance—is it really a struggle for recognition for a workers' contribution to the social good? Honneth's theory does not seem to have a great deal to say about the matter of control or of the quality of work. This might be in relation to economic interest, but it could also concern non-monetary esteem. Consider doctors' strikes. Here, their contribution to the social good *is* esteemed socially, albeit not always financially, but what might be at stake is patient safety, or their conditions of contributing to the social good, or the relational *experience* of contributing to it. Additionally, does the idea of contributing to the social good obscure the fact that workers might make claims for pay in relation to profits their employers have made? (Indeed, they do.) In such cases, do workers really see themselves as deserving of pay on the grounds of their contribution or because they are also aware of the money that their employer makes? Perhaps these struggles are not esteem struggles and cannot be included in Honneth's theory.

⁸⁵ Axel Honneth, 'The Invisible Rebellion: Working People Under the New Capitalist Economy', in *Crisis under Critique: How People Assess, Transform, and Respond to Critical Situations*, eds. Didier Fassin and Axel Honneth, Columbia University Press, 2022.

The second point is that as political actors, workers face legal and practical constraints that shape their course of action when they are organised in trade unions. In its most negative form, this might be through anti-trade union legislation that restricts their scope of action, banning them from campaigning on issues outside of pay and conditions.⁸⁶ This produces a particular political project, narrowing it off from the start. This means that demands might be *expressed* in particular (limited) ways, and that the demand formations of actors should be assumed to be subject to the same worries about ideology as morality or normativity in the market in general.

What are the forces in addition to the law that shape distributive demands, particularly as they appear as trade union activities? Most significant are the power relations between workers and capitalists, expressed either as temporary states of affairs (in a hot labour market, workers can ask for more money, perhaps with less need to justify their demands); as who is able to wield more power than the other because of longer-term trends (for example, the decline of union membership puts significant constraints on the capacity of workers to effectively formulate and make demands); or finally as power relations understood as general rules or tendencies of capitalist societies, similar to the notion of economic domination or mute compulsion outlined above. These approaches to power relations are often theorised as ways of modifying or complicating the notion of ‘interest’, while still retaining a view of the market as driven by class conflict. Interests emerge from and within concrete struggles as well as against the backdrop of the differential powers of these two broad ownership classes. An attempt to theorise these constraints, can be found in Claus Offe and Helmut Wiesenthal’s (1980) ‘Two Logics of Collective Action’. As they describe it, there are ‘class-specific differences of the

⁸⁶ This is the case in Britain.

respective types of input factors, internal processes, and relative organisational advantages' of trade unions compared to business or employers' organisations. They argue that in each of these aspects, 'labour and capital show substantial differences with respect to the functioning and performance of their association', and that these differences are a result of and symptomatic of antagonistic class relations.⁸⁷ Before unions organise workers, workers have already been organised as employees by capital. Capital has three different forms of collective action in its power (the firm itself, informal cooperation and the employers or business association)⁸⁸, whereas labour has only one—association. These relations and facts of economic power shape the kind of claims and activity that workers can make, make and should be considered alongside with the economistic aspects of political motivation in accounts of how and why workers act politically and what forces are likely to help them succeed or to fail. This, again, calls into question the plausibility of the moral market in the strong sense that Honneth requires for his theory.

6. Why Not Abandon the Moral Market?

His moral view of the market causes Honneth several problems. Could he abandon his moral view? Could he amend it so that it is not so strongly normative? He is unable to do either of these without losing something important to him: a means of grounding critical theory in an immanent normativity that emerges from norms proper to each sphere of recognition. As we saw with Jaeggi, this search for a standpoint, a foothold, a justified position, is not without its

⁸⁷ Claus Offe and Helmut Wessenthal, 'Two Logics of Collective Action: Theoretical Notes on Social Class and Organizational Form', in *Political Power and Social Theory*, vol. 1, ed. Maurice Zeitlin, JAI Press, 1980, pp. 67–115, p. 72.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

costs. In this case, Honneth must find ‘a standard which constitutes a justified, rational claim within the criticized relations themselves’. It is on this basis that he rejects the craft conception of labour to which he had earlier subscribed and rejects also the possibility of such a standard in ‘[t]he silent protests of employees who oppose the determination of their work activity by others’. This is because of the ‘multiplicity of socially necessary work activities’, the fact that there are very few shared features of activities that constitute ‘work’, meaning that it is ‘impossible and absurd’ to demand they be organised in a specific way. This means we must look for a ‘rational claim within the existing organization of work.’⁸⁹ Thankfully, because the market *can* have morals, he can find one. There is a normative basis for the organisation of work that means that work can immanently criticised. He finds this in Hegel, Weber and Durkheim’s social-integrationist moral markets.

If the demands of this strong version of immanent critique were relaxed, Honneth could find a route to bring more of the problems and dynamics of work and the market into view. The extent to which the norms of the market are ideological, and these norms and workers’ politics are shaped by and in dynamic relation to economic ‘interest’, and control over the labour process could come into view. But the norms he locates in the market cannot be ideological, except at the margins, and must have a causal primacy which leaves him with an implausible sociology.

In his early writings, Honneth’s position is different. He sees the acceptance of these norms not as positive and system integrating, but one in which norms might be accepted only pragmatically, and which might be ideological. Further, he identifies what David Borman describes as ‘a hidden morality of labor, focused on intrinsic features of work and not merely

⁸⁹Axel Honneth, *The Pathologies of Individual Freedom: Hegel’s Social Theory*, trans. Ladislaus Löb, Princeton University Press, p. 229.

on the relationship between work and income distribution'.⁹⁰ This hidden morality is connected to the experience of concrete labour. The normative functionalism he later adopts loses sight of this because it sees the market in an idealised and abstract way. Abstract labour, exchange, the coordination of impersonal singular activity is what legitimates the market. It becomes hard to bring recognition to bear on the very experiences of work that it had initially seemed able to meaningfully and critically understand. The stakes of this are significant—if critical theory is to be meaningfully critical, it needs to be able to make sense of social reality.

Moreover, in normatively anchoring an emancipatory horizon by abandoning the craft conception of work (and any other non-rational, universalisable, etc principles) and turning to abstract labour's functions, much workplace resistance and worker activity is not part of esteem struggles. A better starting point would be those concrete experiences and practices of resistance. These could meet the demands of a weaker immanence, of looking for ideas and possibilities present in the actions, thoughts, sufferings, humiliations and hopes of ordinary working people that emerge from and within their particular historical contexts.

Recognition, if taken to be a way of theorising status harms, or capitalism's subjectivity wounds, or barriers to autonomy, has a great deal to offer thinking about work. It cannot do this, however, if it is required to conform to the strenuous demands Honneth places for grounding critical theory. It could instead, operate as an immanent theme or framework for understanding the dynamics of capitalist societies and how these are experienced and lived by people, in a similar way to how alienation, reification and even exploitation feature in first

⁹⁰ Borman, 'Bourgeois Illusions', p.106.

generation Critical Theory or in Marx (as guiding standpoints for critique and analysis but not *normative* in the sense Honneth has decided such frameworks needed).

7. Conclusion

Having re-politicised labour within Critical Theory after the Second Generation's turn away from it, Honneth undermines the radical possibilities of theorising recognition as a harm of work by devising a model of the market that is and (to preserve its status as normatively-grounding) *must be* overly idealised. If this demand were relaxed, recognition could be useful for thinking about work-under-capitalism: it could help politicise suffering that is privatised and offer a detailed empirical account about the motivations of workers as political actors. Both features could contribute to movements for the transformation of work by revealing obscured social relations and better understanding workers' collective action. Instead, we are left with a one-sided model of the market which means that Honneth's theory fails to deliver on the potential of recognition as way of making sense of work's status and subject harms, for which it had appeared very promising.

A further problem is that if the normative principle to be met is that work, as contribution, should be adequately rewarded, recognition is further limited and limiting. Recognition of contribution is compatible with work practices that might be objected to from the standpoint of labour, whether this is Honneth's lost craft conception, or any other. This means that recognition would need to be supplemented with other ways of seeing and critiquing work. This is not in itself a problem, if we accept the possibility of a plurality of legitimate ways (as argued for in Chapter One) to see work-under-capitalism. But it is a problem for Honneth,

whose theory claims a universalisability and comprehensiveness, which rules out or rules less significant other ways of seeing work. If this were not the case, and recognition in the form of esteem was but *one* way of assessing and understanding the market and the demands that are made within it, i.e. if its comprehensiveness claim was dropped, the standpoint of labour and concrete labour practices that recognition comes tantalisingly closing to seeing, could be brought back into view. But comprehensiveness and universalisability *must* be held on to, and tightly, because Honneth needs them in his hunt for normative foundations. Looking for a normative foothold can mean tripping up.

Chapter Four: Alienation's Muted Return

As in religion, man is governed by the products of his own brain, so in capitalist production, he is governed by the products of his own hand.

—*Karl Marx*

There is nothing more alienating than having one's pleasures disputed by someone with a theory.

—*Lauren Berlant*

Alienation is an idea with a history. This does not mark it out as unusual (what does *not* have a history?), but its history is characterised by intense political contestation. Once widely invoked, then declared dead, alienation has recently been reborn. The fortune of ideas is closely related to their ability to 'speak' to some significant phenomenon and provide a way of making sense of it that is 'useful' (for various possible purposes). The popularity of work claims seen in Chapter One is one such example. Describing something as 'work' places it within a set of mutually intelligible meanings (though as we saw, these are both contested and politically open) and political frameworks. There is a rhetorical and political reward from this semantic activity. The same is, or has been, true of describing something as 'alienating'. A set of ideas and meanings (of authenticity, of psychological suffering, of a lack of meaning, of lack of control, of lack of something, or the presence of something other than human) appear and are put to work.

Alienation, like domination and recognition, is invoked by philosophers, sociologists, political movements, and ‘ordinary people’ to make sense of suffering within capitalism, and especially work-under-capitalism that extends beyond liberal freedom, and exploitation, into the experiential and psychological; the ways we can be damaged as subjects. It has come into fashion again. This return tracks a concern about the connections between self, ‘authenticity’, and labour markets, particularly in forms of work that emerge after the break-up of the Fordist order, especially precarious work, especially within an increasingly dominant service sector.

The *philosophical* return of alienation has been shaped by objections to older accounts of alienation that are perceived to be fatal: essentialism and paternalism. This chapter considers what happens when alienation is reformulated around these objections, arguing that important parts of the concept are lost. I begin by situating alienation in its generic and popular uses, before turning to Marx’s theory. I then evaluate Jaeggi’s revisionist approach, suggesting that her formalist solution strips alienation of its historical specificity and radical horizon. I go on to advocate a return to Marx’s later alienation, locating in it the resources to solve the objections to alienation, while retaining the critical resources lost in Jaeggi’s revisions. I conclude by further consideration of the advantages that these restored critical resources offer: a substantive standpoint for critique and the possibility of bringing experiences of powerlessness at work into view.

1. Introduction: What is Alienation?

Once thought defeated, unable to hold itself up against several allegedly decisive objections (essentialism, productivism, sexism, paternalism, perfectionism, prelapsarian fantasy, over-

extension, to name but a few), alienation—by which I mean the practice of theorising alienation, rather than alienation as a state of affairs¹—is back.²

What is alienation? Most broadly and in everyday use, alienation is the separation of two things which should rightly, according to the person making the diagnosis of alienation, belong together.³ In its generic use, alienation is when something is given up, taken away, lost, or out of the control of someone or something to which it *should* belong. A recently controversial use which can be taken as exemplary might be the legal concept of ‘parental alienation’—a highly contested aspect of thinking within family law, which alleges that one parent, typically the mother, has turned the children against the other, typically the father.⁴ Here, two things that are supposed to be together, a parent and child, are, it is alleged, *artificially* and *wrongfully*

¹ ‘Alienation’ can be used to describe both the sociological phenomenon and theories of it. Of course, to theorists of it, it probably never went away. As noted, the return of ideas is not disconnected from things that are happening in societies. This is, perhaps, an obvious point but importantly here it means that alienation holds appeal and captures interest because of its ability to make sense of actual social practices, not because ideas swing in and out of fashion like a pendulum.

² Recent attempts to revive, reconceptualise, or repopularise alienation include Hartmut Rosa, *Alienation and Acceleration: Towards a Critical Theory of Late-Modern Temporality*, NSU Press, 2010; Dan Swain, *Alienation: An Introduction to Marx’s Theory*, Bookmarks, 2012; Graeber, David, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*, Penguin, 2018; Jan Kandiyali; ‘The Importance of Others: Marx on Unalienated Production’, *Ethics*, vol, 130, 2020, pp. 555–587; Pierre-Louis Choquet, ‘Alienation and the Task of Geo-Social Critique’, *European Journal of Social Theory*, vol, 24, no, 1, 2020, pp. 105–122; Axel Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea*, Oxford University Press, 2008; Emil Øversveen and Conor Andre Kelly, ‘Labour, capital and the struggle over history: Reconstructing Marxist class theory from the standpoint of alienation’, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 26(3), 2022, pp.317–334; Christopher Henning, *Theories of Alienation*, Routledge, 2025; Vanessa Wills, *Marx’s Ethical Vision*, Oxford University Press, 2024; Rahel Jaeggi, *Alienation*, trans. Frederick Neuhouser and Alan E. Smith, Columbia University Press, 2014; Frederick Neuhouser *Rousseau’s Critique of Inequality: Reconstructing the Second Discourse*, Cambridge University Press, 2014; Jeppe von Platz, ‘The Injustice of Alienation’, *Social Theory and Practice*, vol, 47, no, 2, April 2021, pp. 397–424; Rainer Forst, ‘Noumenal Alienation: Rousseau, Kant and Marx on the Dialectics of Self-Determination’, *Kantian Review*, vol, 22, no, 4, 2017, pp. 523–551; and (in relation and comparison to republicanism) Bruno Leipold, *Citizen Marx: Republicanism and the Formation of Karl Marx’s Social and Political Thought*, Princeton University Press, 2024 pp.175–184

³ See Daniel Brudney, *Marx’s Attempt to Leave Philosophy*, Harvard University Press, 1998, p. 389; Rahel Jaeggi, *Alienation*, trans. Frederick Neuhouser and Alan E. Smith, Columbia University Press, 2014, p. 25; and David Leopold’s exposition of alienation in David Leopold, ‘Alienation’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2022 Edition), eds. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman.

⁴ For the controversial history of the term see: ‘Parental Alienation Syndrome: 30 Years On and Still Junk Science’, *Judges’ Journal*, American Bar Association, Summer 2015; see Julie Doughty, Nina Maxwell and Tom Slater, ‘Review of Research and Case Law on Parental Alienation’, report for the Welsh Government, 2018 for a discussion of the concept’s history and recent applications in Britain.

separated. In some cases, the separation of the two supposed-to-be-together halves is more general—for example, the arguments that sections of society, for example, young people, working-class people, people of colour, migrants, and so on, are wrongfully separated from society through feelings (and sometimes, practices which lead to those feelings, or both) of disaffection or disconnection. These variations are typical of sociological conceptions of alienation, particularly in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

The *supposed* (in ‘supposed to be together’) implies a claim about how things should be. This can vary significantly in scope—if someone feels alienated from their friendship group because their friends have begun to practice indoor climbing, in which they have no interest, more than going to the pub, which the group used to arrange their socialising around, little is expressed beyond the idea that people should feel close to their friends, and perhaps, that engaging in shared activity is the proper way to do so. However, claims about alienation tend to involve—either directly or indirectly—stronger claims about how things *should* be than in the weaker everyday use.

To return to parental alienation, the idea that a parent should always be able to see their child, including when the parent who is the primary carer and the child themselves have expressed a contrary desire, involves a series of claims about family, the rights of children, and the role of the state in relation to both. The state has the right to force children to spend time with a parent because parents should always be allowed to see their children; this outcome is ‘better’ for both parent and child.

How are these various *shoulds* justified? Which is to say: how can it be said that a separation is wrongful, or conversely that the two separated elements should go together? How are theories of alienation grounded?

Theorists of alienation make claims about why a state of affairs is better than another state of affairs. The everyday uses of the term are unabashed in their declarations of the wrongness of various separations: parents belong with children, friends should feel close to each other, societies should be more welcoming to troubled youth (or, depending on your political persuasion, troubled youth should better adjust to society). The reasons given for the wrongfulness of the separation will differ significantly according to the politics of the alienation-alleger: one conservative basis for ‘parental alienation’ might be that children belong with their parents because that is how things have always been, for instance.

In its most general sense, alienation is a worrisome separation that the alienation-alleger would prefer to see ended. What does this have to do with work? There are two ways in which popular frustration with contemporary work appears in alienation-type forms. Firstly, the idea that people cannot be their ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ selves at work, especially that work demands a fakery, an emotional pretending that is injurious to them. Secondly, that work lacks meaning, typically that it does not seem to be connected to what we think is important. This becomes particularly painful because work is something we spend much of our time doing, and something through which we are encouraged to find meaning. Instead of being able to do what we would like to do (and that would be meaningful for us), we do something instrumentally, for someone else, in which meaning is only contingent, leaving us unable to know who we are or what we want.

In the sci-fi television series *Severance*, employees are offered a chance to separate their working lives from the rest of their lives. This process creates two versions of the employee. Its creator, Dan Erikson, reports coming up with the idea while working at a company that makes doors. His job was cataloguing all the different parts of doors. He was so bored that he would imagine what it would be like if he ‘could skip the eight hours of the workday, to disassociate and just get it over with’.⁵ If work is something that requires being not-oneself, and the reconciliation unlikely, why not complete the severing? The splitting the show portrays is complete, whereas the alienation-like phenomenon that it points to in work is necessarily incomplete: people are both themselves and ‘not themselves’. The demands placed on them by, at, and in work require them to reconfigure their actions, especially the outward expression of emotional states that are expected of them, to the extent that they do not ‘feel themselves’ at work. This is the kind of alienation that is present in the notion of ‘emotional labour’—especially Arlie Hochschild’s two gendered poles of the air hostess and the bailiff. The management of the emotions of others, through displays of emotions which are not sincere or are only partially sincere, depends on a splitting between ‘self’ and action.

In their lives outside of work, the characters of the show are lost, ‘rudderless’, in Erikson’s telling. They cannot find meaning in their lives outside of work and they have severed the possibility of meaning at work. This sense of subjective pointlessness and of drifting, living a life that is not one’s own, is common in the way alienation is described in popular culture. The idea of ‘bullshit jobs’ captures this sense of alienation. A bullshit job is one that, per the late anthropologist, David Graeber, is pointless and experience by the person who has it as pointless. Bullshit jobs are, per Graeber, the product of capitalism. He distinguishes bullshit

⁵ Dan Erickson, “‘Severance’ Creator on Work-Life Balance and Finding Meaning in Work”, *The Hollywood Reporter*, 4 February 2022.

jobs from jobs which are difficult, repetitive or unpleasant. A bullshit job is a job that its occupant believes to be pointless, and indeed, one which involves having to pretend that it is not pointless.⁶ Here, the subjective element is decisive: a job is bullshit (/pointless) when it is believed to be so.⁷ The meaninglessness version of alienation is present in the philosophical literature on work, too.⁸ In this literature, meaningful work is typically opposed to work that is especially drudgerous, repetitive, or routine; work that might constrain the possibilities of self-development over the course of a lifetime. In most tellings this is tied to low-quality forms of work rather than being a *general* situation under capitalism.

A particular harm of meaninglessness might be that in being encouraged by a dominant culture to find meaning in our work and because of the fact that we need to work to live and the fact that work takes up so much time practically crowding out other sources of meaning—when work is unable to provide meaning in either of these senses, there is a further frustration of fulfilment. This can be understood as functioning like Lauren Berlant’s ‘cruel optimism’.⁹ In such dynamics, the object of desire becomes an obstacle to flourishing: what we want stops us from getting what we want. Work is something we expect and want to find meaning in, but finding meaning is rare. This lack of meaning, and the affective demands, not only from being expected to care about something that we cannot find meaning in, but in the concrete processes of work, in which, per Hochschild, we are expected to manage emotions (our own and others’), mean

⁶ Here Graeber uses the example of a mafia hitman—a job that is harmful but one which does not involve *pretending* the opposite. See David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*, Penguin, 2018, p.8. The subjective experience of not-reality, of lived bullshit is clearly the central category for him.

⁷ Graeber’s view puts a great deal of faith in people’s ability to recognise something is ‘pointless’, and is rather vague on the question of ‘point’, relying on the idea of ‘socially useful’ which is itself not an answer, but another question: how can we know if something is socially useful? For what, for whom, how, and when? And crucially, who decides? During the Covid-19 pandemic the question of ‘useful’ was brought quite dramatically to the fore in legal definitions of ‘important’ and ‘useful’ or in Germany ‘system-necessary’ jobs/fields: Systemrelevanten Bereiche/Unternehmen.

⁸ See e.g. Adina Schwartz, ‘Meaningful Work’, *Ethics*, vol. 92, no. 4, 1982, pp. 634–646.

⁹ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, Duke University Press, 2011.

that our ability to understand and experience our selves and our feelings is problematically disrupted.

Alienation has historically been strongly connected to the critique of work-under-capitalism through two strands: Marx's account of alienation as estranged labour, and popularised sociological accounts which foreground subjective meaning, connection and 'self-fulfilment'. The former holds that capitalist work *necessarily* involves several unwelcome separations, the undoing of which can only come from a societal transformation: a separation between man and 'species being'; between man and the product of his labour; between man and the process of labour; between man and fellow man. The first holds that the modern division of labour involves a loss of meaning and of social solidarity. According to Emile Durkheim 'anomie' occurs when the norms governing society's practices fade or are eroded by the division of labour; to Max Weber, the bureaucratisation of modern industrial society has negative psychic effects.¹⁰ This sense of disconnection is more closely aligned with the way in which the term is generally used today than the technical one that is developed by Marx.

There is a third strand of alienation which emerges from within existentialist philosophy. In this account, alienation—which takes place internally within a subject—is a generic feature of all societies and does not have its origin in capitalism (although on some accounts, capitalist societies might significantly intensify its effects). It is primarily through its sociological and existentialist heritages that alienation is related to meaning and individual psychological states.¹¹

¹⁰ Marcello Musto, *Karl Marx's Writings on Alienation*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, p. 4.

¹¹ Although, as will be discussed in the final section of this chapter, industrial work puts a downward pressure on the extent to which work can be varied and autonomous, and in this sense, there is an interesting connection between Marx's account of alienation and meaning within the labour process.

As we can see, Marx's account of alienation is only one of many available. It is, however, the one most closely connected to the critique of work. It not only theorises how alienation might appear at work but theorises work-under-capitalism as a central and distinctive source and site of alienation. On this view, work is not only one of various arenas in which alienation can inhere, but also special: it might have causal significance, it might have its own dynamics, separate from other forms of alienation. If this is the case, overcoming alienation will require significant changes to work. As for work, alienation might be able to offer a way of bringing its harms into view.

As with recognition and domination, alienation brings problems that extend beyond a liberal paradigm of freedom into view. In this case, even though our lives and work are 'free', that is to say not *directly* coerced, that our activity there is in some way not our own seems to bring about feelings of meaninglessness, inauthenticity and frustration. Our work activity is not our own and coping with this requires a splintering, as in *Severance*, a rushing to get through the day, feelings of squandering our time, exhaustion, or an attachment to work which can provide only a flimsy foundation for the realisation of meaning.

If alienation is a problem in and of work-under-capitalism, Marx's account of alienation offers a chance to politicise these feelings and to offer a solution, in a horizon of disalienated work, achieved through a transformation in the ownership of the means of production.

As there is significant controversy over the meaning and significance of Marx's theory of alienation for his wider account of capitalism, a brief historical overview of Marx's alienation and its reception is helpful here.

2. More Than a Feeling: Marx's Alienation

Marx claims that the development of our capacities is separated from us because of the arrangement of capitalist work and because of the way that ownership is structured in capitalist societies. This means that we experience 'one-sided' rather than 'many-sided' development in work that reduces us to something machine-like. At the level of society as a whole, our potential collective, productive capacities are restricted by production which is focused on generating value. These limitations on possibility and on human freedom can be undone only by a reordering of society that 'expropriates the expropriators': removing the means of production from private hands and transforming production, work and needs, and overcoming alienation.

Marx's writings which are most directly about alienation, in his notebooks known as the 'Paris Notebooks' or 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844' (EPM), were not published until 1932. These writings tend to form the basis of much thinking about his account of alienation.¹² Interestingly, prior to their publication, the concept received little¹³ attention (from Marxists) outside of Georg Lukács's 1923 *History and Class Consciousness* which looked at the overlapping framework of 'reification', based on a reading of a small section of *Capital* that deals with the 'fetishism of commodities'. Their publication, and, later, their translation into English, spurred (and were to a significant extent, spurred by) a far-reaching debate about Marxism and orthodoxy.

¹² Most accounts of alienation focus on this text. Exceptions can be found in e.g. Terrell Carver, 'Marx's Conception of Alienation in the *Grundrisse*', in *Karl Marx's Grundrisse*, ed. Marcello Musto, Routledge, 2008.

and Marcello Musto, *Karl Marx's Writings on Alienation*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.

¹³ Sometimes it is argued that it received *no* attention, but this seems to be overstating the case, see e.g. Joe Paterman, 'V. I. Lenin on Alienation', *Critical Sociology*, Vol 49, 2, March 2023, pp.185-200.

To some the texts and the theory of alienation, revealed or demonstrated a lost or suppressed humanist Marx which could function as a framework for condemning the Soviet Union and orthodox Marxism as well as critiquing capitalism. A young Herbert Marcuse, for example, reviewing the newly published notebooks, argued that these new texts meant there was a need for a fundamental reinterpretation of Marx's thinking, and put into question the idea of 'scientific socialism'.¹⁴ Marshall Berman recalls, as a student, buying cheap copies, for fifty cents each, published by Soviet publishers, and giving them out everywhere, excited by a Marx that seemed more alive than the official one.¹⁵ On the other side of the ring were those who argued that the early writings, especially on alienation, were a Hegelian deviation that need not be paid attention to. This meant that there were two Marxes, with a decisive break between a young Hegelian (and young-Hegelian) Marx and a mature 'Marxist' Marx. This was not a merely Marxological question (if, indeed, anything can ever be), but a question with clear political stakes. As David Leopold puts it, the newly-published texts 'appeared to cast doubt on the authority of the orthodox Soviet account of Marx's work ... responses to the early writings became polarised from the very beginning. These texts had to be identified either as rightly abandoned juvenilia, or as the long-lost key to a proper interpretation of Marx's entire output'.¹⁶

The most common current view, at least in the contemporary Anglophone literature, is, however, that there was *not* a decisive break in Marx's thinking, but instead, a continuity in a concern with alienation, although expressed in different vocabularies.¹⁷ Alienation is

¹⁴ David Leopold, *The Young Marx*, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p.6.

¹⁵ Marshall Berman, *Adventures in Marxism*, Verso, 1999, p.11.

¹⁶ Leopold, *The Young Marx*, p7.

¹⁷ For an opposing view see Mark Cowling, 'Alienation in the Older Marx', *Political Theory Revisited*, vol. 5, 2006, pp. 319–339.

mentioned less frequently in Marx's later writings and where it is mentioned, is talked about in different ways. This offers fertile ground for disagreements in interpretation. In particular, there is disagreement on the extent of the continuity of a concern with alienation in two senses. Firstly, does Marx have one continuous theory of alienation throughout his work, and if it does shift, why and how does it do so? Secondly, is there a continuity in the centrality of alienation to Marx's theory, i.e. is it equally important throughout his thinking?

In Section Four, I will argue that Marx modifies his theory of alienation later in his life, that is to say, that it is discontinuous in the first sense, but that it remains important to his thinking and does so continuously. For now, because it is the account of alienation that the majority of both proponents and critics tend to have in mind,¹⁸ when I am talking about alienation, I mean alienation as described in the EPM.

The subjective aspects of alienation that are central in David Graeber's depiction of 'bullshit jobs' are importantly not foregrounded in Marx's account of alienation.¹⁹ There is a difference between the subjective experience of meaning and the way in which alienation is used by Marx to refer to an objective situation, describing society in general, although, importantly, a situation which has subjective and experiential qualities as its effects. To Marx, believing oneself to be alienated or feeling alienated is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition of alienation. In fact, in *The Holy Family*, Marx and Engels note that:

¹⁸ Exceptions include Terrell Carver, 'Marx's Conception of Alienation in the *Grundrisse*', in *Karl Marx's Grundrisse*, 1st ed., Routledge, 2008, Emil Øversveen, 'Capitalism and Alienation: Towards a Marxist Theory of Alienation for the 21st Century', *European Journal of Social Theory*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2022, pp. 440–457, Sean Sayers, *Marx and Alienation: Essays on Hegelian Themes*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

¹⁹ On some readings (e.g. Leopold, 'Alienation', 2022), Marx's account *exclusively* concerns objective alienation. I read Marx differently. While alienation is *always* objective and only sometimes subjective per Marx, there is good reason to believe that the experiential qualities of alienation are not only present in Marx's account, but a feature that is both significant and useful (in the sense developed in this dissertation).

The propertied class and the class of the proletariat present the same human self-estrangement. But the former class feels at ease and strengthened in this self-estrangement, it recognises estrangement as its own power and has in it the semblance of a human existence. The class of the proletariat feels annihilated in estrangement; it sees in it its own powerlessness and the reality of an inhuman existence.²⁰

While the bourgeoisie *is* (objectively) alienated it does not (subjectively) *feel* itself to be. In Marx's version of alienation, one can be both subjectively and objectively alienated, or just objectively alienated. Already, the difference between a Marxian version of alienation, which we can begin to see is for him a technical term describing what he takes to be a fact about capitalist societies, and other theories of alienation is clear. Marx's theory is not only a psychological or anthropological one but a sociological one.

Recall that alienation theories involve implicit or explicit reasons for the unwantedness of a separation. Why is it that the separations on which capitalist work depends, which it involves and which it creates, are undesirable? Marx has an answer to this: individual and collective human possibility are diminished by alienation, and this diminishing is a less desirable situation than one of enhanced human possibility. In the account in the 1844 Manuscripts, it is, furthermore, that this is less desirable at least partly because this diminution of possibility is the diminution of a *distinctively* human set of capacities. I will turn to this claim and its relation to the essentialism objection to alienation in Section Four.

²⁰ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Holy Family*, trans. Richard Dixon, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956, p. 49.

The question of whether there is a (suppressed) humanist Marx, within which humanity is violated by capitalism—in Marcuse’s telling ‘a catastrophe of the human essence’²¹—is a central interpretative problem of Marx’s theory of alienation. This neighbours another vexed Marxological question: whether Marx can be said to be a moral thinker. This would mean (1) that Marx finds capitalism morally unacceptable, and (2) that this moral condemnation is important to his critique of capitalism.²² A humanist Marx is more likely to be, but is not necessarily, a moral Marx.

The matter of Marx’s possible moralities was considered in relation to Honneth’s moral markets in the previous chapter. I argued that Marx’s view of morality as it exists in societies, particularly capitalist societies, is that moralities have a historical specificity, rather than being ‘true’ or ‘false’, and that they co-mingle with action and interest. This means that Marx cannot meaningfully be a ‘moral’ thinker if there is taken to be a distinctive, rational moral realm. If ‘moral’ is used to mean something broader—as Raymond Geuss, distinguishing between types of morality puts it, ‘it any kind of systematic distinction between better and worse in the human world’—then Marx can be said to be a moral thinker. On the narrow view, ‘morality’ applies to ways of establishing ‘the good’ and so on as a separate realm, typically powered by abstract reason.²³

Marx’s account of history and especially its claims about the necessity of historicising ideas makes a freestanding, distinct rational moral thinking impossible. On his account, there are not

²¹ Herbert Marcuse, *Heideggerian Marxism*, eds. Richard Wolin and John Abromeit, University of Nebraska Press, 2005, p. 106.

²² There are passages of Marx’s writing in which capitalism is condemned in tones that seem to be moral (famously, for example, its vampiric or werewolf like qualities, or the way it reduces humanity to something like a machine). But the presence of these alone does not prove that Marx is a moral thinker in the relevant sense.

²³ Raymond Geuss, *Reality and Its Dreams*, Harvard University Press, 2016, pp. 95-96.

and cannot be ideas that stand outside of time; people think as social, historical, and needy, situated beings. While Marx is contemptuous of the bourgeois morality of his day, attributing to it the ability to mystify or obscure social relations, the solution to this ideological morality is not to be found in devising some alternative narrow morality that could be a successful rival to the bourgeois one, but rather in overcoming the social relations that produce it, i.e. capitalism.²⁴ This is because social being determines consciousness, not the other way around. As we saw in Chapter Three, this does not require a crude or mechanical determinism, in which the economic ‘base’ is reflected like for like in the ‘superstructure’, rather it is economically deterministic in that it attributes a particularly *fundamental* role to the economic relations of capitalist societies.

But does this economic determinism make it impossible for Marx to say anything moral in the broader sense?²⁵ Clearly, it is possible to think something is better than something else without appealing to a freestanding morality, and to give reasons for our preference of something relative to another without committing to the view that there is distinctive way of thinking that is ethical or normative.²⁶ We do this all the time. We make evaluative and even what seem like moral judgements—of ourselves, our friends, etc.—without being able to name any particular

²⁴ See Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*. Macmillan, 1978, pp. 19-22; Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School*. Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp.10-12; Allen W. Wood, *Karl Marx*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981, pp. 206-210.

²⁵ By contrast, Vanessa Wills argues that Marx is an ethical and normative thinker albeit one with a distinctive historical and immanent method. This understanding of the ethical/normative is different to the standard liberal conception, in which morality is a distinct real. On her view, the basis for a Marxist ethics is historically situated actors and possibilities, i.e. historical and immanent, not an ahistorical reason. It is not clear how this is normative in the sense she has in mind and the idea that there is a ‘knowable and objective’ aspect of ethics according to Marx seems potentially in tension with his historicism. Either way, there is not much of a practical difference between this account and Geuss’s broad morality as neither base judgement on what is better or best on freestanding morality. See Wills, *Marx’s Ethical Vision*, 2024.

²⁶ This might be one of the important legacies of Marx’s thinking and forms an integral part of his method.

moral principle that grounds our judgement, and without treating our judgement as separate from other kinds, e.g. psychological, practical.

What does Marx say about alienation? The young—here meaning the most minimal version of ‘young’, ‘young’ as in age, rather than ‘immature’—Marx picks up a set of claims made by Young Hegelian thinkers about the place of ideas in society: in particular, that religion is best understood as a projection of man’s unrealised capacities or potential powers onto the heavens (as *alienated*). Marx applies this insight to politics, the law and eventually to labour. As Marx puts it, alienation theory descends from heaven to earth to consider ‘human self-estrangement in its secular forms, once its sacred form has been unmasked. Thus, the critique of heaven is transformed into the critique of the earth.’²⁷

The profane form of alienation as self-estranged labour is taken to task in Marx’s ‘Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts’ (EPM). Here, famously, Marx describes four aspects of alienation:

- 1) Alienation from the product of labour [which should be the workers own, but which instead stands above him as an ‘alien object with power over him’]
- 2) Alienation from the act of production [not being in control of his own activity, producing alien powers]
- 3) Alienation from species-being [alienation from human essence—a capacity to consciously produce the world, which appears in a perverse or inverted form in capitalist production]

²⁷ Karl Marx, ‘A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: Introduction’, in Karl Marx, *Early Political Writings*, ed. Joseph J. O’Malley and Richard A. Davis, Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp.57-70, p.58.

- 4) Alienation from fellow men [through competition rather than collaborative work].²⁸

The division of labour and existence of exchange mean that the product of man's own activity comes to stand above him and dominate him, leaving man alienated from himself, the product of his labour, the process of the production of that product, and from other people.

Importantly, Marx, following Hegel, thinks that work—conscious, purposive activity through which human beings act creatively on/in the natural world and in so doing change the world and themselves—is expressive of human species-being, a distinctively human activity. This is lost in emerging forms of capitalist wage labour.

Just as in religion, the activity of man's imagination, of the human head and heart, operates on the individual as something independent of him, i.e. as an alien activity of gods and devils, so the worker's activity is not his self-activity. It belongs to another and is his loss of self.²⁹

This, then, is *self*-estrangement, in which the worker's own activity is turned against himself, is independent of him, 'not belonging' to him. It produces objects that dominate him and a social world that dominates him too. This is a particularly tragic fate: people are compelled to act in a way that estranges them from their very selves.

²⁸ Karl Marx, 'Self-Estrangement', in Marx, *Early Political Writings*, pp.71-78, p.74.

²⁹ Ibid.

In 1844, Marx is working out how this might have come to pass. His answer is broad—because of the kind of being a person is (social, engaging in (re)making the world) estrangement is the result of human activity and within the web of social relations. It is also, in this early writing, the *cause* of private property, its ‘product’ and ‘necessary consequence’.³⁰ Estranged labour produces private property, which then enters a relationship of reciprocal action with it; private property is the product and later the means of labour’s self-alienation.

Marx returns to the question of how it is that the social world of capitalism is reproduced throughout his work, and revises the position sketched out here. But he consistently claims that overcoming alienation is connected to the supersession of capitalist property relations, constituting the historic achievement of the working class, which, in overcoming its own position, cannot but transform the entire set of social relations.

So, per Marx, alienation is the situation of being compelled to produce social relations which dominate you through estranged labour which you do not control. This includes the *experience* of the work that is carried out under and is productive of these social relations. It does not, however, require there to be awareness of this experience as negative. In this account, to say that work is alienated means that the purposive, conscious activity carried out by humans (and which is their *distinctive* activity)³¹ takes place under conditions that are themselves not subject to the control of those doing it, further that the product of labour is separated from the worker and owned by another, and thirdly that this activity produces the social relations that guarantee

³⁰Ibid, p. 77.

³¹ The extent to which this claim about work as the ‘essence’ or ‘essential characteristic’ of human beings is ‘essentialist’ will be discussed in Section Four. For now, what I take this to mean is that Marx sees conscious, world-making activity as a property that that is *only* human, in the same way that Cicero claims that justice is a human characteristic—a property that belongs to people, exclusively, rather than animals (which can be courageous or exhibit other virtues, or in Marx’s case, which can produce things, a beehive for instance, but not in the way that humans work).

its continuation. To say that a person is alienated means that their activity is not a means for the enhancement of their development but for its frustration. To say that their activity is alienated means that it is subject to an alien power and done in the service of an alien power. To say that society is alienated means that it contains this alienation; further, that the possibilities of all are restricted.

Alienation on these terms had resonance as a way of theorising harms of capitalist societies beyond inequality and poverty, particularly as inequality declined and standards of living rose in the middle of the twentieth century. But as the notion of alienation has endured, it has also evolved and mutated. If the classical version of alienation as/through labour meant the production of wealth and power for others but privation for oneself, and in which the world is experienced as ‘alien’, then, according to Herbert Marcuse, the ‘very notion of alienation [becomes] questionable’ in a time of mass consumer capitalism, of ‘affluent societies’, which ‘transforms the object world into an extension of man’s body’ and in which:

[t]he people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment. The very mechanism which ties the individual to his society has changed, and social control is anchored in the new needs which it has produced.³²

He then explains that in new societies, social control comes from consumer desire: ‘when the individuals identify themselves with the existence which is imposed upon them and have in it their own development and satisfaction. This identification is not illusion but reality.’ This, he

³² Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, Routledge, 2002, p.11. Others locate new forms of alienation in consumer societies too: Guy Debord made similar points Jean Baudrillard, see Musto, *Karl Marx’s Writings on Alienation*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, p. 27.

adds, is not the end of alienation but ‘a more *progressive* stage’.³³ This identification, with the system, is strong and so powerful that it obliterates the separation between self and system that alienation in the classic Marxist formulation requires; where there are two wrongfully separated things, there is now—in some sense—only *one* thing (although it might still be possible to think of a self outside of or salvaged from the system). Alienation on the traditional model is not possible, but a worse alienation, he alleges, has emerged.

While this positive identification with the system of control that Marcuse describes might be a new development, the idea that alienation has an ideological effect, blocking awareness of the dynamics of capitalism, is not. Alienation in the classical Marxian, and the expanded consumer-plenty, sense identified a persistent capitalist harm that also involved, via reification, an ideological obfuscation. The result of this obfuscation is that we see things as separated or alien, when there is a sense in which this is not so—it is only so *as* the result of our own activity as set up by society, not as an inherent feature of the world. Viewed in this way, we can see why, on such an account, people might feel out-of-sorts but without much of a sense of what was wrong (because information about the world was blocked). They might, per Marcuse, even come to positively identify with the system that causes their alienation.

Not feeling like yourself or feeling that some aspect of your self-expression or humanity was denied by the arrangement of work, by work-under-capitalism, became a common way of understanding experience and critiquing capitalism from within the political left in the second half of the twentieth century. After leading the Upper Clyde Ship Workers’ work-in (June 1971–October 1972), the trade unionist Jimmy Reid, was elected Rector of the University of

³³ Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, p. 15.

Glasgow. In his rectorial address, he lectured on the theme of the age: alienation. Alienation is the ‘precise and correctly applied word for describing the major social problem in Britain today’:

It is the cry of men who feel themselves the victims of blind economic forces beyond their control. It is the frustration of ordinary people excluded from the processes of decision making. The feeling of despair and hopelessness that pervades people who feel with justification that they have no real say in shaping or determining their own destinies.³⁴

Alienation is a lack of control. From this comes a dehumanising set of attitudes and behaviours, the ability to see only the hunt for profit and not a shared humanity. The solution: ‘rooting out anything that everything that distorts and devalues human relations’; the creation of a new world, based on a recognition of shared humanity.³⁵ In Reid’s address, several common features of left-wing accounts of alienation are present: the centrality of control, the denial of something human, the distortions and suffering that come from this denial, and a path forward, based on the practical possibilities of the world and of political action. While preserving the strong connection with control from Marx’s account, Reid’s alienation draws on a moralised account of a shared humanity which is not present in Marx (at least not to the same extent). Reid’s conception edges closer to the kind of psychologism which characterises the everyday conception of alienation in contemporary discourse.

³⁴ James Reid, *Alienation*, Rectorial Address, delivered in the University of Glasgow on Friday, 28th April 1972, University of Glasgow Publications, 1972, p. 5.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p.7.

Reid's politicisation of suffering by linking it to questions of control and the profit imperative points to a way to change and challenge the status quo. By contrast, the take-up of alienation in professional sociology, Marcello Musto alleges, involved a shearing off of the 'historical social factors that determine alienation, producing a kind of hyperpsychologisation that treated it not as a social problem but as a pathological symptom of individuals, curable at the individual level'.³⁶ It became a problem of maladjustment to a society more or less taken for granted, even while it retained a focus on work through studies of the system of industrial production.³⁷ Rather than flourishing being structurally blocked, in this case, the individual had simply failed to flourish.

These popularisations or popular frames for understanding alienation move away from Marx's. Reid's, which is taken to be more or less typical of the way in which it was understood on the left—humanity denied and forestalled by a competitive, consumer culture, a lack of control, all the result of capitalism—contains a horizon capable of challenging the problem it identifies. But through these subsequent take-ups alienation increasingly comes to be associated with feelings of disillusionment, attachment to the system (to which one should not be attached) and also detachment from it (when one should be attached), the denial of (good) human attributes, a whole host of specifically modern psychological ailments, associated with contemporary capitalism, that exceed domination and exploitation.

³⁶ Musto, *Karl Marx's Writings on Alienation*, p. 27.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 28.

3. Jaeggi's Revisionary Formalism

Such was the popularity of alienation as a framework for understanding various forms of suffering in capitalist societies, that even in its heyday worries about 'concept creep' circulated. In 1968, it was described by Paul Ricoeur as suffering from 'semantic overload'³⁸ with Richard Schacht writing, in 1970, that alienation 'communicates little more today than tapping one's glass with one's spoon at a banquet; neither does more than attract attention'.³⁹

Decades in the conceptual cold followed this extraordinary success. Alienation's connection to essentialist claims about human nature, its perfectionism, its purported paternalism (that it decides for people what is good for them), sexism (that it excludes women), productivism (that it focuses unduly or excessively on work which produces concrete objects), prelapsarianism (that alienation assumes a previous unity which can be reinstated), and its assumption of endless abundance (that is unsupportable given what we now know about climate crisis and the finitude of resources) left it unfashionable, seen as belonging to a bygone conceptual moment. In particular, its connection to allegedly too-strong claims about human nature seemed out of keeping in a moment of post-modern non- or anti-essentialism.⁴⁰

Of course, too, its historical connection to left-wing politics meant that their fates were intertwined. But in the first decades of the twenty-first century, alienation appears to be making a comeback, garnering revived philosophical attention. A link tends to be drawn between this revival and the rise in precarious work in advanced industrial economies. Often the implication

³⁸ Quoted in Pierre-Louis Choquet, 'Alienation and the Task of Geo-Social Critique', *European Journal of Social Theory*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2020, pp. 105–122, p.105.

³⁹ Richard Schacht, *Alienation*, Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1970, p. 245.

⁴⁰ Christopher Henning, *Theories of Alienation*, Routledge, 2025, p.9.

is that work has become *more* alienating than it had been in the past because of the types and conditions of work that have become increasingly common in the breakup of the Fordist social order.

While this revival is not exclusively interested in Marx's version of alienation, nor is it only carried out by Marxists, it is distinctly Marx-inflected, by which is meant that it is motivated by or at least engages with the Marxian and Marxist lineages of alienation.⁴¹ These revivals are more directly about taking up and reshaping the concept of alienation to respond to its alleged problems or to revise it for a changed set of external circumstances.⁴² Foremost among these revivals is Rahel Jaeggi's 2005 *Alienation*, published in English translation in 2014.

Jaeggi, like Honneth, is interested in turning to a concept that motivated the first generation of the Frankfurt School and revising it for the present. Again, like Honneth, this is combined with a concern about establishing satisfactory normative foundations for Critical Theory.⁴³

⁴¹ Additionally, there is some recent interest in alienation that is not much to do with Marx, for example, recent studies of alienation in relation to Rousseau, e.g. Jeppe, 'The Injustice of Alienation', Frederick Neuhouer *Rousseau's Critique of Inequality: Reconstructing the Second Discourse*, Cambridge University Press, 2014.

⁴² For examples of applications of alienation to changed external circumstances or 'updating' for the present moment, see Emil Øversveen, Conor A. Kelly, 'Alienation: A useful concept for health inequality research', *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health*, 50 (7), 2022, pp. 1–6. and Choquet, 'Alienation and the Task of Geo-Social Critique'.

⁴³ This grand hunt for a normative basis for critique is a common theme within contemporary critical theory. Other hunters include Jürgen Habermas, Maeve Cooke, Nancy Fraser (in the parity principle) cf. Amy Allen, who argues, persuasively, that one 'can be a contextualist about normativity and still believe in certain normative principles' (Amy Allen, Rahel Jaeggi and Eva von Redecker, 'Progress, Normativity, and the Dynamics of Social Change', *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, vol. 37, 2016, pp. 225–251, pp. 243–246). For a helpful discussion of this see Justin Evans, 'On the Very Idea of Normative Foundations in Critical Social Theory', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 49, no. 4, 2023, pp. 385–408. For a recent critique of the 'normative turn' which posits that Allen 'asks the right question [in linking her critique to colonialism] but offers the wrong answers', see Nadia Bou Ali 'Critical Apologetics; On Rainer Forst's Noumenal Powers', *Historical Materialism*, (online), April 2015.

Jaeggi wants to return to and revise alienation such that it is not vulnerable to objections that she takes to be decisive. These are essentialism, and two further related objections: a couplet of perfectionism and paternalism. Noting the critical potential of alienation for describing social problems that are not exhausted by liberal concerns with justice, Jaeggi wants to give ‘a consistent account of processes of alienation without recourse to an Archimedean point beyond alienation’.⁴⁴ This means, she explains, one which does not assume an essential human essence to which it is possible to return (a critique of alienation critique from a Foucauldian perspective), and one which is not based on a conception of the good life (a liberal objection) over the heads of those who do not feel ‘alienated’.

Into alienation is sutured a similar attempt to avoid paternalism but retain critical potential for assessing action in the work of psychologist Ernst Tugendhat. In his attempts to develop a theory of psychological ‘health’, Tugendhat steers between two poles: on the one hand, a criterion for health could not simply be identical with the desires or preferences that a person has, but on the other, it must not call into question people’s interpretive sovereignty. How can something at once question but also affirm someone’s desires and preferences? Tugendhat and Jaeggi’s solutions are formalist ones: you can assess (for sickness or for health) the process by which someone does something, but you do not have grounds to assess what they end up doing as the result of that process. Tugendhat is thinking about willing—to be free in what one wills, one must have their will at their command; one must have oneself at one’s command. When one does not, there is an impairment in the capacity to will.⁴⁵ What actually happens in the end, the object of their will, does not matter, but the fact that they have willed it does.

⁴⁴ Jaeggi, *Alienation*, p. 2.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 33.

Jaeggi's account similarly focuses on the *how* and not the *what* of alienation. It is a 'relation of relationlessness'. Instances of alienation are 'disturbed ways of establishing relations to oneself and to the world.' A formal account, per Jaeggi, concludes that an 'unalienated life ... is not one in which specific substantial values are realised but one that is lived in a specific—unalienated—manner.'⁴⁶ This does not need to say much about the self that does the realising (dispelling essentialism) nor about the result of that unalienated process (dispelling paternalism and perfectionism). This formalist approach reflects a broader concern in Jaeggi's work about the normative basis of Critical Theory more generally. At the level of society, she solves it with a similar formalist move: societies or lifeworlds can be assessed in terms of 'learning processes'.⁴⁷

For Jaeggi, alienation is a failure in a relation (between self and self, and self and world), specifically a failure to appropriate. Appropriation 'refers to a way of establishing relations to oneself and to the world, a way of dealing with oneself and the world and of having oneself and the world at one's command'.⁴⁸ When appropriation does not take place, when it is 'blocked', alienation inheres. The result is the opposite of a successful appropriation ('being accessible rather than alien to oneself or being able to understand oneself as the author of one's own action')⁴⁹: being alien to oneself and not being able to see oneself as the author of one's own actions. Examples include a young academic who moves to the suburbs and increasingly sees his life not as of his own choosing, the 'giggling feminist' who 'catches herself over and over again communicating with her lover like a silly, giggling adolescent girl' when she 'cannot identify with her impulse to giggle'.⁵⁰ A major cause is something like an ossification of social

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 35.

⁴⁷ See Rahel Jaeggi, *Critiques of Forms of Life*, trans. Ciaran Cronin, Harvard University Press, 2018.

⁴⁸ Jaeggi, *Alienation*, p.36.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p.49.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p.100.

roles: ‘alienating roles not only force us to conceal or mask ourselves, they inhibit us already in the construction of our identity.’⁵¹

According to Beatrijs Haverkamp, Jaeggi’s model of appropriation makes it hard to use alienation for social critique. While Jaeggi says that reforms to roles and institutions are required for appropriation, what these are is unclear. Further, alienation tends to refer roles or institutions, but this implies that successful appropriation can take place within them. Per Haverkamp, this means that alienation is a problem of disposition and attitude.⁵² Where does this leave the possibility of saying something structural about alienation? Justin Evans argues that Jaeggi could attempt to look to her account of ‘forms of life’ to establish a plausible basis for structural thinking. This means that a critique of capitalism (for example) must find ‘fundamentally problematic’ features, that do not apply to other forms of life, otherwise it will just be about ‘humans in general’. However, this is where Jaeggi falls down, according to Evans. While failures of appropriation are shown to be bad, they are not shown to be unique to capitalist societies. They are not shown to be either caused by or endemic to capitalism.⁵³ Instead, they are transhistorical; they can always happen. The structural causes of alienation cannot be brought into view.

This makes it hard to understand how to overcome alienation—how can alienation be overcome if we do not know its causes? This version of alienation does not have the strong connection to labour and exchange present in Marx’s. This is not in and of itself a problem: there might be other possible accounts of alienation’s structural causes, and by extension, its conditions of

⁵¹ Ibid, p.95.

⁵² Beatrijs Haverkamp, ‘Reconstructing Alienation: A Challenge to Social Critique?’, *Krisis*, 36 (1), 2016, pp. 66-70, p. 69.

⁵³ Justin Evans, ‘Rahel Jaeggi’s Theory of Alienation’, *History of the Human Sciences*, 35 (2), 2022, pp. 126-143, p. 113.

overcoming. Jaeggi's formalist account, however, does not (and arguably cannot, without jeopardising its formalist credentials) go much beyond the analysis of non-alienation as an abstract state of 'command' or 'authorship' (of self, world, actions), and has little to say about the social conditions that might impede or foster this happy scenario. Alienation in Jaeggi's mode does disclose something about social reality: people feel stuck, or not themselves, or acting in ways that are somehow not their own. But because it fails to identify any deeper causes of this state of affairs, it can neither identify political agents to change it, nor establish a meaningful horizon for its overcoming.

Jaeggi's attempt to overcome the problems—of essentialism and of perfectionism-paternalism—which she associates with Marxist accounts of alienation thus comes at significant critical cost. If those problems are formidable enough, any such cost might be thought one worth paying (or anyway unavoidable). On the other hand, if the objections from essentialism and perfectionism-paternalism turn out to be misplaced, then Jaeggi's sacrifice has been for nothing. In the next section, I argue that the second scenario is the case. The objections from essentialism and perfectionism-paternalism fail against a Marxist notion of alienation.

4. Essentialism and Paternalism-Perfectionism

The two most commonly-made objections to Marxian and Marxist alienation, and those frequently considered most pressing, including by Jaeggi, are those of essentialism and paternalism-perfectionism. Firstly, does Marx's account assume a 'true', 'authentic' humanity, outside of history, outside of power, an 'essential' humanity that has been obliterated by capitalism, but, with the right transformation, could be restored? (Given what we have already

seen about Marx's principle of historical specificity this seems an odd charge.) Secondly, does Marx's account require speaking over the heads of ordinary people, deciding what is good for them on their behalf (paternalism), and especially doing so in a way that assumes a certain kind of development as the best, or right way for people to live (perfectionism)? These two Ps can be taken apart: not every paternalism is perfectionist, but every perfectionism is—allegedly—paternalist.

In this section, I argue that the essentialism charge is addressed by resources in Marx's later account, and that the perfectionism-paternalist charges need not be a problem for non-liberals.

1. Essentialism:

Essentialism is even less fashionable than alienation once was. To say that something implies or involves essentialism is to say that it is practically useless, dead on arrival. Honneth, for example: 'Philosophical developments of the past decades on both sides of the Atlantic have put an end to such essentialist conceptions; we now know that even if we do not doubt the existence of certain universal features of human nature, we can no longer speak objectively of a human "essence", of our "species powers", or of humankind's defining and fundamental aims.'⁵⁴

Essentialism is alleged on the basis that Marx's account of alienation assumes a fixed (i.e. historically invariable) and 'thick' human essence. Put most basically this means that alienation theories say too much about what people are like, when, in fact, people vary massively and

⁵⁴ Honneth, 'Foreword' to Jaeggi, *Alienation*, p. vii.

significantly across time and space. Jaeggi's claim is that Marx's account of alienation positions labour as an essential human characteristic, which as a practical activity realises our essence in the world. There is an subvariant of the essentialism objection which can be termed (per Jaeggi) a specifically Foucauldian anti-essentialism, which is not only about a problem of historicity, but also one of power: i.e. there is assumed to be a 'true' or 'genuine' subject which exists outside of power, from the standpoint of which it is possible to critique the existing world, and to which it is possible to 'return'. On the Foucauldian view, there is no self other than the self that is formed by the world, no 'real' subject, untainted by productive power relations. This means that, per Jaeggi, the 'distinction between self and what is alien', which is 'required' by alienation theories, is no longer possible.⁵⁵ Most simply: we are what we are already, there is not something *else* that we are.

The idea that there is a lost but recoverable human nature is common in theories of alienation. Take Rousseau. Rousseau does not think people are always the same, in contrast to someone like Hobbes. Human nature is not fixed, something which society and the state should be set up to be responsive to, but rather, people are shaped by the conditions in which they live. Rousseau thinks that instead that humanity's problems are social: they emerge *from* society, not from who people always are, but even still, there remains the category of man 'as nature made him', 'what is fundamental in him':

And how shall man hope to see himself as nature made him, across all the changes which the succession of place and time must have produced in his original constitution? ... Like the statue of Glaucus, which was so disfigured by time, seas and tempests, that

⁵⁵ Jaeggi, *Alienation* p. 31.

it looked more like a wild beast than a god ... changed in appearance, so as to be hardly recognisable.⁵⁶

While there is a *new* object—the reshaped statue—there remains another, the statue as originally made. It is tragically impossible to return to the old one, for Rousseau, but it ‘exists’ as something that once was, and which it is possible to mourn or to long for. Foucault’s point, via Jaeggi, is that this view of human subjectification is not plausible. People are made by and within the power relations of the society in which they live, and the idea of a core or inner essence is not plausible.

Does Marx subscribe to the same idea of a lost, defaced human nature, i.e. that there is (1) a unified, unvarying human essence that (2) can be returned to or restored? Both claims seem out of keeping with Marx’s commitment to a theory of history which stresses dynamism and the social constitution of individuals, following his principle of historical specificity. Marx, as we have seen, contrasts his own approach to that of political economists who imagine a forever man, in the vein of Robinson Crusoe.⁵⁷

Marx’s principle of historical specificity runs counter to essentialism. Yet the essentialism charge remains frequently levelled against Marx, to the point that it is almost taken for granted. Why is this? If the version of alienation in the EPM is taken as the basis for Marx’s theory of alienation, it seems legitimate to say that Marx—even against himself—makes a strong and

⁵⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, ‘The Second Discourse: Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Mankind’, in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and the First and Second Discourses*, ed. Susan Dunn, Yale University Press, 2002, p. 81.

⁵⁷ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 83-88.

even potentially problematic set of claims about the nature of human beings. However, I will argue now, his later account of alienation has the resources to address this objection.⁵⁸

How does Marx's later account of alienation differ from the account given in 1844? Recall that in the EPM, Marx outlines four facets of alienation:

- 1) Alienation from the product of labour
- 2) Alienation from the act of production
- 3) Alienation from species-being
- 4) Alienation from fellow men.

Through estranged labour, people are compelled to produce a world that dominates them. The capacity—he argues their uniquely human capacity—to make the world through labour, is inverted, and turned against them. This is the core of alienation, and it recurs throughout Marx's work.

Marx is consistently concerned with the ways in which capitalism (1) inhibits the development of the capacities of people by funnelling their activity into a division of labour and production for the generation of surplus value, and (2) is produced as a result of the activity of people, over which they have no control, but which happens 'behind their backs'. Passages making these points can be found throughout his work.

⁵⁸ See Evans, 'On the Very Idea of Normative Foundations' for a similar argument. Evans, however, follows Postone in saying that there is no transhistorical category 'labour'.

But the version that appears later is importantly different in emphasis.⁵⁹ In the *Grundrisse*, in exchange the worker, ‘surrenders its [labour power’s] *creative power*, like Esau his birthright for a mess of pottage’; ‘[t]he separation between labour and property in the product of labour, between labour and wealth, is thus posited in this act of exchange itself’; his labour ‘*comes* to confront the worker as an alien power.’⁶⁰ Here, the worker produces the alien power, now described as capital. But importantly, rather than this production happening through the process of self-estranging labour, as in 1844,⁶¹ it is already contained in the act of selling labour power. The activity of work confronts the worker as an alien power, but the alienation has already taken place. In *Capital Vol. 1* (1867), ‘As in religion, man is governed by the products of his own brain, so in capitalist production, he is governed by the products of his own hand’.⁶²

The later version of alienation as found in (relatively scattered sections of) the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* is something like this:

- 1) The wrongful separation of people from the capacities (importantly, both individual and social) latent in themselves and their society.
- 2) The compelled participation in the reproduction of that separation and of capitalist society more generally.
- 3) The experience of both of these.

⁵⁹ Others make a similar point: see e.g. Lachlan Ross, ‘On Disentangling Alienation, Estrangement, and Reification in Marx’, *Rethinking Marxism*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2020, pp. 521–525. Ross’s account of alienation is as ‘the living being ruled by the dead, producers being ruled by products’, the relations produced by the capitalist labour process. My account differs by including in this what Ross would include within ‘estrangement’, the separation of worker and world from latent capacities.

⁶⁰ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 307. (Italics in original.)

⁶¹ NB In 1844, Marx does not have an account of capital and talks instead in terms of ‘private property’.

⁶² Marx, *Capital*, p. 681.

These take place in exchange, are already present in and embedded into capitalist society's preconditions. In this later version of alienation (2) above is similar to the self-estrangement present in the account of alienation in the EPM, but Marx fills out what this means—how capitalist society is, after its violent, bloody establishment through primitive accumulation, reproduced. Here, importantly, capitalism contains the seeds for the overcoming of alienation. Inside capitalism, latent within it, is another society:

a system of general social metabolism, of universal relations, of all-round needs and universal capacities is formed for the first time. Free individuality, based on the universal development of individuals.⁶³

Communism—the overcoming of alienation, the joining of people and their latent capacities—is possible because of the capacities of the society that comes before it. This relates to the technological capacities of that society, crucially the possibilities of automation, and to the kind of people (proletarians) that it creates and the political relations that their activity will engender. We have here a diagnosis of social ill and, in a horizon of its overcoming, a cure.

In the later texts, then, the first two kinds of alienation present in 1844 (of product; of control of process) are present and again result in the domination of people by their own activity. But what of the other two facets of alienation? In Terrell Carver's words: 'the extended discussion of "species being" drops out'.⁶⁴ Alienation between people is not mentioned directly, either. Why not? Is it because Marx no longer believes in them or for some other reason, perhaps because the texts are written for different audiences, requiring a different vocabulary, or

⁶³ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 158.

⁶⁴ Carver, 'Marx's Conception of Alienation in the *Grundrisse*', p. 63.

intervening into different debates? At stake in this is whether Marx retains, modifies or abandons an idea of human essence, including as the basis for the wrongness of alienation's various separations. This matters for whether Marx can be said to be (problematically) essentialist.

There is good evidence for a difference between these two Marxian accounts of alienation. Marx, in the early variant of alienation has a strong sense of what human nature is and grounds the wrongness of alienation in it; in the later version, the grounding of the wrongness is not human *essence*, but potential that is denied in the present, but possible in the future. These are capacities that are human in the sense of belonging to *people*, but it is not that they will be united with an ahistorical human essence in the future; the people of the future will have these human capacities, but this is not the fulfilment of their *essence*.

Carver, on the contrary, argues that something like the 'species being' section of the EPM appears in the discussion on the labour process in *Capital*, but that this 'is very much a case of slotting the content into a tighter, drier formal structure and a stripped-down logical argument'.⁶⁵ So, are there traces of problematic essentialism here too?

In *Capital*, the labour process is described like so:

We presuppose labour in a form in which it is an exclusively human characteristic. A spider conducts operations which resemble those of a weaver, and a bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what

⁶⁵ Ibid.

distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax. At the end of every labour process, a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally. Man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realizes his own purpose in those materials.⁶⁶

As Carver points out, something like species-being is still present in this account in the way that people possess a uniquely human capacity for labour as world-making activity. The point made here by Marx is that this world-making capacity is an exclusively human capacity. On some humanist Marxist readings, the denial of this capacity or its disfiguring by capitalism is what is wrong with alienation and with capitalism. The harm is the wrong done to this (exclusively) human property. This is quite an odd point. It seems irrelevant whether this property is exclusively human or not; indeed, it could be discovered that another animal species or an alien species has the same capacity, and this would not make the separation justified.⁶⁷ This seems like a red herring.

But there is a second rogue possible essentialism in this passage: the appearance of a transhistorical category of labour. The consideration of the labour process here is made in a way that is quite unusual for Marx: ‘independently of any specific social formation.’ Elsewhere,

⁶⁶ Marx, *Capital*, trans. Ben Fowkes, pp.283-4. ‘Purpose’ in the final sentence here does not mean the realisation of human essence, but the realisation of an aim (one which was already present in the mind of the worker) in the process of effort. E.g. in the new (2024) translation of *Capital*; ‘The worker doesn’t simply shape natural materials into a new form; he also realizes a goal in doing so: a conscious goal that functions as a law determining both the work he performs and how he performs it, and to which, moreover, he must subordinate his will.’ Karl Marx, *Capital: Critique of Political Economy, Vol 1*, trans. Paul Reitter, eds. Paul Reitter and Paul North, Princeton University Press, 2024, p.154. (In German original: ‘Nichtdass er nur eine Formveränderung des Natürlichen bewirkt, verwirklicht er im Natürlichen zugleich seinen Zweck, den er weiss, der die Art und Weise seines Thuns als Gesetz bestimmt und dem er seinen Willen unterordnen muss’).

⁶⁷ For the alien case, see David Leopold, *The Young Marx*, pp. 255-6; ‘It is hard to see why the importance to humankind of fulfilling work, for example, would be diminished by the discovery of another species – say from another solar system’.

he has warned us against exactly this approach: Marx tells us not to look at production in general, but ‘production by social individuals’ or ‘production at a definite stage of social development’. Moreover, he stresses that the possibility of imagining labour as an abstract capacity and its practical realisation as such, take place only within capitalist societies. This, his historical method, is not the taking of concepts and reducing them to their simplest form—the method which he criticises political economists for doing. It is a theory of how ways of thinking come into being.

So why the consideration of labour in general here? There are two ways to read this. Either Marx is talking about a category which is historical as if it was one which is transhistorical, but he does not really think it is, or Marx thinks there is a transhistorical category, ‘labour’. Against the view of a traces of lingering essentialism some theorists, most famously Moishe Postone, argue that Marx abandons a transhistorical essence present in the early account of alienation, one which posits an affirmative view of labour. Instead, he argues, this affirmative view of labour is not Marx’s view but one of the categories of capitalism that Marx is trying to historicise and critique, i.e. it is one of the historical specificities of Marx’s account of capitalism. The strong claim about labour as a transhistorical essence through which humanity is realised is clearly not justifiable based on what we know about Marx’s anti-essentialism. However, a weaker transhistorical claim—that there is always a capacity that humans have (as we have seen, that it is unique to humans is not relevant) which forms part of the metabolic process through which humans make the world—is justifiable. While this idea might fall foul of a particularly strident anti-essentialist—what if people do not always and forever have any such capacity?—it can certainly be seen in all hitherto existing societies. We might not know what the future holds but we can be sure that humans will have all kinds of needs that will be met through our various interactions with our environment, which will, no doubt, have

significant and transformative effects on that environment. This capacity and this planetary metabolism are perennial but the various appearances and dynamics of them ever shifting and historical.

In response to the essentialism objection, then, Marx's later account of alienation has the resources to take the sting out of the tail. Firstly, if there remains a transhistorical claim about human beings, this residue seems relatively unproblematic: people have a special (and he claims—but this is not necessary—unique) capacity to transform the world through their efforts to meet their needs. This seems thin enough and accurate enough (at least for describing hitherto existing human societies) to not be a problem. Secondly, if the lingering essentialism is not thin enough, or if any claim about what people generally are like is unacceptable,⁶⁸ the defender of Marx's account might say that the claim about what people are like is not the basis for what is wrong with alienation, which would be bad regardless of whether it is the case that people always have a particular capacity.⁶⁹ A final option might be found in the interpreters of Marx who argue that there is no transhistorical capacity at all, but this seems harder to justify.⁷⁰

Marx's later account of alienation is not essentialist in a problematic way. It does not rely on unsupportable claims about what people are like. But in as much as it notes something about

⁶⁸ This is outside of the scope of the present chapter, but it is noteworthy that essentialism is taken to be uniformly and equally bad and every potential essentialism objectionable. Need every claim about what people are generally like be forbidden?

⁶⁹ It might even be irrelevant whether people always have it. It would be possible to say that for people who generally seem to be, do, or have XYZ, it is bad for them to be thwarted in or estranged from their characteristics and activities. For instance, not everybody plays the saxophone, but people who do play the saxophone should be at one with their playing of the saxophone. (Thank you to Lorna Finlayson for this example.)

⁷⁰ For the anti-transhistorical case see, Moishe Postone, *Time, Labour and Social Domination*, Cambridge University Press, 2003; Evans, 'Rahel Jaeggi's theory of alienation', *History of the Human Sciences*, 2022, Vol. 35(2), pp. 126–143.

what people do and could do, are and could be, it is able to be critical. The connection between the capacity for labour and the frustration of this capacity's development in capitalism, the diagnosis and the horizon, allows alienation to be diagnostic, political and historical, qualities which Jaeggi's account sacrifices to save an anti-essentialism that was never in jeopardy.

2. Paternalism and Perfectionism

The objections from paternalism and perfectionism are distinct but linked objections to Marx's account of alienation. 'Paternalism' here means deciding what is good for someone else (also 'objectivism'), and 'perfectionism' means containing or presupposing an account of what is good (for people in general), or a particular view of the 'good life'. Perfectionist theories are found objectionable in part because they are suspected of paternalism, which is almost universally deemed an unacceptable feature of a political theory (or practice).⁷¹

Things can be good regardless of the preferences or feelings of the people involved. Perfectionist theories are frequently based on ideas of human nature: what is good is good *because of what people are like*. The capacities (etc.) that are thought to be good to develop or realise are, in many cases, taken to be ones that are expressive of human nature or essence. Thus, Jaeggi's charge of perfectionism sees alienation as assuming 'that it is possible to determine what is objectively good for humans by identifying a set of functions inherent in human nature ... that ought to be.'⁷²

⁷¹ For discussions of perfectionism and its controversies, see Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism*, Routledge, 1993; Vinit Haksar, *Equality, Liberty, and Perfectionism*, Oxford University Press, 1979; Steven Wall, *Liberalism, Perfectionism and Restraint*, Cambridge University Press, 1998; Richard Arneson, 'Perfectionism and Politics', *Ethics*, 111, 2000, pp. 37–63.

⁷² Jaeggi, *Alienation*, p. 29.

Thus construed, alienation runs into a familiar problem. Given what we know about the variety of humanity, is it possible to defend the idea of an invariant human essence or human nature? Can this be the basis on which the good to be realised (and the harm to be overcome) is understood? A solution might be found in abandoning the idea of human nature but keeping perfectionism. This should be easy enough: perfectionist theories do not need to appeal to human nature and some versions do not. Thomas Hurka distinguishes between two types of perfectionism: a narrow perfectionism which values characteristics because they realise human nature; and a broad perfectionism which values characteristics not because of human nature.⁷³ Human nature, understood as ‘species being’, clearly plays a significant role in Marx’s early theory of alienation. As we have seen, however, the role it plays in his second version is either non-existent or modified in a way that makes it unproblematic. Moreover, as we will see, while Marx endorses the development of capacities as good, he does not stipulate what those capacities will be. Insofar as the worry about perfectionism is a worry about essentialism, it seems misplaced.

What of paternalism? This charge might apply to a broad perfectionism as much as, or perhaps even more than, a narrow perfectionism. Regardless of whether or not it is based on a claim about ‘human nature’, a judgement to the effect that some characteristics or ways of living are objectively better than others is held to be problematic, even dangerous. And if not based on a view about human nature, what *is* the ground for such a judgement? The objection from paternalism calls into question the basis for determining what is good for someone else and furthermore charges such perfectionist determinations with violating a widely held and even sacrosanct principle. As Jaeggi puts it:

⁷³ Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism*, Routledge, 1993, p. 4.

if the foundation of modern morality and the fundamental conviction of liberal conceptions of society is the idea “that it should be left to each individual how he lives his own life”—that individuals are sovereign with respect to interpreting their own lives—then a theory of alienation that relies on objective perfectionist ideals appears to reject this idea in favor of a paternalist perspective that claims to “know better.”⁷⁴

The dilemma for alienation is that while one of its uses is questioning people’s assessments of their lives, (we might add that this is twofold: because it points to structural limitations over their freedom and because it involves ideological obscuring of reality), this same move is hard to justify, not least because alienation grounds itself in claims, she argues, about human nature, from which it is hard to derive normative standards.

The objection, as she puts it, has two parts.

- 1) There are problems with theories that are paternalist or violate a principle ‘liberal neutrality’.
- 2) The existing basis for grounding alienation theory is not compelling enough to address those problems.

The first part is ambiguous. Jaeggi does not seem explicitly to rule out the possibility of a different grounding for alienation. She seems to be either ruling out theories that violate liberal neutrality or saying that attempts to do so need to meet special criteria to be successful. The

⁷⁴ Jaeggi, *Alienation*, p. 29.

second part is based on the assumption that perfectionism must be based in human nature, which is taken to be the wrong grounding in any case. It might be possible for a perfectionism based on something less problematic to overrule (1) but Jaeggi does not consider this line of argument.

But why exactly is paternalism a problem? Jaeggi points out that the paternalism charge originates from the Rawlsian philosophical tradition which avoids objective conceptions of the good life.⁷⁵ The problem of paternalism, as she outlines it, is from the perspective of liberalism. It goes as follows: if someone does not feel subjectively alienated, how can they be said to be? What ‘objective’ evidence can be given to overrule their subjective assessments or preferences? But what exactly is this objection based on? Why should non-liberals need to respond to it? Why is the liberal objection automatically taken to be decisive? This is important because Jaeggi is a Critical Theorist, a tradition which is supposed to take some leave from how societies see themselves, what is taken to be true, and so on, on the basis that these have a tendency to be ideological.

So, why accept a liberal framing? Jaeggi does not give us an answer, but there are some plausible ones. It might be that liberalism is so hegemonic that its truth is no longer the only thing that matters, and as such, any successful theory of alienation, i.e. a theory that would have broad popular appeal, would need to avoid the dreaded double P. Call this a pragmatic adoption of the liberal objection. Alternatively, it might be thought that the premises of the liberal objection are correct. There are various ways to understand the liberal objection to paternalism, but the typical argument is that it violates people’s right to choose for themselves what is good

⁷⁵ Ibid, p 28.

for them; that it ignores the fact they are the best and sovereign judges of what is good (for them) and how they should live. If this is accepted, alienation theories which say something *substantive* about how people should live are not justifiable. This objection can be called the straightforwardly liberal objection.

In a recent attempt to theorise and revive alienation, Emil Øversveen, referencing Jaeggi, makes a similar case for a rejection of paternalism but from a different direction:

[the] paternalist implications of alienation theory make the concept seem difficult to reconcile with the Marxist political project, dedicated as it is to the vision of a social order that both breaks with and develops out of capitalist modernity, and which is to be accomplished through a radical process of democratization and mass mobilization.⁷⁶

Theorists deciding what is good for people, he argues, is incompatible or at least in tension with other commitments of Marx's. Here, the argument is fundamental rather than pragmatic. Marx has competing commitments that are hard to reconcile. Alienation theories should not descend from on high but emerge from below. Concepts that 'overrule people's own experiences and desires', especially those that assume a 'false consciousness' which prevents them from understanding their objective situation, are elitist and anti-democratic. This objection can be called the anti-elitist objection to paternalism.

What can Marx say in his defence? If the reason to reject paternalism is an acceptance of the liberal belief in the rational sovereignty of individuals, Marx will likely have little to offer in

⁷⁶ Øversveen, 'Capitalism and Alienation', p. 444.

response. Marx has an ‘objectivist’ theory: he has a sense of what a better way of living would be and the political and economic arrangements that would be required for this. Of course, these are (very famously) not laid out in detail (‘not making recipes for the cookshops of the future’) because of his commitment to anti-utopianism and the related belief that ways of thinking emerge from/are immanent to social arrangements. This means that it is neither possible nor useful to start from first principles. While Marx’s account might differ from typical accounts of the good (his is importantly limited by the principle of historicity, immanence, etc), it remains one that says that some things are better for people than others, including, and importantly, when they do not themselves recognise it.

There is a fundamental and irreconcilable difference here between Marxism and liberalism. This difference is sometimes underplayed in the argument that the Marxist goal is to increase the practical possibility of people being free in this particular liberal sense. But Marxism is not liberalism with a transformative economic project tacked onto it. Rather, it is a different way of seeing the world, people, and freedom. For one thing, Marx does not think that people are the best or even good judges of their interests—there are many ways in which what is better for people is obscured, including through reification. For another, freedom, to Marx, is not enhanced opportunities or choices for individuals *as* individuals,⁷⁷ but socially instantiated development and possibility.

What has been said here is very unlikely to convince someone who takes the liberal principle of neutrality to be valuable. I do not intend it to. Rather, I want to point to the fact of fundamental disagreement and theoretical incommensurability. If it is accepted that some ways

⁷⁷ See Karl Marx, ‘On the Jewish Question’, in Marx, *Early Political Writings*, pp.28-56, p.45. Where he criticises freedom as ‘the right to do and to pursue what does not harm another’, as it is ‘the freedom of man as a monad isolated and withdrawn into himself’, rather than social freedom.

of living are better than others, then how to organise collective life to best realise those better options, rather than maximise individual choice (as liberals would prefer), is an important political question. Marx, through his theory of alienation and elsewhere in his thought, has an answer to this.

As for the other anti-paternalisms, if the reason for the rejection of ‘paternalism’ is a pragmatic one—it goes so against the grain of the status quo that it would have little appeal—this is hard to prove. (The difficulty of assessing these speculative empirical claims will be further discussed in Chapter Five.) As for the more radical expression of the objection (that there is something anti-democratic about claiming people might be wrong about their experiences), if the model of consciousness is as outlined above—a dynamic, collective interpretation by people of their own experiences, as these shape and are shaped by cultural, experiential and economic fashionings of ‘interest’, as elaborated in Chapter Three—then this seems implausible.⁷⁸

Another argument against pragmatic form of liberal objection against paternalism (i.e. that paternalism cannot produce appealing ideas) is that it assumes a strange division of labour between theorists and ‘ordinary people’, in which preferences, even if we know them to be likely to be ideological, are taken for granted as unchanging and authoritative. This is a ‘Critical Theory’ without any confidence in the possibilities of consciousness. Now, there is good reason

⁷⁸ If the model of paternalism is a theorist telling people what is wrong, without any of these sites for the generation consciousness present, (call this the ‘[straw] Adorno in every home’ model), then this might be problematic or anti-democratic. However, this would not be the fault of the theorist, but of the lack of important occasions and institutions for collective deliberation. This might be an accurate model of the real possibilities for consciousness-creating deliberation, especially given the isolating dynamics of contemporary work practices. But it is certainly not a compelling reason to abandon the possibility of positing that something could be better than something else, even, and sometimes *especially*, if either that thing or a dynamic or cause of it is not immediately obvious to people or is disagreed with.

to be doubtful: consciousness does not come automatically, it does not come without various conditions of deliberation, of institutions and sites of collective meaning able to host that deliberation, without the circulation of ways of making sense of experience, and even with all those things in place (rare, indeed!) it is in no way guaranteed. But a response to the non-automaticity of consciousness which does not leave some hope, however small, however attuned to the limits of judgement, for the dynamic and open possibilities of human thought and action—of politics—ends up assuming something worse about people, over their heads, than that they might be ‘wrong’ about their own experiences.

Marx’s account is not, in fact, (problematically) essentialist, only weakly perfectionist, and the paternalism objection accepts far too uncritically a liberal objection, it is not so obvious why a revised version of alienation was needed at all.⁷⁹

In the follow two sections, I consider two advantages of Marx’s alienation relative to Jaeggi’s:

- 1) It can politicise experience because it goes beyond formalism, to something substantive
- 2) It is able, with some revisions, or at least, reconsiderations, to bring experiences of concrete, contemporary work into view.

⁷⁹ It is possible that a theory of alienation could be objectivist and therefore more critical than Jaeggi’s on the terms I have outlined here but still be disadvantageous for the purpose of understanding work-under-capitalism, relative to Marx’s. One example would be Hartmut Rosa’s account of alienation as a lack of resonance. He is keen to stress that his approach is not strictly formalist. See Robin Celikates, Thijs Lijster and Hartmut Rosa, *Krisis* 39 (1), pp. 64-78. Here, ‘resonance’ (disalienation) is neither formal, nor substantive, but a *Vexierbild*: ‘it is substantive in terms of the quality of the relationship, but it is formal in terms of what is at the end’, p.71). Either way, it might still be less helpful for bringing capitalist work (even broadly understood), rather than the experience of capitalist temporality in general into view.

5. The Case for Marx's Alienation (1): Substance

Marx's methodological legacy, via the Frankfurt School, is of interrogating, historically and dialectically, the ways that societies or parts of societies understand themselves. But to do this, I have suggested, a weak objectivism in the form of a horizon of transformation needs to be maintained. Otherwise, too much credence is given to ways of seeing the world that are ideological, and critical purchase is lost.

This touches on a bigger debate within contemporary Critical Theory: what can be the normative groundings of Critical Theory? From early on in the history of the Frankfurt School, the old idea as to what justified and motivated the critique of capitalism—the position of the proletariat as a world-historical universal force, that could but change the world by changing its own position—was no longer tenable. The radical French industrial sociologist, Serge Mallet, recalled how Marcuse, in a debate with Mallet and André Gorz at the University of Mexico in 1966, summarised his belief in the diminution of the possibilities of the working-class as a progressive political subject with the claim that ‘the cop is nowadays in the very head of the worker-consumer’.⁸⁰ Friedrich Pollock's pessimism was both deeper and earlier: in 1956 he argued that the threat of automation required state intervention to stop a jobless working class becoming fascist. As Jason E. Smith puts it, so profound is this hopelessness, that the ‘sole solution the working class itself can arrive at ... is an authoritarian, indeed totalitarian,

⁸⁰ Matt Myers, *The Halted March of the European Left: The Working Class in Britain, France, and Italy, 1968–1989*, Oxford University Press, 2025, p. 37.

one. The state's mandate, therefore, is to act in the combined interests of the capitalist class and its partners in the large labour unions in order to thwart in advance any revolutionary remedy.⁸¹

After this, from Habermas on, arose an even greater doubt and a great search, not for a better revolutionary subject, but for a normative basis for criticising society. Without one, theorists saw themselves as having two bad options: on one side relativism, on the other, attempts to establish metaphysical criteria.⁸² For decades, attempts have been made to sail the critical-theoretical ship through stormy waters, answering how something can be rationally justified without either collapsing into relativism or implicating itself in context-blind impositions that even run the risk of supposed authoritarianism.

Successive generations of critical theorists have attempted to find new ways of normatively grounding critical theory. We saw the problems this causes Axel Honneth in the previous chapter. Putting Jaeggi into this context is helpful to understand the limitations of her revised notion of alienation. Jaeggi's account attempts to avoid saying anything substantive about what is better or worse, beyond the limited 'formal' criteria she advances. I've already argued that one of the worries to which this is a response, namely a queasiness about paternalism, is misplaced. But for many critical theorists, a further worry remains. Even if we are persuaded that is not inherently and inadmissibly paternalistic to say that one form of life is better than another, or that people can be wrong about this, there remains a question as to how normative claims are to be justified, or 'grounded'.

⁸¹ Jason E. Smith, *Smart Machines and Service Work: Automation in an Age of Stagnation*, Reaktion Books, 2020, p.28.

⁸² Evans, 'On the Very Idea of Normative Foundations in Critical Social Theory', p. 389.

The fundamental issue is that it is very difficult to find anything that can satisfactorily solve this problem. Each bit of ground quickly reveals itself to be subject to either status quo bias or to not be a grounding at all. As Justin Evans points out, those seeking to normatively ground an idea will need to find a normative grounding for that grounding and so on and so on. It is, he argues, easier when there is a God or some other divine rule to which one can appeal. In fact, the problem might go even deeper. For instance, it is a subject of contention in Judaism as to whether the good is good because God has decided it is good, or because God has made a good world in which there is a capacity for judging what is good, external to God.⁸³ I want to suggest now that the anxiety over grounding does not need to be answered by the discovery of new normative foundations. Why not put our judgement, as imperfect and occluded by all forms of ideology, and the epistemic limitations of being a situated (how else could one be?) person, to use – accepting that, for better or worse, it is all we have – without expecting to find anything as firm or authoritative as a ‘foundation’ on which that judgement might be rested?

There is a further problem for Jaeggi. The formalist solution to the problem of objectivism in fact makes claims about what a good life is, even if these are more minimal than the later Marx’s capacities account. A successful appropriation is better than an unsuccessful one. At the level of an individual action this does not seem objectivist but over the course of a life, it entails a set of claims about what a good or better life might be. And again, all this at a significant cost: focusing on the ‘how’ narrows the field of analysis to individuals, siphoning off the social and structural causes and dynamics of alienation. It might not even offer the (unneeded) benefit that it attempts to secure.

⁸³ Thank you to Barnaby Raine for this example—and sorry, too, for my disappointing commitment to orthographic consistency.

What alienation in a Marxist mode usefully does is to take the negative experiential qualities of work and give shape to their causes and their solution, to politicise them. The ‘objectivist’ and therefore ‘paternalist’ aspects are, rather than a problem, *central* to its ability to do this. This requires a belief in the possibility of saying that a given separation is bad, or that a given situation is worse than some other, and that people can be wrong, or confused about their situations.

Now, Marx does not give a particularly strong sense of what people would do with their developed capacities. Developing capacities, collectively and individually, through carrying out work (broadly understood) is his horizon and evaluative standpoint for comparing societies. What exactly people would do with this many-sided development is open. It can be (and by some Marxists has been) interpreted in more strongly perfectionist ways, covering exactly which capacities should be developed, but this does not automatically follow from Marx. This question, on what we would do should we have the opportunity—via changes to economic relations, more free time, or the erosion of work-under-capitalism through allegedly transformative reforms—to develop in such a way, is engaged with as it relates to intra-left debates about UBI in the next chapter.

Marx’s later theory of alienation has better resources than Jaeggi’s to speak to the textures of work in contemporary capitalism because it commits to say something substantive; about experiences of powerlessness, frustration that comes from powerlessness and a lack of control, a feeling of being unable to act on the world, of having thwarted agency. This relates closely to experiences of contemporary work, the subject of the next section.

6. The Case for Marx's Alienation (II): Bringing Work into View

So far, I have argued that two objections levelled at Marx's theory of alienation are overblown. Marx's theory is not (problematically) essentialist, and the perfectionism of the theory is not a problem, but a critical basis for his theory. These objections are best and well addressed by a consideration of how Marx changes his theory of alienation over time and by situating his theory of alienation within the context of his anti-essentialist understanding of history.

Why rescue Marx's account of alienation? For some, the project of correcting the record, of making inaccuracies visible, might be justification alone. But if alienation is to be used in the spirit of critical theory, i.e. not merely to describe things but also to change the world, then it must make more possible the changes that the theory sees as required. The point is not merely to defend Marx against inaccurate objections, although there is no doubt some value in doing so. Alienation, as an account of what is bad about work—as Marx's account of a particular experiential quality of work, the result of 'objective' sociological facts about capitalism—must be more than just accurate. Is alienation useful not just for thinking about work, but for changing it?

Recall that a useful theory of a problem of, at, or with work is taken to mean that something is useful for the political goal of overcoming that problem. This means it should:

- 1) Show a problem
- 2) Point to actors capable of changing it
- 3) Reveal a horizon capable of addressing (1)

The significant recent interest in alienation points to a popular disaffection with work. The popular version of alienation tends to be connected to questions of meaning: whether people find ‘meaning’ (pointfulness, self-fulfilment, connection to social good, skill development) in their work. There is a problem here for Marxist accounts of alienation, in which *subjective* meaning is not central (and on some readings, not even relevant). It is possible on Marx’s account for someone to be alienated and not feel themselves to be. Most analysis of Marx’s account tend to stress that it is objective, not subjective. But Marx *is* interested in the experiential qualities of alienation. Alienation is an objective fact about capitalist societies, but the experience of that fact, of that state, while not required for alienation to be diagnosed, is something that can usefully be thought about in light of that notion.

If alienation needs perfectionism and a dose of (so-called) paternalism, and if essentialism is overblown, is there any objection in light of which Marx’s account *does* need to be revised? One potential candidate is ‘productivism’. The objection to alienation because of its purported productivism goes like this: Marx’s theory of alienation focuses excessively on a variety of work activity—the production (hence ‘productivism’)⁸⁴ of physical commodities—and this is problematic for two possible reasons. Firstly, it might turn out that this kind of work, which appeared to Marx to be the most common or most important form of work, is in fact only one of many types of work, or it might be tied to a particular place and time, and not universal.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ There is another critique of Marx that is called ‘productivism’: the idea that Marx excessively and excessively positively focuses on labour as the defining characteristic of people. This is discussed in Chapter Five.

⁸⁵ This point is made by Hardt and Negri who argue that ‘immaterial labour’ (intellectual or linguistic, and affective) is now more common than industrial labour which produces material goods. See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude*, p. 108. Their account has been criticised, not least because industrial production also involves the production of knowledge and ‘immaterial’ goods.

Secondly, a focus on this type of work might be said to exclude some workers. Here, the problem is that alienation is premised on an unjustifiable sexist exclusion because it takes as the paradigmatic type of worker a male, industrial worker who produces concrete products. As Alison Jagger puts it:

According to the Marxist conception of human nature, human beings create themselves and their world by labouring to transform nature to satisfy their needs. Although this account is apparently gender neutral, Marxists in fact have interpreted 'labour' to mean primarily the production and exchange of objects—the kind of work that they associate with men. As I have argued, they exclude much women's work, and especially procreative work, from the category of labour and construe it more as biological processes. So women are excluded from history and even from full humanity.⁸⁶

This objection seems to rest on a misunderstanding of 'productive' in Marx. Productive does not refer to material properties of the product of labour. Indeed, Marx is at pains to argue that (contra Adam Smith), it is not whether a product lasts or perishes that makes it productive, but rather the social relations within which the labour is carried out and which are produced by that labour.⁸⁷ Where there is surplus value, there is productive labour. The purchase of a service to meet the everyday needs of a capitalist is *not* productive.

⁸⁶ Alison Jagger, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, Rowman and Littlefield, 1988, p. 79. Jagger argues that it is possible to revise Marxism to historicise human nature including procreation and address this problem.

⁸⁷ See Ian Gough, 'Marx's theory of productive and unproductive labour', *New Left Review*, 1972, pp. 47-72.

He says:

If we may take an example from outside the sphere of production of material objects, a schoolmaster is a productive labourer, when, in addition to belabouring the heads of his scholars, he works like a horse to enrich the school proprietors. That the latter has laid out his capital in a teaching factory, instead of a sausage factory, does not alter the relation.⁸⁸

Because the school proprietors are ‘enriched’, teaching is productive. The product is not a straightforward object (say, a widget in a widget factory), but here is the effect on the students, which produces value for the school’s owners. The same holds true for a clown, if in a circus.⁸⁹ There is no reason why alienation need exclude this sort of work.

However, it is the case that when Marx talks about commodities, he tends to have in mind the production of concrete objects for the enrichment of capital. In fact, he argues that when it comes to productive (in the sense outlined above) service work, ‘[a]ll these manifestations of capitalist production in this sphere are so insignificant compared with the totality of production that they can be left entirely out of account.’⁹⁰ Does this matter for the usefulness of the theory of alienation? His account of alienation does not *exclude* service work nor any other work which does not produce a material object. There is no reason that an immaterial product could

⁸⁸ Marx, *Capital*, p. 644.

⁸⁹ Elsewhere, Marx notes that an actor, or even a clown, is productive if he works in the service of capitalist. He contrasts this with a jobbing tailor, who mends the capitalist’s trousers, which even if it is ‘useful’ ‘productive’ in the everyday sense, is not *productive* in the technical sense, see Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value* Part 1, Progress, 1969, p. 157.

⁹⁰ Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, pp. 410–11. Some, e.g. Axel Honneth in *The Working Sovereign*, (pp.67–8), have drawn attention to Marx’s inattentiveness to service work on the basis of its preponderance (relative to manufacturing) during the nineteenth-century, but Marx is clear here that he is talking about *productive service work*, not service work in general.

not be the result of alienated labour and experienced as such, and, in a transformed set of social relations, come to be the result of disalienated labour.

Does it matter for Marx's argument whether the object that is the product of labour takes a material or immaterial form? What if, to take Marx's example of productive but immaterial labour—private teaching—the product of labour is not a single discrete object, but an ongoing relation. Or, what if the product of labour is a shorter duration but still relational? Consider Arlie Hochschild's account of 'emotional labour' by which she means paid work wherein the product/object of effort is the inducement of emotional effects in others by control over one's own emotional states. Air hostesses smile to keep passengers calm and happy, bailiffs terrify debtors into handing over goods. There is not an object that stands over the air hostess or bailiff, but insofar as the products of the activity, its results, produce value and the relations that make up capitalism, the airhostesses' own activity and its results stand above them, dominating them.

Their *activity* is the product. It cannot ever be fully appropriated by the capitalist in the way an external, objectified commodity-as-object can. Take the air hostess's smile: while it is done for someone else, and it itself might only be one part of the 'product', it remains on her face—it is both part of her and not her. In a sense, this is not that different to alienation in the capitalist labour process in general: movements, effort, etc. all *embodied*, are done under someone else's control, for some *alien* power. The purposive effort expended to produce the smile is not her 'own', even while it is on *her* face. There is sometimes a temptation to suggest that this kind of work is *more* alienated. Sometimes this seems to come from a reliance on the idea of an authentic self or emotional expression that is denied in contemporary capitalist work. But we run into trouble here, for what is what 'pure', 'real' emotion anyway? This splitting off between 'real' and 'fake' emotional expressions and selves is hard to maintain.

Firstly, this is because the spectre of essentialism has returned. Secondly, it presumes that some especially emotionally demanding work is experienced as negative, ‘fake’, when this might not be the case. The problem here is not paternalism but a subjectivist account of alienation in which voluntariness, or the knowledge of one’s own experience is central, rather than one which foregrounds economic compulsion. It is also an overly pessimistic view. Rather than seeing this work as *more* alienated, considering its political economy gives us a clue to understanding how the experience of such work might both generate and be illuminated by theories of alienation.

Different kinds of work regimes will produce different experiences of the lack of control that characterises alienation. In industrial work, tasks can be broken down into smaller and smaller parts, including by automation and other technologies. This creates a downward pressure on skill; work tasks become generic and fragmented.⁹¹ However, in sectors where there is low capital investment and where work is relational, it is not possible to break down tasks. It might be possible to automate them,⁹² but there are questions of feasibility as well as desirability, and while such work is cheap, there is limited incentive for automation.⁹³ The productivity gains,

⁹¹ Harry Braverman’s account of the degradation of labour through the capitalist labour process is the classical example of this analysis. See Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism; The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, Monthly Review Press, 1998. Per Braverman ‘the technical features of the labor process are now dominated by the social features which the capitalist has introduced ... *The labor process has become responsibility of the capitalist.*’ Because of the uncertainty of labour power, the fact that the capitalist needs to get the most from the purchased capacity, ‘[it thus becomes essential for the capitalist that control over the labor process pass from the hands of the worker into his own. This transition presents itself in history as the *progressive alienation of the process of production* from the worker; to the capitalist it presents itself as the problem of *management.*’ (p. 39-40)

⁹² For a discussion of this see Hester, Helen, ‘The Automated Heart: Digital Domesticity and Emotional Labour Saving’, *New Vistas* 10 (2); Helen Hester and Nick Srnicek, *After Work: The Fight for Free Time*, Verso, 2023.

⁹³ See Horgan, ‘Android Paranoia’, *Radical Philosophy*, no, 211, Winter 2021, pp. 51–55.

and therefore, in a capitalist society, increased profits, possible in manufacturing where the same goods are made by fewer workers, are not possible in the service sector.

Deskilling is likely to produce a different set of frustrations than the experience of care that is thwarted. It is not that the teacher or the nurse or the air hostess is *forced* to care, but that their capacity for care and practical caring activity is subject to a number of constraints that take place because of the political economy of their work. We need to be careful to avoid a pitfall of seeing care as a moralised site of goodness, outside of capitalism. This is still part of work-under-capitalism: people do not enter care work out of benevolent desires alone (or in some cases, at all) but the radicalising or politicising experience at work is different from that of the degradation of skill and labour process in industrial production. This is not intended to be an exhaustive theory of service and/or care work's alienation experiences, but to be a limited attempt to see what happens when critical concepts are brought to bear on experiences of work-under-capitalism.

7. Conclusion

Paternalism-perfectionism and essentialism are overblown. Alienation theories need say something substantive about the past, present and future to be able to be useful. How is Marx's theory of alienation *useful*? Again, a political concept is useful for some political goal, if it helps to advance that goal. It is not a question of simply having the correct position on some issue but of generating ways of making sense of the world that can make forms of (desired) political action for some (desired) political goal more likely. This is probably more of an art than a science. Marx's theory of alienation, including as brought to bear on non-industrial work,

offers a way of politicising frustrations at work that has several advantages compared to competing theories: it identifies problems, agents and horizons. Where Jaeggi's appropriation model ultimately flattens a political issue into a question of personal coherence, Marx's model retains a horizon of transformation—pointing beyond the existing order rather than accommodating it.

Alienation, in Marx's account, is thus useful in the sense developed by this dissertation. The relational frustrations of contemporary work and its affective demands help bring disalienation as a horizon of control and development into view. The powerlessness this work involves is different to that at which a republican conception takes aim. It is not (only) that you are subject to power-over over which you have no say. If the republican freedom-as-non-domination paradigm illuminates, as was argued in Chapter Two, a particular kind of freedom, a basis for enacting other forms of freedom, the powerlessness that alienation in this mode seeks to end is something different. It is powerlessness as a *thwarted capacity* to shape our lives and to shape the world. Its present-day psychic harms: meaninglessness, detachment, splintering. Its overcoming: disalienation, the subjecting to collective control of social labour, many-sided development and in the service of the meeting of many-sided needs.

Chapter Five: Ten Things I Hate About UBI

Perhaps the true society will grow tired of development and, out of freedom, leave possibilities unused, instead of storming under a confused compulsion to the conquest of strange stars. A mankind that no longer knows want will begin to have an inkling of the delusory, futile nature of all the arrangements hitherto made to escape want.

—*Theodor Adorno*

Not in vain does it [the proletariat] go through the stern but steeling school of labour. It is not a question of what this or that proletarian, or even the whole proletariat, at the moment regards as its aim. It is a question of what the proletariat is, and what, in accordance with this being, it will historically be compelled to do.

—*Marx and Engels*

This chapter considers a proposal for mitigating the harms and contributing to the overcoming of work-under-capitalism: universal basic income (UBI). It defines a generic version of UBI and then turns to versions from the political left, right and centre. It turns next to left-wing critiques of left-wing UBIs. Firstly, a group of objections on the basis of a left and right convergence; secondly, a more challenging set of objections on the grounds of feasibility and desirability. These objections mostly fail, I argue, but this does not necessarily mean that UBI should be supported or adopted by the left. The question of UBI, contra both its supporters and its detractors, is one that is unlikely to be possible to settle. However, paying attention to the

arguments made both for and against and the assumptions made within them, puts us in a better position to adjudicate whether UBI is a good solution to the problem of work-under-capitalism.

1. What are UBIs?

Universal Basic Income (UBI) refers to a cluster of policies and demands within which regular cash transfers are made to members of a polity. For this reason, when I talk about ‘UBI’, I mean UBIs—a variety of schemes, proposed and carried out in different contexts, with different goals in mind, rather than a single proposal. There are significant differences between them both in terms of the policy detail of the proposed schemes, the goals of the proposals, and the broader horizons and/or normative commitments they involve.

UBI has emerged as a popular policy in the first decades of the twenty-first century. A number of theoretical and empirical arguments for it have been made, from various political traditions, and many trials have been carried out. The response of some governments to the Covid-19 pandemic’s temporary suspension of (parts of) labour markets also could be considered a mass cash transfer trial, albeit one carried out under rather unusual circumstances.

Supporters of UBI, as is the case with supporters of many things, often seek to establish a historical pedigree for the policy.¹ While versions of direct money transfers can be traced back to Thomas More, Thomas Paine, and through utopian socialists to the present day,² UBI as a

¹ Peter Sloman, Daniel Zamora Vargas and Pedro Ramos Pinto, eds., *Universal Basic Income in Historical Perspective*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, p. 3.

² Philippe Van Parijs, ‘The Universal Basic Income: Why Utopian Thinking Matters, and How Sociologists Can Contribute to It’, *Politics and Society*, 41(2), 2013, pp. 171-182.

policy proposal emerged in its modern form as a response to perceived problems in mid-twentieth-century advanced industrial economies.

These included persistent poverty (understood as having different sources depending on political allegiances), the alleged paternalism of welfare states (again, the nature and problems of this paternalism having different meanings to organised welfare recipients and feminists than to right-wing libertarians, for instance), the threat of automation, and the breakdown of the guarantees (political, social, and economic) of the Fordist work order. The proposal picked up further steam in the later decades of the twentieth century and then again in the 2010s as the spectre of automation reappeared.

Given all these different versions, how best to understand the generic version of UBI? One of the foremost proponents of UBI, Phillipe van Parijs's BIEN (Basic Income Earth Network) defines a basic income as 'cash paid at regular intervals to all individuals, unconditionally'.³ Now, cash is simple enough: money is given rather than, say, benefits in kind, or tokens for purchasing or exchanging particular items and services. But what about the further stipulated features: regular intervals, to individuals, and unconditionally? Firstly, there is the question of 'regular': is this monthly, weekly, or some other interval? Here, UBI can be distinguished from a related proposal, 'stakeholder grants' in which adults receive a lump sum at certain touchpoints, turning eighteen, for example.⁴ Secondly, there is the matter of 'all individuals'—is this all citizens or all residents? Does it include children? In practice, most actually-existing UBIs are targeted at particular groups of people or segments of society, or geographically bounded parts of a polity, rather than being paid to everyone, but many proposals are for

³ Ibid, p. 174.

⁴ See Erik Olin Wright, 'Basic Income, Stakeholder Grants, and Class Analysis', *Politics & Society*, vol. 32, no. 1, March 2004, pp. 79–87, for a discussion of both proposals.

universal payment, within a given state. Some include children while others do not, some include residents as well as citizens, others do not. A difference between UBI and the welfare state's programme of benefits is clarifying here: while the welfare state pays⁵ money to particular groups by dint of membership of that group (parents, the disabled, the unemployed, university students etc.), UBI would be paid to everyone. It is universal in scope and ambition. This relates to the next point: unconditionality. Everyone is entitled to a UBI and further, there are no conditions of payment. This differs from unemployment benefits in, for example, the contemporary British context, in which conditions like accepting job offers, 'engaging' with services, applying for jobs, and so on, are placed on the receipt of benefits. BIEN's definition stipulates no conditions, but in some proposed UBIs there are conditions.⁶

In addition to these differences, there are three further divergences that relate to where UBI would sit within an existing policy ecosystem. These are in relation to existing taxation or other redistribution regimes, with benefits programmes, and with public services. Firstly, should taxation fund UBI? In many actually-existing schemes and trials in the Global South, funding comes from charities and NGOs, but proposals tend to assume embeddedness into state taxation regimes. If tax will fund UBI, which groups should be taxed, and would this be more than existing taxation? Would or could this lead to significant redistribution within society? Secondly, would UBI supplement existing (non-universal) benefits or supplant them? In the latter case, could this mean some current recipients of benefits receive less money under UBI than under existing provision?

⁵ Or paid, as many of these are now historical.

⁶ This might not be meaningfully UBIs (no longer being universal and unconditional) even if they are labelled as such.

Despite these differences there is a unity of focus within these different proposals: the state transfers cash directly to people, and does so on a regular basis, without conditions or with fewer conditions than existing provisions. This is intended to either replace or meaningfully reduce individual reliance on other sources of income, typically benefits, wages, or both.

It makes sense to distinguish additionally between UBI and an income floor or income guarantee. An income guarantee or floor is when the state offers cash to top up existing income from paid employment and/or existing benefits. Campaigners, particularly feminist campaigners like the National Welfare Rights Organization have argued directly or indirectly for an income guarantee by fighting for higher (and often less conditional) welfare payments.

In practice, however, an income guarantee and UBI blur together: many UBI proposals supplement existing income from work rather than fully displace it. Some supporters of UBI are more hesitant about UBI replacing the patchwork of existing provisions of welfare payments (although for many advocates, the removal or simplification of other provisions is exactly the point of UBI). The boundaries of the two schemes, at least as when taken as policies, are fuzzy.

Despite this, it makes sense to distinguish these two schemes because of the difference in their goals: UBI has the goal of reducing dependence on income from wages and/or benefits, an income floor seeks to bring income over an agreed threshold through top-up transfers.

UBIs are supposed to make other forms of income less significant in people's lives. This is how they might be said to change work. At the level of one of one worker: if you are no longer reliant on your wage, you are less dependent on your employer's whims. If you have a portion

of your income guaranteed you can spend, if you want, less time in paid work. This could mean you spend more time carrying out work in the broader sense, potentially allowing a redistribution of that unpaid work within a society. At the level of the workplace, workers' improved position might allow them to organise better, should they want to. For society as a whole, the link between having enough money to meet your needs and having to work is severed. This might reduce the centrality of paid work to societies, with, according to the policy's supporters, significant and potentially transformative effects.

In the next section, I turn to the different reasons that people have seen UBI (including, but not limited to, its capacity to transform work) as an attractive political goal.

2. Who wants UBI?

UBI has been supported by thinkers all across the political spectrum; from Charles Murray, the conservative political scientist and author of *The Bell Curve*, to anti-capitalists, who see it as a bridge out of or a supportive mechanism for overturning capitalist economic relations or capitalism itself. In some cases, UBI is seen as having transformative potential: the ability to change directly or make significantly more likely changes to fundamental aspects of society. Other proponents are more sceptical or connect UBI to more modest goals; targeted solutions for particular problems that might not transform society. In some cases, UBI is seen as well-suited to solving a problem *and* in so doing having or enabling transformative effects more generally. Some thinkers might see the same problem as solved by UBI without transformation as others who see the application of UBI to that problem as involving wider transformation. The problems that UBI has been proposed in relation to include automation, the persistence of

poverty (particularly relating to specific racialised or other minority groups), inefficacies of existing redistribution mechanisms, sluggish economic growth, the paternalism and bureaucracy of the welfare state (understood in both left and right wing registers), the breakdown of the Fordist working model including the rise of precarious work and the loss of a guaranteed industrial consciousness or subjectivity and politics, and, especially by feminists, the lack or inadequacy of financial compensation for low paid or unpaid care work.

As already noted, within these justifications for UBI, the extent to which social relations are to be transformed differs. For instance, some feminist proponents of UBI support it on the grounds that it could promote gender equality by allowing a symbolic recognition of care work but that it need not change the division of household (/care) labour providing that such work is entered into freely, while others argue that (one) goal of UBI could be the concrete redistribution of household tasks rather than merely freeing up space for enabling women to more easily choose.⁷

This is an important difference. On some views, UBI is a solution to a problem that can be carried out while leaving the bulk of social relations unchanged, on others it is either a mechanism directly for significant transformation or an enabling factor for such change.

The most ambitious—in terms of ultimate goal as well as amount—UBIs, those that aim for a transformation of society, come from both the political left and the political right. Demands for UBI from the centre tend to be uninterested in large-scale change beyond their immediate target or problem, or they are interested in preventing other unwanted change, in which case, they are

⁷ For a discussion of this and other divergent feminist views on gender equality and UBI, see Olga Lenczewska, ‘Universal Basic Income and Divergent Theories of Gender Justice’, *Hypatia*, vol. 37, 2022, pp. 705–725.

system-preserving. For instance, Philip Pettit's proposal for UBI to make exit from a workplace easier, thus reducing domination. This might have important effects on the presence of domination in the workplace and in an individual's life, with employers being more hesitant about bad treatment because of the reduced dependency of workers on them, and workers better able to resist⁸ or exit bad situations, but the overall system of work is unchanged.

Similarly, one argument for UBI is that it can ease exit for women in abusive relationships.⁹ While this is welcome and important, it does not, on its own, transform relationships between men and women in general. It might make romantic partnerships between men and women better, but this is not the only way in which gender plays out, important as it is.¹⁰ The analogy between men and women and employers and employees does not quite hold because, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, capitalist work relations mean work-under-capitalism *requires* domination; the same is not true of relations between men and women, even as men structurally have power over women. However, while eased exit might plausibly have effects

⁸ Of course, it is worth noting that the ability to leave more easily is not going to stop all instances of workplace domination. Threats to leave are only made in the last instance and while the cost of exit is reduced by a financial cushion, there are still significant costs to exit in a society where needs are met on the basis of selling labour in exchange for wages used to pay for needs, and in which unemployment is stigmatised. Regardless, exit is eased by the small UBI Pettit proposes.

⁹ The evidence for domestic violence being reduced by UBI comes from the Canadian Mincome experiment in the late 1970s; see David Calnitsky, 'Debating Basic Income', *Catalyst*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2017, for a discussion of the evidence in which he makes this case as a form of exit and analogy between work and household. Calnitsky is not a liberal supporter of UBI, however, this argument is made elsewhere on a liberal basis. See also, Liz Ely, 'Three Ways a Citizen's Income Could Help Prevent Men's Violence Against Women', *Basic Income Earth Network*, 20 April 2015; Amelia Womack, *The Independent*, 'Financial Dependence is the Reason So Many Women Can't Escape Domestic Abuse', 12 March 2018. For a review of the evidence on UBI and violence against women see: Maria Wong and Evelyn Forget, 'Basic Income and Violence Against Women: A Review of Cash Transfer Experiments', *Basic Income Studies*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2024, pp. 85–130.

¹⁰ Feminists have argued for UBI that could support transform gender relations via housework, too. Kathi Weeks advocates UBI over a Wages for Housework demands because, 'wages for housework nonetheless demands an expansion of the wage relation rather than a transformation of its terms' and because the demands and goals of recognition and redistribution of housework paradigm would be better served by UBI than by wages paid to housewives. See Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, p.137. There is some doubt about whether UBIs might end up locking-in existing gender relations if women have more time without other aspects of the social order being challenged. See discussed in Calnitsky, 'Debating Basic Income' for a discussion of this.

outside of the moment of actually leaving, it remains compatible with and does not, on its own, overcome existing gender and working relations.

Another UBI proposal from the centre is UBI as a response to the threat of automation. This, of course, could be made on radical grounds—if automation is going to happen, how might it be put in the service of a transformative goal, like overcoming drudgery or enhancing freedom, or more defensively, how can workers shape the trajectory of automation in their rather than capital's favour.¹¹ In its centrist or technocratic variant, however, it is system-sustaining or system-stabilising rather than system-transforming. These technocratic UBIs come from modern captains of industry, especially tech CEOs. Sam Altman, the CEO of OpenAI, for instance, has funded a UBI trial and supports a version of the policy.¹² Because AI may transform work, removing existing jobs, policies that address this and protect affected workers are required. There may be additional benefits assumed in these schemes (perhaps reducing inequality), but these are not the central motivation for them. Others who have supported UBI on such grounds include Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg, Chris Hughes (a co-founder of Facebook), Richard Branson, who argues that if AI reduces the number of available jobs, people should be paid from the money that AI generates,¹³ 'futurist' Martin Ford,¹⁴ and economist Daniel Susskind (who thinks automation will, gradually, replace all employment)¹⁵.

¹¹ This might not sound transformative but for something like that to happen the balance of power between workers and capital would have to shift so significantly that it would in practice require transformative change.

¹² See Lakshmi Varanasi, 'Sam Altman's Basic-Income Study Is Out, Here's What It Found', *Business Insider*, 28 July 2024.

¹³ See Benjamin Kentish, 'Richard Branson calls for universal basic income because robots are taking people's jobs', *The Independent*, 10 October 2017.

¹⁴ Martin Ford, *The Rule of the Robots: How Artificial Intelligence Will Transform Everything*, Basic Books, 2021.

¹⁵ Daniel Susskind, *A World Without Work: Technology, Automation and How We Should Respond*, Allen Lane, 2020.

In these cases, UBI is a solution to a problem but not the way to *transformation*. The empirical basis for claims about the removal of all or most jobs through automation, a ‘jobsapocalypse’ scenario, is shaky.¹⁶ Whether or not this scenario is likely to come to pass does not matter for the discussion at hand, however.¹⁷ The technocratic, centrist version of UBI is connected to this prediction, but other versions are less directly attached to it. Left-wing accounts of UBI, including those that see automation as a threat, do not rise or fall on this prediction because they tend to also want to transform society and realise other values through UBI, including by the harnessing or managing of automation.

It is from the political left that contemporary demands for UBI are most commonly made and theorised. The idea is that UBI would be such a significant change that, paid at a maximal level, it would itself constitute a societal transformation or would bring one closer, including by improving worker power. As such, these proposals tend to be for maximal UBIs—at a level of supplanting or supplanting wage income at the standard of a decent life—and with the ambitions of addressing left-wing goals and values in relation to work-under-capitalism, or in the meeting or realisation of other relevant goals and values.

¹⁶ See Jason E. Smith, *Smart Machines and Service Work*, 2020, Benanav, *Automation and the Future of Work*, 2020, for a discussion of why there is good reason to doubt this. Briefly, the easy availability of cheap labour, especially for tasks that are technically hard to automate, and the relative chances of technology being used to reorganise work (with, of course, worse outcomes for workers) rather than like for like replace existing jobs. This might result in expulsions of workers or layers of workers from sectors but is unlikely to mean that jobs are simply automated and disappear universally. See Horgan, ‘Android Paranoia’, *Radical Philosophy*, no. 211, Winter 2021, pp. 51–55, for a discussion of these themes.

¹⁷ That it is tech CEOs who stress the importance of needing regulation and action to stop the damages of their own sector is intriguing. Some have argued that this is a cynical move to get ahead of the regulation and shape the future landscape of their industry in so doing. See e.g. Zachary Wood, ‘Big Tech Firms Pushing AI Regulation Are Not Seeking the Public Interest’, *Competitive Enterprise Institute*, 5 July 2023. This seems more plausible than this being an act of benevolence, out of keeping with the normal behaviour of *Trägers* of class relations and interests.

These goals include:

- 1) Reducing drudgery and improving the quality of work, by reducing the reliance that workers have on wages, making it easier to refuse the worst jobs. This could encourage automation, and it could also form a response to automation that prioritises workers' interests. In some cases, a horizon of automating work as much as possible is adopted.¹⁸
- 2) To decommodify labour. If people no longer rely on paid work to meet their needs, capitalism will not have gone away but will be significantly changed and challenged. This could be good for intrinsic or instrumental reasons.
- 3) With labour decommodified and the link between work and having enough to live on broken, workers might be in a better position to (further) challenge capitalist relations. (This is the instrumental case for (3). Erik Olin Wright, for instance, argues that UBI could act as an 'inexhaustible strike fund', allowing workers to wait out their employers.¹⁹

NB Some see UBI as a special kind of reform. Rather than just advancing anti-capitalism by contributing to increasing the power of workers,²⁰ it can be said to be a special kind of reform, one which can be a 'wedge in the door'²¹ or a 'bridge' to a non- or post-capitalist

¹⁸Lazar, 'Work, Domination, and the False Hope of Universal Basic Income'; Hester and Stronge, *Post Work*, 2023; Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*, Verso, 2015.

¹⁹ Erik Olin Wright, 'Basic income as a socialist project', *Rutgers Journal of Law & Urban Policy*, 2 (1), 2003, pp. 196-203, p. 201. The strike fund might be less infinite, however, if one's employer is the state that pays the UBI, however.

²⁰ Although more cash and easier exit alone might not directly increase the collective power of workers even if it improves their individual bargaining power.

²¹ Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 2011.

society, or a ‘non-reformist reform’.²² This is, per Wright ‘because of the ways it may contribute to a broader transformation of capitalism itself.’²³

- 4) For a redistribution of work. Some people have too much work, in the sense of paid- employment and work more broadly, and some have too little. UBI could help challenge this if combined with action to coordinate such a reduction.
- 5) Reducing inequality by acting as a form of redistribution of the surplus produced by collective work, in terms of money, as well as a time. Even in a situation where UBI had led to less work, there would be, at least in an ‘intermediate phase’, lots of work (in narrow sense) that would still be done, and the value produced, along with potentially other sources of wealth, could be shared through UBI.

What stands out about those who are interested in UBIs as a means to an end or as political tool (as well as a goal) tends to be either an openness to political experimentation or an acknowledgement that anti-capitalist political strategy requires innovation. Questions of strategy will be turned to in Section Four, but for now, it is worth noting that this is one significant way in which UBI supporters diverge from its critics.

Beyond this generic case, which makes several claims about the connections between UBI and work, as well as between UBI and (the end of) capitalism, particular groups have argued for UBI for their own reasons. Here, I outline these groups and their typical cases for UBI. There

²² Wright, ‘Basic Income, Stakeholder Grants, and Class Analysis’, 2004; André Gorz, ‘Reform and Revolution’, *Socialist Register*, vol. 5, 1968, pp. 111–134.

²³ Erik Olin Wright, ‘Basic income as a socialist project’, *Rutgers Journal of Law & Urban Policy*, 2 (1), 2003, pp. 196-203, p.203.

is significant overlap, e.g. many Post Work theorists are also feminists, but these can still be thought of as distinct groupings.

- 1) Feminists who see UBI as a way of addressing the present organisation of work (in the broad sense) and its attendant harms. This includes overcoming paternalism of the welfare state; the marginalisation, low pay, or other lack of recognition for work typically carried out by women; an opportunity to redistribute care work. Additionally, UBI would be egalitarian, enhancing the power of women as a group by reducing reliance on wages.
- 2) Radical republicans who see UBI as a way of reducing domination. There is disagreement among radical republicans about whether UBI is a viable strategy and/or a desirable goal.²⁴
- 3) Post Work theorists. An anti-capitalist (I use this term broadly to encompass a variety of traditions that seek the end of capitalism: socialism, Marxism, anarchism, etc.) tradition that seeks the overcoming of work, its abolition. Freedom, on this view, is to be found not in work, but from work. The goal is to overcome a ‘work ethic’, ‘productivism’ or an ‘ideology of work’, and to reduce the centrality of work, attitudinally and by the redistribution of work, both in the present capitalist moment, and in a future post-capitalist one.²⁵
- 4) Degrowthers who see UBI as a necessary part of reducing work to remain within planetary boundaries. For them, UBI could be used to support workers during a green transition and manage a slowdown.

²⁴Lazar, ‘Work, Domination, and the False Hope of Universal Basic Income’; Calnitsky, ‘Debating Basic Income’, 2017.

²⁵ See Hester and Stronge, *Post-Work*, 2023; Frayne, *The Refusal of Work*, 2015, Bob Black, *Why Work*, PM Press, 2020; Stanley Aronowitz and Jonathan Cutler (eds.), *Post-Work: The Wages of Cybernation*, Routledge, 1997.

- 5) Disabled people's movement theorists, for whom exclusion from work and the working-class and its attendant harms, including those of existing welfare systems, might be addressed by UBI which decouples income from contribution as (paid) work. which as disability theorists point out, can be anyone: for many of us, not being disabled or otherwise unable to work is a temporary situation: we most likely will all be unable to work at some point in our lives).²⁶

Critics of UBI from the left suggest that the policy is treated (by left-wing and technocratic supporters) as a 'silver bullet'. It is hard to find any examples of left-wing, rather than liberal, proponents who see UBI in this way. In fact, it is more typical, at least in the most recent literature, to see UBI proponents to be at pains to say that UBI alone is *not* sufficient to solve the harms of work-under-capitalism, to realise other important related goals (freedom, dignity, reducing the centrality of work), or to end capitalism.²⁷ However, it is argued frequently that UBI would have a special role to play relative to other tactics and demands around and against work.²⁸ Even if this would not fall foul of the 'silver bullet' critique—nobody really thinks UBI on its own is sufficient—it might still be a problem. This problem is better understood not in

²⁶ Hester, Stronge, Welfare Recipients Orgs – more on these Elliott Aidan Johnson, Howard Robert Reed and Matthew Thomas Johnson, 'Can Universal Basic Income Work for Disabled People? An Examination of Existing UK Organisational and Academic Positions', *Disability & Society*, vol. 39, no. 11, 2023, pp. 2900–2919; Toru Yamamori, 'A Feminist Way to Unconditional Basic Income: Claimants Unions and Women's Liberation Movements in 1970s Britain', *Basic Income Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1–2, 2014, pp. 1–24.

²⁷ E.g. David Casassas, *Unconditional Freedom*, Pluto Press, 2024: 'But basic income is not some ubiquitously valid, universally effective, transhistorical cure-all. On the contrary, it must be examined as one (central) part of a set of mechanisms with which we can operate at present to endow ourselves with the power of negotiation and of creating our own lives.', p.14. Hester and Stronge, *Post Work*, makes a similar point, seeing it 'useful' and a 'directional demand', but not a comprehensive solution, p. 94.

²⁸ For instance: Yanis Varoufakis, Yanis Varoufakis, speech at the *Future of Work Conference*, Zurich, Switzerland, 5 May 2016, argued UBI should be seen as 'a foundation, not a safety net'; an 'emancipatory reform'. Per Calnitsky, it is emancipatory: 'gets to a moral vision', 'tips balance of power in favour of workers', Calnitsky, 'Debating Basic Income', 2017. In these cases, it is more than just one of various options to enhance worker power, it has special properties.

terms of ‘silver bullets’ but in assessing the relatively deadliness of various weapons in the left’s arsenal.

The political right has also been interested in UBI. On the right, Charles Murray, Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek have all argued for a version of the policy. The right also sees UBI as a means to transform social relations.²⁹ The existing system of benefits and welfare provision makes people dependent; by transforming them, people become self-reliant rather than state reliant.

For instance, Charles Murray’s UBI scheme is as follows: all existing health and welfare provisions and the bureaucracies around them are removed and replaced by an annual payment to all citizens. Some of this payment is earmarked for paying for (private) health insurance but the rest is to be spent as the individual prefers. At a certain income threshold, the payment is partially taxed back, though the amounts that would have been used to pay for social security and other formerly state-provided provisions are retained. The purpose of his scheme is twofold: to address the threat of job losses from new technologies, and to obliterate the bureaucracies around existing welfare provision, replacing the welfare state with an individually responsabilised self-reliance:

The availability of a guaranteed income wouldn’t relieve individuals of responsibility for the consequences of their actions. It would instead, paradoxically, impose responsibilities that didn’t exist before, which would be a good thing ...

²⁹ Friedman notes this convergence too and seeks to distinguish his proposal from left-wing versions.

It will be possible to say to the irresponsible what can't be said now: 'We won't let you starve before you get your next deposit, but it's time for you to get your act together. Don't try to tell us you're helpless, because we know you aren't.'³⁰

Murray's UBI allows people to make their own choices and replaces a safety net of state-organised provisions with private ones. This involves a potentially significant redistributive mechanism for the poorest Americans but there is also the removal of collective provisions with the intention of *remaking* social relations.

Milton Friedman's 'negative income tax' proposal offered everyone a floor of income via the tax system. At a certain point, rather than being taxed, those on low incomes receive additional income. It was trialled in the late 1960s in cities across the United States, but these trials were not expanded or scaled up.³¹ Commenting on the divergence of the left and right on proposals for guaranteed income in some form, he argued:

the negative income tax is more compatible with the philosophy and aims of the proponents of limited government and maximum individual freedom than with the philosophy and aims of the proponents of the welfare state and greater government control of the economy.³²

³⁰ Charles Murray, 'A Guaranteed Income for Every American', *The Wall Street Journal*, 3 June 2016.

³¹ See Anton Jäger and Daniel Zamora Vargas, *Welfare for Markets*, University of Chicago Press, 2023, Chap. 2, for a discussion of this history.

³² Milton Friedman, 'The Case for the Negative Income Tax: A View from the Right', in *Proceedings of the National Symposium on Guaranteed Income*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 9 December 1966, pp. 49–55.

Friedman's scheme did not have any conditions on working but he wanted to make sure that the details of its design did not disincentivise work. By contrast, Friedrich Hayek supported making payments conditional on being in or willing to look for work:

I do not question any individual's right voluntarily to withdraw from civilisation. But what 'entitlements' do such persons have? Are we to subsidise their hermitages? There cannot be any entitlement to be exempted from the rules on which civilisation rests.³³

In these three cases, what is to be remade is the relationship between citizens and the state. For right-wing advocates of UBI, cash transfers enhance individual freedom.³⁴ It supplants existing state provision with private options. It is not intended to empower citizens as *workers*, but as market-freedom-maximising monads. This is not the same kind of freedoms (as non-domination; from drudgery; of time, etc) that left-wingers seek from UBI. For the right, UBI helps diminish collective provision, leaving each individual citizen to their own devices to manage their own safety net. The breakup of government monopolies on provision also offers a strategic lever to further change social relations through privatisation.

We can consider some aspects of the left-wing UBI proposals along with these right-wing ones as responses to the welfare states of advanced industrial economies in the twentieth century. The left-wing critique of the way states met (and shaped) needs—whether through service provision or conditional cash transfers—focused on a paternalism that was intrusive, that enforced and actively shaped gender norms, that were themselves both shaped by and shaping processes of racialisation and racism, and that ultimately created subjects fitted for life in

³³ Matt Zwolinski, 'A Hayekian Case for Free Markets and a Basic Income', in *The Future of Work, Technology, and Basic Income*, eds. Michael Cholbi and Michael Weber, Routledge, 2019.

³⁴ Ibid.

hierarchical, capitalist societies.³⁵ On this view, the welfare state was not benign, it was at best ambiguous: even as it represented an achievement of the workers' movement and created and guaranteed (for a time) a rise in standards of living, it inscribed hierarchy and ensured the reproduction of capitalist society.

The right similarly criticised the state on the basis of the subjects and subjectivities it produced, which were taken to be insufficiently active and striving. Remaking social provision was about changing how people acted and the kinds of subjects they were: prioritising individualism, competition and freedom in the market. This was intended to break up the lifeworld of welfare states, including those created by public services, and weaken the power of the working class, culturally, politically and economically.

In its present day iteration, the left-wing support for UBI on the basis of the harms of the welfare state relate to an additional set of harms in which the state is implicated that have appeared since the break-up of the social democratic order. In particular, a shift in approaches to benefit payments for unemployment in which the unemployed must accept any job,

³⁵ The idea of a family wage and policies that assumed and effected household arrangements built around this would be one mechanism by which all of these are implicated. For discussion of the patriarchal nature of welfare see Carole Pateman, 'The Patriarchal Welfare State', in *Democracy and the Welfare State*, ed. Amy Gutmann, Princeton University Press, 1988, pp. 231–260; Linda Gordon, 'The Welfare State: Towards a Socialist-Feminist Perspective', *Socialist Register*, 1990, pp. 171–200. For the state as ideologically productive or subjectifying see Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, Verso, 2014. For an attempt to theorise how radical members of the welfare state bureaucracy should conceptualise their activities and try to act, see London-Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, *In and Against the State*, Pluto Press, 1979; and for a discussion of how this relates to Post-Fordism as conjuncture, see Katrina Forrester, "'In and Against the State': Revolutionary Feminism During Deindustrialisation', Quentin Skinner Lecture, University of Cambridge, June 2023. For a discussion of how British new left intellectuals ambivalently understood the welfare state and sought to democratise it and make uses of its resources, see Stuart White, 'The Left After Social Democracy: Towards State-Society Partnerships', in *Alternatives to State-Socialism in Britain*, eds. Pat Ackers and Alastair Reid, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. For a theoretical account of the processes described here see Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, Princeton University Press, 1995.

regardless of quality or fit. This is sometimes seen as the result of the victory of a work ethic³⁶ but is at least as much about forcing people into bad work because of a changed economy: the Fordist social order was able to deliver (for some) stable, long-term work. The post-industrial work regimes that followed were not able to reliably do so, particularly because successive governments actively pursued policies which encouraged any employer, no matter how unscrupulous, to set up shop. In former industrial towns, labour markets and employment regimes, and the experience of work, were actively remade. Sacha Hilhorst has demonstrated that towns like Mansfield and Corby were not ‘left behind’, but reshaped, through neoliberal regeneration policies like enterprise zones, land sell-offs and financial perks for the business that replace industry, and which offered only low-paid, insecure work:

Successive governments unleashed experimental policies on post-industrial towns, which served as laboratories for novel forms of deregulation, subjectivation and corporate welfare. These policies came with big promises about good jobs, regenerated spaces and bright futures. But this future did not materialise. Many ex-miners and ex-steelworkers became economically inactive, while the present-day demand for labour in ex-industrial towns is largely for low-paid work in supermarkets, care homes and distribution centres.³⁷

³⁶ E.g. Frayne, *The Refusal of Work*, 2015; Hester and Stronge, *Post Work*, p.72. A particularly useful way of approaching the ‘work ethic’ is a historical one; looking at local variety, change, connection to concrete work, to political economy, and so on. If the ‘work ethic’ is an ideology, (and there is case that it is best conceptualised as such) it should be considered one in the historically and sociologically rich sense outlined in Chapter Three. This might mean seeing multiple, shifting, dynamic, and even discontinuous, ‘work ethics’. Two recent useful studies of specific work ethics: Erik Baker, *Make Your Own Job: How the Entrepreneurial Work Ethic Exhausted America*, Harvard University Press, 2025; Claudia Strauss, *What Work Means: Beyond the Puritan Work Ethic*, Cornell University Press, 2024.

³⁷ Sacha Hilhorst, ‘A Tale of Two Towns’, *Common Wealth*, 2024; Sacha Hilhorst, ‘Afterlives of legitimacy: a political ethnography of two post-industrial towns in England’, (PhD thesis), London School of Economics and Political Science, 2024.

This new labour regime came with and required a welfare system that pushed people into jobs of low quality. Similar policies and processes took place across advanced industrial economies. The present day welfare state is not only damaging in the way its New Left critics noted, but it also administers a regime of conditionality which subsidises employers' low wages and guarantees heightened exploitation, by giving people no choice but to accept work. Given this, it is not a surprise that support for UBI for its *universality* and lack of conditions is common.³⁸

Overcoming the harms of the present system—which interweaves welfare and work—is one of the justifications for UBI from the left. In addition to this reparative aspect, the transformative potential of UBI comes from its potential to decouple or loosen the link between work and income. Kathi Weeks argues that this is a better (re)distribution mechanism than wages and the struggle over how much of the surplus should be paid to workers as wages, because of the very significant amount of unpaid work that is, (despite, or perhaps, *because of*, not being paid), fundamental to the reproduction of capitalist society. A basic income, even a minimal one which could then be scaled up, would have the potential (though would not do so automatically) to transform the conditions of this presently unpaid work.³⁹ For Philippe van Parijs, decoupling income and work erodes a coerced norm of reciprocity, allowing people freedom over their own time: 'real freedom for all'.⁴⁰ The most famous emblem of Parijs' freedom-as-temporal-sovereignty is the surfer, who contributes nothing to society, but who is justified in taking back 'rents which would otherwise be monopolized by those who hold a rich

³⁸ For a republican critique of welfare conditionality, see Anja Eleveld, 'Welfare to work and the republican theory of non-domination' in Anja Eleveld, Thomas Kampen and Josien Arts eds., *Welfare to Work in Contemporary European Welfare States: Legal, Sociological and Philosophical Perspectives on Justice and Domination*, Policy Press Scholarship (Online) 2020.

³⁹ See Kathi Weeks, 'A Feminist Case for Universal Basic Income', *Open Democracy*, 18 September 2019.

⁴⁰ See Philippe Van Parijs, *Real Freedom for All. What (if anything) Can Justify Capitalism?* Oxford, Oxford University Press.

society's productive jobs'.⁴¹ To André Gorz, severing the connection between work and income paves the way for a 'multi-activity society' in which work becomes less central.⁴²

There are also differences in policy design: left-wing supporters tend to favour a maximalist scheme, in which UBI *replaces* wages, or, if the proposal is for UBI as a strategic instrumental good, a strong minimal UBI which enhances worker power is advocated. By contrast right-wing schemes are not intended to fully supplant income from work, and form more minimalist schemes. They are intended to replace the welfare system with less rather than more ambitious provision. Centrist or tech technocratic schemes tend to be more minimal—Sam Altman's UBI trial offered \$1000 a month, for instance, but liberal maximalist versions are possible.

A significant difference between left, right, and centre UBIs is their various conceptions of demand-making. This might seem counterintuitive—a demand is a demand! You want X policy; you ask A government or B public body to introduce it. Here is a policy, here is how to implement it, now implement it.

But, as we have seen, making a demand is in itself an act with political stakes. While many of the UBIs outlined above operate as what we might call straightforward policy demands in which a proposer hopes some government or other public body will take up a more or less detailed plan, demand-making can also have different political goals. In these cases, the demand being made might not be something that can be (immediately) implemented. The political intentions of the demand, in such cases, are not directed only at the demand recipients, but also to demand-makers, potential demand-makers, and people in general. For example, a

⁴¹ Philippe Van Parijs, 'Why Surfers Should Be Fed: The Liberal Case for an Unconditional Basic Income', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 20, no. 2, 1991, pp. 101–31, pp.130–1.

⁴² André Gorz, *Reclaiming Work, Beyond the Waged-Based Society*, Polity Press, 1999, p.79.

demand can raise consciousness about some aspect of social relations or point to a possible future. It can also attempt to create a political coalition that does not yet exist.

Some left-wing UBI advocates conceptualise demand-making as more than requesting a state adopt a policy, but as an act of creative, critical politics. The neatest description of this view comes from Kathi Weeks, who argues that UBI is a ‘utopian demand’ meaning it :

takes the form not of a narrowly pragmatic reform but of a more substantial transformation of the present configuration of social relations; it is a demand that raises eyebrows, one for which we would probably not expect immediate success. These are demands that would be difficult though not impossible to realize in the present institutional and ideological context; to be considered feasible, a number of shifts in the terrain of political discourse must be effected. In this sense, a utopian demand prefigures again in fragmentary form a different world.⁴³

A utopian demand, according to Weeks’ reading, both estranges the present and generates agency by provoking the capacity to imagine a different future.⁴⁴ The present arrangement of social and economic relations is called into question, and consciousness is raised against the ideological blocking of the possibility of change.

To Phillipe van Parijs, UBI is also a utopian demand. By utopia, however, he means something different to Weeks. His utopia is a ‘simple real utopia’, in which ‘radical reforms ... [are justified] on the basis of normative principles combined with the best possible scientific

⁴³ Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, p. 176.

⁴⁴ Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, p. 208.

analysis of the root causes of the problems the proposals are meant to address' and then subjected to 'unindulgent critical scrutiny.'⁴⁵ It spells out what a good or better society is and tries to lay out some of its institutions, looking to a 'better yet feasible future', and 'reasonable hope'.⁴⁶ This does not sound particularly unrestrained in its utopianism, but what makes it utopian is its temporal focus on the future and how to realise some particular goal, horizon, or value there. On his account, utopian thinking shapes 'political will'. But the constituency that is created by this demand is unclear, not least because of the way that being subjected to scientific scrutiny leaves it vulnerable to a technocratic slide, leaving it without a mass politics to enable its realisation.

There is also a strategic dimension to his UBI proposal. The creation of UBI, he argues, moreover represents a 'capitalist road to Marx's realm of freedom'.⁴⁷ This is not an issue of utopian vs realist thinking as much as the theory of societal change. In this way, a demand for UBI is a way to realise a goal that is both the primary goal and one that (necessarily) comes after another goal. UBI is, in such a view, a strategic precondition for broader anti-capitalist goals. Demanding it opens up the strategic possibility of a different society. Similarly, Kathi Weeks argues that a UBI, even a minimalist one, creates a 'foot in the door' for more radical reforms and transformations. This aspect of demand-making is not a difference between a left and right-wing UBI, however. It is clear that right-wing UBIs also intended to use the policy as a lever to change society. It is, however, one of the grounds on which UBI sceptics, should they want to give UBI a fair hearing, ought to judge UBI.

⁴⁵ Philippe Van Parijs, 'The Universal Basic Income: Why Utopian Thinking Matters, and How Sociologists Can Contribute to It', *Politics and Society*, 41(2), 2013, pp. 171-182, p.171.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 173.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 174.

In some cases, there is a theory of societal or historical change built into this aspect of demand-making. The most famous example is André Gorz's account of so-called non-reformist reforms. In moments of relative affluence, Gorz argues, the traditional socialist approach of expecting poverty and immiseration to generate scaleable political action and workers' power is no longer sufficient. With this, the revolt against society has 'lost its natural base'.⁴⁸ What is needed instead of a revolt against poverty, is a revolt against the 'new needs' that capitalism creates but is structurally unable to universalise.⁴⁹ This situation makes revolutionary struggle of the traditional form very unlikely, but many reforms that might build the strength of a revolutionary movement, he argues, have a tendency to support rather than undermine the status quo. Instead, a Gorzian path must be to 'impose anti-capitalist solutions which will not immediately be incorporated into and subordinated by the system'.⁵⁰ These 'non-reformist reforms' develop the autonomous, rather than subordinate, powers of the working class. They can be gradual or sudden, but they permit workers to 'take over powers or assert a force ... strong enough to establish, maintain, and expand those tendencies within the system which serve to weaken capitalism and to shake its joints.'⁵¹ UBI is, on his reading, one such non-reformist reform. Elsewhere, left-wing support for UBI is more conditional and strategic, similarly based on theories of societal change and revolutionary possibility. Examples include Erik Olin Wright's case for UBI as an infinite strike fund and James Boggs' argument for a guaranteed income for the racialised proletariat expelled from automating automotive industries in Fordist America. This does not in itself represent a bridge to a non-capitalist world but builds proletarian power.

The table on the following pages maps these different UBI proposals.

⁴⁸ André Gorz, 'Strategy for Labor', in *Theories of the Labor Movement*, eds. Simeon Larson and Bruce Nissen, p.100.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Gorz, 'Strategy for Labor', p. 102.

⁵¹ Ibid, pp.102-3.

	Proponent	Scheme	Goal	Type of demand
Left-wing UBIs	Phillipe van Parijs	Cash transfer that scales to sufficient to cover all basic needs	Freedom (for individuals, from bureaucracies from need to work)	‘Simple real utopia’
	André Gorz	Initially supports cash transfers with a work condition, but then moves to supporting a maximalist basic income scheme	Freedom and autonomy, freedom cannot be realised in work typical of the modern division of labour	Non-reformist reform
	Erik Olin Wright	Socialist UBI, sufficient for a ‘no frills’ but culturally acceptable standard of living.	Decommodify labour; more time for activity outside of paid work; increased worker power	Non-reformist reform
	Helen Hester.& Will Stronge	Sufficient/maximalist	Contribute to construction of post-work society; redistribute time and labour; support care work	Utopian demand
	Antonio Negri & Michael Hardt	Income guarantee tied to collective autonomy	Support resistance to capitalist exploitation and enhance autonomy of the multitude	Post-workerist/Autonomist
	Yanis Varoufakis	Universal basic dividend funded by returns on shared capital/assets	Democratise the economy, reduce inequality, strengthen economic freedom	Non-reformist reform
	Michel Foucault	No concrete proposal made, preference over welfare state model	End the biopolitically troubling paternalism of the welfare state	-

	Kathi Weeks	Cash transfer that scales to sufficient to cover all basic needs	Reduce the centrality of work, expand the definition of what counts as ‘proper’ work and compensates it in a more adequate way than the wage does	Utopian demand
	James Boggs	‘Weekly cheque’ for the racialised poor expelled from formal employment by automation	Expand socialist strategy to include ‘outsiders’ or surplus populations	Instrumental-strategic
	Radical republicans	Sufficient UBI with firm and economic democratisation	Democratise economy, overcome domination	Various: Instrumental strategic primarily
	Left accelerationists, e.g. Alex Williams & Nick Srnicek	Sufficient/maximalist scheme	Enhance worker power by giving them the choice whether to choose a job, partially decommodify labour	Non-reformist reform
	Green/Degrowth advocates (e.g. Jason Hickel)	UBI integrated with environmental limits and reduction in work hours	Decouple income from growth, support sustainable livelihoods, reduce ecological impact while ensuring wellbeing	Eco-utopian / non-reformist reform
UBIs that are targeted at alleviating specific	Conventional Neo-Republicans, including Philip Petit	Adequate (to reduce power of employers), universal	Reduce domination in the workplace	Civic republican

problems but broadly maintaining status quo	Anxious about automation: Andrew Yang; Elon Musk	Minimalist scheme to cushion expulsions from work	Easy exit/soft landing for those who lose their jobs	Technocratic, policy
	Sam Altman	Three-year pilot providing \$1,000/month	Easy exit/soft landing for those who lose their jobs especially from AI	Technocratic, policy
Right-wing UBIs	Milton Friedman	Negative income tax	Streamline and replace existing welfare provisions	-
	Friedrich Hayek	Negative income tax with work conditions	Streamline and replace existing welfare provisions, reduce domination	-
	Charles Murray	Lump sum payment annually replacing all existing welfare and healthcare payments	Address automation, streamline existing welfare provision	-
	Robert Taylor	Right-libertarian UBI as ‘exit option’ to reduce domination	Enable radical individual autonomy, including exit from exploitative states and workplaces	-
	Matt Zwolinski	Libertarian UBI	Replace coercive welfare bureaucracies, respect individual freedom	-

A note on demand classification for right-wing UBIs: while most centrist UBIs are made as conventional demands, i.e. as simple policy responses, the same is not true of the ambitiously transformative demands for right-wing UBIs. However, because the practice of demand-making as a theory of political action on the right is less developed than on the left, I have not categorised the right-wing UBI demands as demands. This is not to claim however that the right does not have its own utopias, its own utopian demands, non-reformist reforms, and many other possible demand forms, merely that these are outside of the scope of the present discussion.

3. Dilemmas: Strange Bedfellows, Trojan Horses, Smugglers

This section and the rest of the chapter deals with critiques of UBI from the left. Some of these are friendly but critical, others are actively hostile. Many criticisms of UBI are technical—I will not address these technical (economic or policy design) matters here. This is not because they are unimportant, but because the debate about UBI tends to run into a speculative future empiricism—dealing with how things might play out without much grounding—or focus on smaller scale trials, for which there is a good and growing positive evidence base, but which are harder to think about in terms of scaling up or as scaled up to a national level.⁵² In making this move, I assume that it is not on the strength of the evidence base from trials that strategic and normative justifications (i.e. whether UBI ‘works’ as a goal and/or tactic, whether it is a desirable goal) live or die.

Before turning to those strategic and normative justifications and objections to them, there is a vaguer accusation made against left-wing UBI proponents that requires addressing. As we have seen, UBIs attract support from people with all kinds of politics, some as we have seen, with some very objectionable (to leftists, including, of course, this author) politics. Is this a problem?

Some claim that it is. There are three versions of this accusation:

- 1) Strange bedfellows: That both the left and the right want something makes UBI an inappropriate or strongly questionable demand for the left.⁵³ When the right

⁵² For a discussion of this see Anna Coote and Edanur Yazici ‘Universal Basic Income: A Union Perspective’, *Public Services International*, 2019.

⁵³ This claim is rarely made directly (with an exception in Mikael Lyngaas, ‘Beyond Work: The Shortcomings of Post-Work Politics’, *Monthly Review Online*, 24 July 2020) but normally appears as

wants the same thing as the left, the left should reconsider why and if it wants something. This is described as a ‘strange bedfellows’ situation—if you find yourself in bed with your political enemy, you should question how you got there, reviewing the night that took you there, and, perhaps most importantly, if you should stay.⁵⁴

- 2) Trojan horses: Left-wing UBI support is naïve because in practice it will end up being *coopted*, acting as a Trojan Horse for neoliberal versions of UBI. This cooption might be the result of a weakness of the left relative to other forces, or because of a feature of UBI itself.⁵⁵
- 3) Smugglers: That UBI proposals or support might contain (inadvertently) right-wing effects or principles, inscribing right-wing politics in unintended ways.

Typically, versions (2) and (3) do not require that UBI should be rejected outright, but that caution should be taken, and paths trodden carefully.

As for (1), left-wing UBI proponents can offer compelling replies. Firstly, *convergence* might be a better way to think about this than being in bed with the enemy. Convergence is when two different things meet, describing both the process and the state of meeting. Two paths converge, for example. In biology, convergence is a tendency of two unrelated organisms to evolve

innuendo, e.g. Anton Jäger and Daniel Zamora Vargas, *Welfare for Markets*, University of Chicago Press, 2023.

⁵⁴ Kathi Weeks addresses this version of the strange bedfellows argument in Kathi Weeks, ‘Anti/Postwork Feminist Politics and a Case for Basic Income’, *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2020, pp. 575–594, by arguing that being in coalition with a political enemy is strategically permissible: ‘Politics, in contrast, is a collective endeavour that takes place in the public spaces of the streets. To engage in politics, and particularly, to win a large-scale reform, requires confronting the complexity of the broader political landscape and coalescing with those with whom you disagree’, p.586.

⁵⁵ See Emily Clark, ‘Is the Universal Basic Income a Neoliberal Trojan Horse? Analyzing Representations of “the Poor” and “Poverty” in UK UBI Policy Discourses’, *Critical Policy Studies*, 2025, pp. 1–25. See also Alyssa Battistoni, ‘The False Promise of Basic Income’, ‘[UBI] also has the potential to act as a Trojan horse for the left or right’, Alyssa Battistoni, ‘The False Promise of Basic Income’, *Dissent Magazine*, 2017.

similar characteristics, this includes carcinisation, through which non-crab crustaceans develop crab-like bodies. Through similar environmental pressures, divergent, unrelated organisms converge. They are not the same, but they are superficially similar. They have come from different ecologies, different landscapes with different assumptions, principles, and horizons.

UBI is not the only policy that carcinisates. There are other convergences. For example, resistance to compulsory schooling—on the right, primarily argued for on the basis of the right of parents make decisions for their parents, defending the ‘traditional’ family against the encroachment of the state; on the left, as an acknowledgement of the harmful functions of state education. An example that might seem unfamiliar in British context is the right to bear arms. Of course, this is famously supported by right-wing groups like the NRA, but it has also historically been supported by groups like the Black Panthers, on the basis of community self-defence against a racist state and a racist society. Anti-technology demands are made from both left and right too, on the basis of a return to traditional, ‘simple’ ways of living, and on the left, because technology is understood to be not something neutral, but as being shaped and maintained by capitalist power relations.⁵⁶ Foreign policy in which the USA plays a reduced role in war and global competition is supported by both the anti-imperialist left and sections of the right. Anti-imperialists have pointed to the role of US Aid in furthering American interests by making use of conditions on aid as a form of political and economic interference.⁵⁷ In February 2025, Donald Trump stopped US Aid funding, claiming that the extent of spending on foreign aid ‘IS TOTALLY UNEXPLAINABLE... CLOSE IT DOWN!’.⁵⁸ Reducing government spending and a change in approach to imperial governance (sometimes described

⁵⁶ Gavin Mueller, *Breaking Things at Work: The Luddites Are Right About Why You Hate Your Job*, Verso, 2021.

⁵⁷ See e.g. Teresa Hayter, *Aid as Imperialism*, Penguin, 1974.

⁵⁸ Sean Seddon, ‘What Is USAID and Why Is Trump Poised to “Close It Down”?’ , *BBC News*, 3 February 2025.

as ‘dominance without hegemony’⁵⁹), rather than anything like anti-imperialism guided this move. In these cases, the same policy is supported (although some technical details might be different) but for different reasons. That there is a convergence does not seem like a plausible reason to reject out of hand any of these demands. You can be in the same place for different reasons, making different assumptions about what will happen next. Just because it looks like a crab does not mean that it will act like one.

Secondly, left-wing defenders of UBI might argue that the proposals they make are sufficiently different from right-wing schemes to qualify as being something entirely separate from them (UBI differs from other convergences on this point). This could be a difference in policy design such as the amount paid—covering more than poverty relief, for example—or it might be a difference in expected outcome: for example, the extent to which a scheme might make work a less central part of people’s lives. As we have already seen, there are important differences in the ambitions and values of left vs right wing UBIs. While they are all regular cash transfers, they have different goals and are intended to interact differently with the existing systems that govern work (at least in the sense of the prospects it is expected to have for class struggle), benefits and redistribution.

Of the schemes mapped out above, it seems that there are sufficient differences to understand them not as one unitary policy but as highly varied policies. Right-wing versions tend to:

- 1) Be minimalist—not replacing income but supplementing it

⁵⁹ See e.g. Adam Tooze, ‘Is this the end of the American century?’, *London Review of Books*, Vol. 41, No. 7, 4 April 2019.

- 2) Have the intention of fully replacing state with private provision of social benefits as well as cash transfers (healthcare, housing, etc.)
- 3) Be concerned with not disincentivising work.

By contrast, left-wing UBI proposals tend to:

- 1) Either start as or scale to maximalist schemes
- 2) Replace existing cash transfers with a single payment, but do not aim to replace in-kind collective provisions
- 3) Seek to loosen the link between work and pay, thus
 - i. Enhancing workers' power to improve their situation
 - ii. Reducing the centrality of work within society and within a worker's lifetime.

If there is a shared core of the right and left-wing proposals, it is in the primacy of paying people cash directly. The goals, mechanisms, and justifications for these schemes, though, are different and incompatible; they do not want the same thing, they do not think it will have the same effects.

Even with our crabby bedfellows dismissed, perhaps there is still something fishy. What about the second accusation? This is that left-wing UBI support is naïve because in practice it will end up being *coopted*, acting as a Trojan Horse for neoliberal versions of UBI. This cooption

might be the result of a weakness of the left relative to other forces, or because of a feature of UBI itself.⁶⁰

Now, some of this is a problem of what might be termed a ‘speculative empiricism’, a problem of knowing the effects of something that has not yet come to be. It is, obviously, difficult to know if and how doing something will change things, this is true of assessing the virtues of UBI as a plank of anti-capitalist strategy and of determining how people would behave if a UBI scheme at scale and duration was in place. This matter will be considered further in Section Four. For now, it should be noted that it is hard to know what would actually happen. This claim does not defend or object to UBI, the point is that justifying or objecting to UBI on these grounds is not as successful as those on both sides of the debate would hope.

Turning back to whether UBI could be a Trojan Horse for a right wing UBI; the idea here is that if a left-wing version of UBI was implemented, the right could seize on this and turn the left-wing UBI into a right-wing one by changing the amount of money given, for instance. Or that right-wing goals could be brought into or would be achieved by a UBI that appeared left-wing or was secured by left-wing groups. To avoid this problem, Alyssa Battistoni proposes proceeding with caution when the right is in charge.⁶¹

Coooption can happen with any policy or left-wing victory. We have already seen how the welfare state can become part of a bullying and strongly coercive work regime. It is not true either that victories won by organised labour cannot be coopted. As Calnitsky puts it:

⁶⁰ See Clark, ‘Is the universal basic income a neoliberal trojan horse?’; Battistoni, ‘The False Promise of Basic Income’, 2017.

⁶¹ Ibid.

It is widely believed that basic income presents a clear and present danger of cooptation. This is true; it is entirely possible to imagine it being coopted. The same is true for a jobs guarantee, Roemer's coupon socialism, strengthened unions, Medicare for All, and every ambitious but plausible scheme to reorganize socioeconomic life for the better. While we should be sensitive to this dilemma, striving to make all our proposals uncooptable is a mistake. ... Cooptability should be seen as a necessary condition for our policy proposals, not a reason to disavow them.⁶²

There is one way in which UBI is technically easier to coopt than the existing patchwork of conditional benefits payments: if there is one payment, it is easier to turn off the cash. The amount that is paid could be reduced in one fell swoop, rather than taking a longer time (because of the numbers of taps) and potentially needing legislation (delaying the process and offering more opportunities for contestation, each tap takes longer to turn off).⁶³ In states where there is a vestigial welfare state, there is a plausible pragmatic basis for preferring attempts to contest and improve existing conditional benefits by minimising their eligibility and increasing the payments within them, rather than advocating replacing them with a UBI. Alternatively, a UBI which supplements rather than supplants benefits systems might be preferred. Either way, this is not a particularly compelling reason to reject UBI. While it is true that the right also supports UBI, this does not make them any more or less likely to try to transform it and

⁶² Calnitsky, 'Debating Basic Income', 2017, p.155.

⁶³ See Jurgen De Wispelare, Leticia Morales, 'The stability of basic income: a constitutional solution for a political problem', *Journal of Public Policy*, 36:4, 2016, pp. 521–545, for some practical discussions of this issue. Andreas Malm makes an analogous point in his arguments against geoengineering: new technological solutions hand over significant concentrated technical power into the hands of governments which set the terms of their deployment, including running the risk of 'termination shocks'. See Andreas Malm, 'The Future Is the Termination Shock: On the Antinomies and Psychopathologies of Geoengineering. Part One', *Historical Materialism*, Vol 30 (4), 2022, pp. 3–53. (Thanks to Lukas Slothuus for this example).

radicalise it in ways that further their own political goals than any other policy that the left could win.

So far, UBI supporters can say that their schemes are compatible with other approaches and tactics, which means that the risk of cooption is reduced. This is not true of one alternative: full employment, backed by a state ‘jobs guarantee’.⁶⁴ This is different to other worker-power enhancing demands that could be made *alongside* UBI because it is not compatible with UBI. This is because, if UBI from the left is taken to be about reducing obligations to work in the here and now via universal cash transfers (as an intrinsic good and/or as part of a broader anti-capitalist strategy), then an obligation *to* work is incompatible with it.

Demands for full employment are based partly in the same instrumental claim—for enhancing worker power—as some UBIs. Both full employment and UBI could grow worker power in the here and now and establish a better playing field for class struggle. Kalecki’s 1943 ‘The Political Aspects of Full Employments’ is the classical statement of this kind. If the formidable political opposition to full employment from capitalists and their political supporters could be overcome, it would represent a sea change in working-class power:

⁶⁴ For a recent empirical study of a jobs guarantee, see Matias Kasy and Lukas Lehner, ‘Employing the Unemployed of Marienthal: Evaluation of a Guaranteed Job Program’, *INET Oxford Working Paper*, no. 2022-29, 2022. In this experiment, every unemployed resident of the Austrian town was given an unconditional guarantee of a well-paid job for a year. The TUC made the case for a (limited) jobs guarantee during the Covid-19 pandemic: Trades Union Congress, ‘A New Plan for Jobs – Why We Need a New Jobs Guarantee’, 4 May 2020.

[U]nder a regime of permanent full employment ‘the sack’ would cease to play its role as a disciplinary measure. The social position of the boss would be undermined and the self assurance and class consciousness of the working class would grow.⁶⁵

On this view, the barriers to full employment are not economic but a question of political will. Full employment removes a major source of power-over workers that employers have, meaning workers could better organise. It is partly on this basis that some on the left have argued for full employment or a ‘jobs guarantee’.⁶⁶

Because of this incompatibility, the proposals are in competition. This, however, cannot be solved on the grounds of relative cooptability. The basis on which UBI might be considered *more* (relative to other policies) cooptable is limited and not a reason to reject UBI. It is possible to see how, with the right in power, full employment could become a tool to discipline labour or otherwise have its radical possibilities undermined. Kalecki points out that ‘Full employment capitalism’ will have, of course, to develop new social and political institutions which will reflect the increased power of the working class’.⁶⁷ Without these institutions the benefits to workers power could be reduced or even undermined. For instance, a full employment regime with legal attacks on trade unions combined with government policies encouraging the business practices often called ‘unscrupulous’,⁶⁸ low pay, precarity, and so on, of the kind that

⁶⁵ Michał Kalecki, ‘The Political Aspects of Full Employment’, *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 14, no. 4, October 1943, pp. 322–330, p. 326.

⁶⁶ E.g. Dustin Guastella, ‘Jobs for All: A Job Guarantee Puts Workers in the Driver’s Seat’, in *The Green New Deal and the Future of Work*, eds. Craig Calhoun and Benjamin Fong, Columbia University Press, 2022, pp. 153–176.

⁶⁷ Kalecki, ‘The Political Aspects of Full Employment’, p. 331.

⁶⁸ The anti-moralist Marxist would say that these are neither scrupulous nor unscrupulous practices but rather the result of economic forces, mute compulsion, behind the backs of the bearers of economic interests. Important here is that this does not mean some practices cannot be ‘worse’ than others.

governments brought in as experiments in post-industrial towns, might disempower labour relative to other proposals, including UBI, even as the power of ‘the sack’ is diminished.

In a moment of defeat and powerlessness, or in anticipation of future defeat, the left perhaps, must proceed with caution everywhere. When it comes to cooption, *any* policy can be overturned. The huge gains—even as ambiguous and system-stabilising as their critics rightfully pointed out that they were—of the workers’ movements in advanced industrial economies have been since overturned, undone, abolished and smashed up. There are no guarantees of durability. Of course, some policies might be better at producing solidaristic culture and enhancing worker power than others. There is one reason to doubt UBI on this front: it only indirectly supports this by freeing up time, unlike decommodification of services or provisions which bring people together in more direct ways. (It is possible to do both, but it is not infinitely possible to do both). However, ultimately the question of cooption is a question of *power*: who has the power to set the terms of UBI when it is adopted and how has power to govern over it, enforce it, and change it. This rests on the same questions that plague the left in general: how to win and how to win durably. This does not settle the worry in favour of UBI, but points to its status as a *generalised* problem from the left.

What of the third convergence worry? This is that left-wing proposals for UBI might contain right-wing principles without knowing. Here, the left has (inadvertently) smuggled in or absorbed right-wing principles and built them into arguments and proposals for UBI. If this is true, according to the smuggling-allegers, the response should be self-reflection and attempts to reconfigure proposals, or, if the inadvertently-adopted principle is seen as especially significant, to abandon them. Sometimes this comes down to the idea that e.g. consumerist attitudes have inadvertently infiltrated the left, even if UBI supporters would deny this and

would give other justifications for their support. This is hard to adjudicate: is any acceptance of markets, even in the service of longer-term destruction consumerist? It is not obvious where the line can be drawn. The same might be said of the argument from the other side: is any support for counter-cultures of dignity in work, even in the service of the overcoming of work, evidence of a ‘work ethic’ or ‘producersism’?

Another version of the smuggling claim comes in the form that support for UBI is based on values, principles or horizons that are the ‘wrong’ ones for the left, or at least less important relative to other left-wing values, principles or horizons, and therefore operating under the wrong or inappropriate assumptions. This means that the left has adopted a right-wing (or less than ideally left-wing) value, in error. For example, UBI proponents tend to rank universalism, in the sense of unconditionality, as an especially important (either intrinsic or instrumental) value, but those who favour strategies that make UBI less central, or which rule out UBI entirely might put more onus on contribution or recognition. In such cases, the dispute is over which is the ‘better’ goal or value.

The left, like any other group where membership is based on a shared worldview, adjudicates disputes over principles and goals in terms of allegations of having abandoned that worldview. This is an entirely legitimate (and in any case, unpreventable) activity, even if it tends to produce cynical mobilisations of such claims and in so doing turn living worldviews and critical ways of seeing and acting into dead dogma. Now, none of this means that there are not cases when such boundary claims are accurate.⁶⁹ The point here is that it is, in principle,

⁶⁹ Exactly how to assess whether they are ‘true’ will depend on one’s commitments to how much a political position can be ‘true’. If movements are seen not as expressions of ideas, but groups, coalitions, organisations seen historically and sociologically, then there is not some ‘true’ essence which they can betray. (The same applies to claims that problematic feminists ‘are not real feminists’, see Sophie Lewis, *Enemy Feminisms*, Haymarket, 2025, for an analysis along such lines). This does not mean there is *no way* to justifiably put

possible to distinguish between the claim that right-wing ideas have been smuggled in and the policing of the boundaries of group membership. Smuggling-in claims might practically function as attempts at exclusion, and often do, but a demand for exclusion does not automatically follow from them and the two can be kept distinct.

One example of the ‘smuggling-in’ argument is that UBI has unknowingly accepted the consumerist, market principles that are, really, just a symptom of its defeat.⁷⁰ The substance that has been smuggled in here is an acceptance of markets on the basis of an openness (perhaps unconsciously) to the legitimacy of the sovereign consumer. While this might be a fair critique of left-wing UBIs that *are* happy with or not bothered by markets, it does not seem fair to apply to those UBIs which seek to form part of a broader strategy of long-term decommodification, including through services. UBI gives people cash for consumption. It could, if not combined other political action, represent a retreat from the collective determination of collective needs outside of the market. This does not mean it is not a potential weakness of UBIs (more on this later), but this criticism is not as well-founded if UBI is adopted as part of an overall strategy.

some self-styled group members outside of those groups, for example, the persistent and strikingly unjustifiable defences on purportedly left-wing grounds made of Israel and Zionism, including during the present genocide of Palestinians in Gaza, particularly by the Antideutsche groupings in Germany, and additionally in a statement ‘Principles of Solidarity’ on the website of the Normative Orders research centre in November 2023, signed by Nicole Deitelhoff, Rainer Forst, Klaus Günther and Jürgen Habermas, and arguing for a defence of Israel’s assault on Gaza, as ‘justified in principle’ on the basis of ‘solidarity’ (see Nicole Deitelhoff, Rainer Forst, Klaus Günther and Jürgen Habermas, ‘Grundsätze der Solidarität. Eine Stellungnahme’, *Normative Orders*). For a response to this statement see: Adam Tooze, Samuel Moyn, Amia Srinivasan, ‘The Principle of Human Dignity Must Apply to All People’, *The Guardian*, 22 November 2023.

⁷⁰ See e.g. Jäger and Zamora, *Welfare for Markets*, p. 176. Important here is that the inadvertency of the bringing in takes place at the level of broader historical change; they conclude that left-wing support for basic income in the tail end of the last century and the start of this, is part of a broader ‘market turn’. This is turn is not outside of the left as a tradition; they point to the existence of market socialists in the 1930s and 40s, but this later market turn, which ‘united both left and right in an increasingly inescapable embrace of the decentralized operations of the price mechanism’, and which supplanted both planning and politics. It constituted a victory for the emergence of a new political subject, the ‘sovereign consumer’. This forms part of a ‘second capitalist revolution’, in which ‘humanity undertook its second move from markets to market societies’.

As for the matter of the sovereign consumer, the alleged problem is the move from a collective, political subject, in the form of workers, to an isolated, atomised, consuming one. If this choosing, buying individual subject is the starting point of UBIs, then that would be a problem for the claim that UBIs can empower workers and change the balance of power between workers and capital, potentially having the possibility of transformative change. But, while the subject and starting point of UBIs is different to that of the labour movement (more on this later), this might be beneficial, bringing in other social struggles and demands, outside of the workplace. It does not seem obvious that the non-worker subject(s) of UBIs either *is* or results from the rise of the ideal sovereign consumer but might be better seen as a new opening that could be politicised in various directions (which could of course, be politically successful to varying degrees). The latter position is the one staked out by Kathi Weeks, Helen Hester and, Will Stronge, among others. This position can be disputed on other grounds, including that in saying more about broad work or worklessness, it is able to say less about aspects of narrow work, but the objection is not viable on the smuggling-in as overlap claim alone.

4. Feasibility and Desirability: Further Criticism from the Left

If, claims Alex Gourevitch, ‘the left is to have a future, it cannot give up on work’.⁷¹ In his argument, two common objections to left-wing UBIs crystallise. Firstly, that UBIs are a strategic misstep, and secondly that they are not normatively desirable. The first of these can be termed ‘feasibility objections’. By feasibility, I mean whether UBI could be *realised*—could it generate the political action required to make it happen. There is, additionally, debate on the

⁷¹ Alex Gourevitch, ‘Post-Work Socialism?’, *Catalyst*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2022, pp. 9–48.

workability of the policy once achieved, i.e. would it actually *work*? In what follows, for brevity's sake, I assume that it will be broadly workable, that enough people would reliably work, and work in the right ways to provide a sustainable, decent standard of living through UBI.⁷²

This leaves us on the terrain of political strategy. This is not the easiest ground for political theorists and philosophers to traverse. The kind of practical knowledge and ability to judge what will work that seasoned political actors have is a different kind of training to an academic training in how to think about thinking about politics. But, if we want to take the demands and responsibilities of critical theory seriously, what actually might come to pass should factor into how we think about politics as one of the 'empirical' concerns that matter. One part of trying to bring into view how the world is, is considering what might happen next. This does not have to be strenuous or detailed (in fact, it might be better if it is not) but is well suited and easy to integrate into both non-ideal theory and immanent critique approaches.

Just because this activity is important does not mean it is easy or likely to be accurate. Some of this is because speculation and prediction are always going to be uncertain; we simply cannot be sure what will happen next. But beyond this aspect of speculation-in-general, politics and political action have alchemical properties. This might be in contingencies we were not aware of, unintended effects, complicated causalities, the emergence of ideas, subjects, movements, and more that cannot be predicted in advance; most broadly put, politics has 'openness' to it.

⁷² Here, I might be accused of making the same errors I accuse others of making, namely ignoring salient economic facts about the world, or having a missing/partial empirical model. My reason for excluding this is as follows: the literature is highly technical, and its models make many and differing assumptions that are potentially ideological or otherwise faulty. This literature may well merit analysis of the extent to which it might be said to be making political, ideological, or other assumptions, but given its size and technical detail, this would be a temporally extensive project, as well taking up dissertation space. Hopefully, this acknowledgement lessens the charge of hypocrisy.

This is meant in the sense that Gramsci described: that politics (is not determined mechanically by economic relations, that there is room for agency and contingency, struggles and surprises. This openness makes thinking about strategy all the more important; there is no guarantee of victory on the basis of ‘laws’ of history.⁷³ Openness here is also meant in a more banal sense: we cannot know what will happen next in advance. This has implications for politics: sometimes action necessitates something like a leap of faith, into an unknowable future. While events look certain in hindsight, knowing what is to be done in any given moment for any given actor is more of an art than it is a science,⁷⁴ (though it requires an *experimental* attitude).

Now, while there is a fundamental unknowableness to the future, there are some rules that structure the state of play and these should inform our predictions. When it comes to thinking about class power, class struggle, work, production, and so on, it goes without saying that men make their own history, but not under conditions of their own choosing. Structural (or *structuring*) power relations make particular outcomes more or less likely and set out how different groups will interact with each other as they form and respond to their various economic interests. It is through struggle over the surplus generated by work, over the conditions of work, the length of the working day, that modern working practices have appeared, the same is true not of society in general: to take but a few examples—the rise and fall of the organised working-class and its attendant institutions and lifeworlds; the rise of finance and its institutions and lifeworlds. Class—as a dynamic relation and encompassing

⁷³ See Stuart Hall, ‘Marxism Without Guarantees’, *Salvage* for a discussion of the stakes of strategy on the basis of this insight.

⁷⁴ Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, Princeton University Press, 2008, and also the Machiavellian idea of politics as statecraft, as both a way of dealing with unknowable and uncontrollable forces, including luck and fate, rather than the application of moral principles to actions by monarchs and then by states, is most fruitful for thinking about strategy (see Quentin Skinner, ‘Machiavelli on Virtù and the Maintenance of Liberty’, in *Visions of Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 160–185.)

class struggle—has a historically significant role. It makes things happen, it changes things, and it does so in a way that is more fundamental than other power dynamics and relations.

On some interpretations, that this is the case rules out or downgrades UBI in favour of ‘point of production’ struggles. Because UBI is about consumption, the objection goes, which might have downstream effects on the workplace, its adoption means abandoning sites of production, which is bad strategy because of what we know about class and its historical dynamics. This is not particularly convincing. Firstly, if UBI is combined with other strategies to increase the power of workers, then UBI could advance class struggle in these terms, rather than abandon them. Secondly, points of production struggle are, as we have seen, only one kind of class struggle, UBI might have effects on other sites of economic struggle. And as Michael McCarthy and Mathieu Hikaru Desan point out, a view of the structural primacy of class as outlined above, does not commit adherents to a belief in the political primacy of class.⁷⁵ Further, attempts to derive the political primacy of class from accounts of its structural primacy presuppose its political primacy. In place of this, they posit ‘class dynamism’. This is based on the idea that what makes class unique is its interest generation capacity, that it creates differentiated interests, allows for other dynamics (particularly race and gender) to shape the ‘material matrix’ within which possible participants of class formation are located. This permits a structural primacy for class while giving room for other important dynamic, which, they argue, ‘generate substantive subjective differences and hence variable grounds for collective political identification and action’.⁷⁶ Differences and identities other than class are politically productive: generating consciousness and action. This means the objection to UBI from the political primacy of points of production struggle looks weak. If the goal is to transform work

⁷⁵ See McCarthy and Desan, ‘The Problem of Class Abstractionism’, 2023.

⁷⁶ Ibid, p.11.

and to do so durably, through a transformation in its structural conditions, what is required is such a significant shift in the balance of power that other forms of struggles, while having their own particular dynamics, are very likely to be needed.

There is a further point here about unknowability. Debates about UBI on the left tend to employ a speculative strategic empiricism, in which strong claims about the future effects of UBI are made to justify or reject it. These normally go something like this: for the positive case, the increased exit power workers have means they can challenge domination in the workplace, the increased time they have from having to work less can be used to increase collective power in various ways and for various groups, not just for workers as workers, but also workers as renters, as carers, and more. For the negative case: UBI will lead to people acting as consumers, rather than workers, perhaps even deepening atomisation and isolation, making useful political action less likely.

But there is no way of being sure in advance of what would happen if people were given UBIs.⁷⁷

People will have more spare time and enhanced (individual) bargaining power. What they do

⁷⁷ We might think about cash transfers (furlough, ‘Biden Bucks’ & co.) as one of the most major trials of cash transfers. The evidence from this is interesting, and supports the idea that behaviours will be varied, shaped by the context in which money is given (admittedly, in this case a rather unusual one in which ‘normal’ activity was constrained). Perhaps predictably, people spent most of the money on covering basics and paying debts. Some used their transfers to engage in speculation, including in a flurry of cryptocurrency investments; the crypto app Coinbase claimed a 200% increase in investments of \$1200 (the amount paid in the stimulus cheques; see Anantha Divakaruni and Peter Zimmerman, ‘Uncovering Retail Trading in Bitcoin: The Impact of COVID-19 Stimulus Checks’, *Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland Working Paper*, no. 21-13, 2021. They note a 3.8 per cent increase in Bitcoin-USD trading by volume, making up 0.02% of total stimulus payments. The number of people in the US giving to charity declined but the amounts given increased. (See Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, ‘The Giving Environment: Giving During Times of Uncertainty’, 2024.). Studies of labour market behaviour have noted that in the US context, these allowed people to shop around for better work but did not disincentivise work. (See Ioana Elena Marinescu, Daphné Skandalis and Daniel Zhao, The Impact of the Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation on Job Search and Vacancy Creation, *SSRN Working Paper*, March 2021.) In terms of pro-social behaviour, while volunteering initially increased in both the US and UK, this reduced over time, with volunteering presently lower than pre-pandemic years: the Community Life Survey reported that in 2023/24, 16% of adults in England engaged in formal volunteering at least once a month, down from 23% in 2019/20. (UK Government, ‘Community Life Survey 2023/24 – Volunteering and Charitable Giving’, 2024.) From

with it will depend on many other factors. A comparison here might be made with questioning the assumption that with our extra time, we would do something virtuous and worthy, activities that further our own development and the collective good. For James E. Smith and Marielle Pfannebecker this is a structural problem for Post Work thinking:

While the post-work hypothesis aims to rescue us from both the material need and the faulty moralism that keeps us in jobs we hate, it does so by proposing a better life after work. What will make it better falls to an anti-work writer to define; and it is very difficult to make such a definition without becoming surreptitiously prescriptive.⁷⁸

In the case of strategic empirical speculation, rather than a guaranteed virtuous set of Post Work practices, what is claimed is that the political effects desired for one's argument (either increasing or decreasing the power of workers, for instance) are more likely than the unwanted ones. This is very hard to prove or disprove. Moreover, the speculative evidence that liberals give for UBI includes claims that it would reduce populism or increase trust in public institutions.⁷⁹ If these claims turn out to be accurate, UBI might *weaken* workers' positions.

Helen Hester and Will Stronge argue that UBI gives people 'more cognitive bandwidth', which gives workers more confidence to make demands, 'redistributing power', as well as wealth.⁸⁰

this, we can take that responses to cash transfers are diverse and context-dependent, guaranteeing neither vice nor virtue.

⁷⁸ Pfannebecker and Smith, *Work Want Work*, p. 24-25.

⁷⁹ See Hester and Stronge, *Post Work*, p.58; and Liam Byrne, 'Universal Basic Capital Could Deflate Britain's Populist Bubble', *New Statesman*, 23 November 2024; 'Universal Basic Income and Radical Populism: Making the Link'. *Forbes*, 5 January 2017. In fact, it this depoliticising effect that is exactly what is valued by some liberal-technocratic versions of UBI. The assumption here is that a left-wing populism might be needed to build a powerful left coalition, and that trust in the government could have politically-pacifying effects.

⁸⁰ Hester and Stronge, *Post Work*, p. 97

This does not seem implausible (especially as they stipulate very clearly that UBI is not a singular policy but part of a wider transformative approach, with various demands) but neither is it proven. People can do all kinds of things with increased cognitive bandwidth.

In Chapter Two, I argued that liberal republicans tend to build political assumptions into seemingly technical claims about what is ‘pragmatic’, ‘realistic’ and so on in relation to workplace democracy, and that these could be ideological. Here the claim is slightly weaker: rather than being ideological, speculative strategic empiricism assumes too much politically about a situation that is not knowable. For those who use this to argue against UBI this means the baking in of a strategic timidity. For UBI supporters, it might assume the correctness of the strategic path without a good basis for doing so. Given what we know about the openness of politics, there is a case for encouraging rather than restricting experimentation, because, who knows what might happen next.

However, for UBI there is a strategic consideration worth paying careful attention to. There is a risk that relative to class struggle in the workplace over the wage (i.e. one of the other means of redistribution), the possibilities for the formation of consciousness or of radical subjection are reduced. This might tip the strategic case in favour of other approaches but should not lead to a rejection of UBI out of hand.

That said, UBIs might have unknown *positive* effects. Likely these are not knowable in advance, nor are they guaranteed. Other factors—say the persistence of an individualistic, entrepreneurial culture that turns some significant number of people into tiny speculators, kitchen traders, investing their UBIs in get rich quick schemes, or if absent other factors that

reinvigorate trade unionism, like a lifting of restrictive legislation ⁸¹—might mitigate against transformative change. But more time and more money for many people might well lead to actions that have politically significant effects. Because of the class dynamism of societies and of historical change, there is a case that beefed-up worker power will have positive effects on the capacity of the entire working-class's ability to act.⁸²

Thinking strategically and assessing strategic cases for proposals require a consideration of the context in which those strategies will be deployed. Indeed, a strategy which dealt *only* with a highly abstracted model of class conflict and class possibility would likely be of little use. Importantly, some left-wing proponents of UBI support it strategically not just for the enhancement of working-class power as a general principle but as better suited to the proponent's present moment than alternatives. Given this, it is essential to understand these histories, contextualise and assess contemporary arguments about UBI. In this section, I look at James Boggs, André Gorz, by way of Marx's treatment of the effects of different work regimes in the *Grundrisse*. I argue that strategic cases for UBI rely on descriptive claims about changes in working-class composition or about the relative prospects of revolutionary subjects.

James Boggs reoriented conceptual and practical starting points for work and the working-class. In the early 1960s, he argued that automation in the automotive industry was expelling black workers, establishing a stratum of 'outsiders', beyond Fordism's economic and political

⁸¹ Britain has some of the most restrictive trade union legislation in Europe. While the worst excesses of the previous government have been repealed, there is no interest from Keir Starmer in empowering workers through undoing the legislation that came before this. For the case for reinstating collective bargaining, better enforcement, and a removal of other restrictions on collective activity, see e.g. Keith Ewing, John Hendy and Carolyn Jones, 'Rolling Out the Manifesto for Labour Law', Institute of Employment Rights, September 2018.

⁸² However, UBI might do this less well than a jobs guarantee and these strategies are incompatible. I do not take a view as to which is better.

relations. Unlike previous waves of automation, in these cases, these expelled workers would have ‘nowhere to go’. According to Jason E. Smith, ‘Boggs foresaw a world of outsiders on the margins of the wage relation, whose every move was hounded by money’. Then (as now) the conventional wisdom⁸³ on the left was that the best way forward was to (re)build labour unions. But, as Smith has it, ‘[t]o those who imagined rebuilding the AFL-CIO of two decades prior, he could only say, dream on.’⁸⁴ This is because, per Boggs, ‘Historically, workers move ahead ... That is, they bypass existing organizations and form new ones uncorrupted by past habits and customs’.⁸⁵ Not only did these ‘expendables of automation’ have nowhere to go, making their situation a pressing political problem, their expulsion from existing working-class institutions, which had been brought into the capitalist socially reproductive fold, their lack of ties, gave them a particularly revolutionary location. In a way, this might be analogous to Marx and Engels’s idea of the proletariat as a universal class: ‘the proletariat can and must emancipate itself. But it cannot emancipate itself without abolishing the conditions of its own life. It cannot abolish the conditions of its own life without abolishing all the inhuman conditions of life of society today, which are summed up in its own situation’.⁸⁶ On Boggs’s view, this would need modifying: the proletariat, at least the stratum of it that covers secure, industrial workers, is not the universal class, but the divisions within the dispossessed proletariat point to new paths and modes of struggle. Of these surplus, expelled workers, he

⁸³ I mean this is a non-pejorative sense, i.e. that it *was* and *is* the dominant approach, or is taken for granted to be the best approach. As per the discussion on speculative empiricisms above, it is hard to know which strategies will work, so this is without comment on the merits of this view. In any case, it is hard to see how the left can advance *without* this happening, but this does not mean it is the only requirement.

⁸⁴ Jason E Smith, *Smart Machines and Service Work*, p. 149.

⁸⁵ Boggs, *The American Revolution*, 1956, in Smith, *Smart Machines and Service Work*.

⁸⁶ Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, p.50. For a discussion of Marx’s notion of a ‘universal class’ see Renzo Llorente, ‘Marx’s Concept of “Universal Class”: A Rehabilitation’, *Science & Society*, vol. 77, no. 4, October 2013, pp. 536–560.

wrote, that '[t]he means to live without having to work are all around them, before their very eyes. The only question, the trick, is how to take them.'⁸⁷

A few decades later, André Gorz similarly argued that shifts in work and in class composition necessitated a shift in socialist strategy. Post-industrialisation meant the end of the working class, understood as a special historical subject. On his view, the relations within and experience of industrial work produced a 'stratum of skilled workers who take pride in their trade and in the real or potential power it confers on them. The main strategic goal of this social stratum, which has always been hegemonic within the organised labour movement, will remain the appropriation of work, of the work tools and of power over production'.⁸⁸ These workers define themselves in their work, or try to, and realise themselves in it, or try to.

New forms of post-industrial work produced in the place of this layer of workers, those for whom work can never be a source of personal fulfilment or the centre of their lives' those who see work as 'tedious necessity in which it is impossible to be fully involved.'⁸⁹ This stratum, a non-class of non-workers, has the 'abolition of worker and work' as its goal rather than its appropriation. This is the class (non-class) that can deliver the abolition of work, but it is not a transcendental subject: 'It is not the harbinger of a new subject-society offering integration and salvation to its individual members. Instead, it reminds individuals of the need to save themselves and define a social order compatible with their goals and autonomous existence.'⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Boggs, *The American Revolution*, p. 52.

⁸⁸ André Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class*, trans. Michael Sonenscher, Pluto Press, 1982, p.6.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p.7.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p.11.

Rather than ‘socialist morality’ in which commitment to work was elevated and which had as its goal the appropriation of work, this new non-class desires the absence of work, its abolition, because their experience of work is not of (frustrated) meaning but of meaninglessness and anxiety.

Gorz’s rendering of the changes in work and particularly their implications—of the extent to which these (1) obliterated the working-class (in the sense he understood it) and (2) these changes could definitively set the terms for political action in the future—are questionable. For one thing, the end of the working class, declared not only by Gorz but a host of other left-wing figures at this time (most famously in Eric Hobsbawm’s ‘The Forward March of Labour Halted’, a lecture given in 1978, two years before Gorz’s 1980 *Adieux au Prolétariat* [In English translation in 1982 as ‘Farewell to the Working Class’]) was, according to one recent historical study, a premature death notice.⁹¹

While significant changes to class composition, production, and culture *did* take place, this was not in the way that Gorz and others described, nor did they happen without the possibility for contestation and political action by the left:

Changes to social structures and cultures did not generate new political outcomes automatically and were open to multiple interpretations. The key structural shift between the 1960s and late 1970s was not working-class dissolution but the comparative growth of the professional white-collar workers at the expense of small-business-owning strata. This change provided the conditions for the expansion of white-

⁹¹ Matt Myers, *The Halted March of the European Left: The Working Class in Britain, France, and Italy, 1968–1989*, Oxford University Press, 2025.

collar trade unionism as well as the intensification of new lines of antagonism amongst wage earners. ... Understanding the working class as a static, blue-collar, job type has led to a flattening of what were in reality complex forms of class re-composition.⁹²

The implication here is that the defeat diagnosis was wrong, and that the left missed and ignored opportunities for renewed struggle, partly because they did not see the presence of a heightening of activity on class lines in ‘new forms of mobilisation led by female, migrant, and young wage-earners’.⁹³ Further, deindustrialisation did not have to lead to left-wing collapse and defeat and the left played a part in what came next, by ‘participating in the structural, political, and ideological disempowerment of a diverse new generation of workers’, and in so doing stabilising capitalism.⁹⁴

If the reason for Gorz’s support for this reoriented politics (abolition rather than appropriation) was only strategy, this error would be a problem for his case. However, he, and others, also see the point of UBI as normative, i.e. comprising or contributing to a *better* horizon than workers’ control, appropriation or other forms of revolutions in work. The strategic is only one part of why UBI is a preferred option.

⁹² Ibid, p.19.

⁹³ Ibid, p. 2. An important implication of this is that UBI or anti-work perspectives do not always lead to better inclusion of workers outside of the dominant paradigm of work, and hence, as Hester and Stronge argue, it is important for those who see this anti or Post-Work paradigm as useful for its capacious subjects and objects, to also further radicalise and contest the Post Work canon on this front, Hester and Stronge, *Post Work*, p.95.

⁹⁴ Ibid, p.210.

UBIs are proposed from the left as a strategic response to changes in production and/or in the composition of the working class.⁹⁵ That working practices shape consciousness and demands, setting epistemic and practical constraints on workers is in keeping with Marx's own claims about historical specificity. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx describes the resistance of freed slaves in Jamaica to incorporation into emergent relations of wage labour:

[They] content themselves with producing only what is strictly necessary for their own consumption, and, alongside this 'use value', regard loafing (indulgence and idleness) as the real luxury good ... they do not care a damn for the sugar and the fixed capital invested in the plantations, but rather observe the planters' impending bankruptcy with an ironic grin of malicious pleasure and even exploit their acquired Christianity as an embellishment for this mood of malicious glee and indolence. They have ceased to be slaves, but, instead, self-sustaining peasants working for their own consumption. ... Wealth confronts direct forced labour not as capital, but rather as relation of domination; thus, the relation of domination is the only thing, which is reproduced on this basis, for which wealth itself has value only as gratification, not as wealth itself, and which can therefore never create general industriousness.⁹⁶

Different work regimes produce different consciousness. This passage comes just after one where Marx describes how capital's 'severe discipline' across generations, 'has developed general industriousness as the general property of a new species'. At a certain point of the

⁹⁵ Not every left-wing UBI is made on this basis but even when it is not an explicit reason, background debates around class composition form an important context to late twentieth-century and twenty-first century UBI proposals.

⁹⁶ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, Penguin, 1973, p. 325-6. For a helpful discussion of this important passage and its implications, see Barnaby Raine, 'Immanent Freedom: Visions of Ending Capitalism in the Heart of Empire', PhD. diss. Columbia University, 2025.

development of the productive power of labour, ‘possession and preservation of general wealth require a lesser labour time of society as a whole, and where the labouring society relates scientifically to the process of its progressive reproduction’, it becomes possible not only for less work, but also for the overcoming of drudgery, of ‘labour in which a human being does what a thing could do’. On this view, it is the ceaseless striving of capital, its ‘mania’ and its ‘whip’ that produces the material conditions for ‘the development of the rich individuality which is as all-sided in its production as in its consumption’.⁹⁷

The possibilities of action and of consciousness are set by work regimes, and Gorz, Boggs, and others are right to consider how shifts within broader trajectories (i.e. not just in the differences between slavery and wage labour, but within forms of wage labour), might affect political possibilities and hence, pose and help answer questions of strategy for the left.

Because as before, it is hard to adjudicate questions of strategy because of their speculative nature. This should encourage rather than discourage efforts to think and act experimentally. It does mean, however, that attempts to argue for or against UBIs on the basis of speculative strategic claims is not particularly successful.

What of normative critiques of UBI from the left? In these, UBI may or not be feasible, but it is not *desirable*. Recall that the left-wing case for UBI is an increasing worker power (instrumental), and intrinsic, as something it is good to realise on its own right as well as for improving the balance of power in society for future political goals. The intrinsic, principled, or normative cases for UBI from the left include:

⁹⁷ Ibid, p.325.

- 1) Giving workers more time and more choice over how they spend their time, decoupling reward and contribution (especially as way of improving the lives of those outside of wage labour).
- 2) Expanding the definitions of and practical capacities for political action (this is instrumental but in as far as it meets criteria of justice and the virtues of inclusion, it is also intrinsic).
- 3) Overcoming the harms of the conditional welfare state.
- 4) Equality or productive justice: redistributing the surplus in a form that is preferred to (but importantly, not incompatible with) firm-level struggles over wages or state-funded public services, and
- 5) Reducing the centrality of work to society and to people's lives.

It is the last three that have been particularly controversial and been criticised as representing the wrong goal or horizon. While the strategic implications of (1) and (2) have been debated, the normative cases rarely are. Some economistic socialists who seek to police the boundaries of worthwhile struggle might veer into saying that struggles outside of the point of production are less valuable, but this still a primarily strategic claim.

The criticisms of (3) and (4) tend to be put simultaneously. The harms of the conditional welfare state are significant, including obscuring and exploiting the unpaid work of women in the home, but cash transfers are not the only or the best way to address these, nor are they the best way of redistributing the surplus (both in terms of the value and the productive capacity) that is generated at the level of the firm. The alternative means of doing this—by struggle over wages at the firm or sectoral level, and by the provision of services and public ownership of

the means of production at the level of all of society—are, the objection goes, better ways of achieving this objective and furthermore, might better realise other important values. Nancy Fraser supports taking ‘basic’ needs out of the market via universal public services.⁹⁸ Elizabeth Anderson argues that social solidarity is better supported by in kind provision than it is by cash. This is because in kind provision allows a state (or a people democratically through it) to ‘grant higher priority to securing certain goods, such as education, over others.’⁹⁹

In response to this objection, UBI proponents make two convincing points. Firstly, universal provision of services and UBI are not mutually incompatible. It is possible to imagine decommodified housing, for instance, alongside UBI. A choice remains of how much of the power to set preferences that comes from the relative weighting of goods that Anderson outlines. Secondly, UBI supporters point to the heterogeneity of needs and therefore the efficiency of cash relative to services in meeting these needs. UBI is compatible with extensive public service and decommodification, including with the solidaristic and egalitarian attitudes and behaviours that these services have been argued to promote on the basis of their (near) universal use.¹⁰⁰ It is also compatible with an atomistic society without decommodification, but this is not the version that is argued for from the left.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ See Nancy Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism*, Verso, 2023.

⁹⁹ Elizabeth Anderson, ‘Optional Freedoms’, *Boston Review*, 17 July 2000. Anderson rules out UBI on pragmatic grounds. This plausibly ends as a similarly ideological move to the one outlined in Chapter Two. One pragmatic factor is preferences of American citizens. While preferences should not be ignored, especially for thinking about what could happen, if our horizon is attached to what American citizens want, it might already be behind us.

¹⁰⁰ See G. A. Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?*, Princeton University Press, 2009

¹⁰¹ Some critics doubt that the solidarity- or community-boosting effects of UBI are likely. E.g. Honneth in *The Working Sovereign* warns of the disintegrative effects UBI could have: ‘Social labour acts as a mediator between diverse interests, and its shared responsibilities and activities compel individuals to engage in social community. But a basic income leaves individuals’ interests unchanged: they remain oriented towards the satisfaction of subjective preferences ... a universal basic income would produce private consumers’, p. 138.

If UBI is seen as one mechanism for distributing the surplus in tandem with others, these objections are far shakier. One thing UBI does not do, however, is to address the quality of work beyond individual exit.¹⁰² This has been criticised. Martin Hägglund argues that UBI only captures the ‘mode of distribution’ and cannot bring into view democratic socialism, which he defines, in an unorthodox way, as a socialism that involves and constitutes ‘a fundamental and practical revaluation of the capitalist measure of value.’¹⁰³ Hägglund is right to point out that UBI cannot overcome dependence on wage labour for production at a societal level. But this is not what the case for UBI is based on: the claim is that it reduces wage labour’s centrality and could support overcoming it entirely, in the long run. There are, potentially, problems about the workability and practicalities of defending an interim stage and during UBI’s middle period. But it is not accurate to say that UBI, in this sense, is not a solution to the problem of wage labour, because it cannot tackle production, only distribution. It is true that UBIs from the left move away (in terms of strategy and theorising) from production relative to the worker appropriation approach, but it is not true that they cannot support changes in production.

A weakness remains in that UBI is less good at bringing this horizon into *view*. Those who support UBI as part of a broader Post Work vision can say that this is not a problem as questions control and the quality of work can be addressed elsewhere.¹⁰⁴ But it is something that shifts in this paradigm or approach relative to others. Other features of capitalist societies are, however, brought into view. Already mentioned are proletarian experiences beyond waged work. Additionally, UBI adherents are right to point to its usefulness as a means of repoliticising and if enacted, contributing to the redistribution of time. The demands of flexible capitalism involve huge temporal stressors: uncertainty over a lack of permanent work opportunities and over

¹⁰² As argued in Chapter Two improving individual exit helps but is not sufficient.

¹⁰³ Martin Hägglund, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom*, Pantheon Books, 2019, p. 287.

¹⁰⁴ See Hester and Stronge, *Post Work*, for a defence of Post Work against its critics along these lines.

week-to-week scheduling are common. 52% of workers on zero-hours contracts have had shifts cancelled twenty-four or less before they were due to start, according to the TUC.¹⁰⁴ A lack of security results in ‘generalised syndromes of anxiety’.¹⁰⁵ Given all this, it makes sense to restore time to, as Hester and Stronge describe, a ‘frontier of struggle for workers’ movements’.¹⁰⁶ A demand for UBI could mobilise concrete experiences, not of the workplace, but of ‘work creep’ the blending of work and life, the temporal stresses of contemporary capitalism, as well as experiences of unemployment and the conditional benefits system.

Control and meaning, however, do recede in the centring of UBI and/as exit. This is not a problem for theorists who think these are less important either as empirically existing matters of consciousness (Gorz, for instance) or who think that they are either incompatible with or less important than the freedom from work than a UBI in a broader Post Work context could realise. But if, either as consciousness-inspiring horizon or as a practical goal, meaning in and control over work are taken to be as or more important than freedom from work, UBI is relatively less useful.

Ultimately, although this is often presented as a matter of strategy and realisability, it comes down to differing political commitments and their relative priority. We can divide left-wing or anti-capitalist thinking about work into two broad camps. Because there is often quite extraordinary sloppiness and straw-manning across these two positions, what follows is a very cautious attempt at outlining them which is ‘fair’ to ‘both sides’. We have seen hints of this cleavage already in Gorz’s account of the old tradition of work appropriation and control vs an

¹⁰⁴ See Trades Union Congress, ‘Over 8 in 10 Zero-Hours Contract Workers Want Regular Hours, TUC Poll Reveals’.

¹⁰⁵ Paul Apostolidis, *The Fight for Time: Migrant Day Labourers and the Politics of Precarity*, Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 6.

¹⁰⁶ Hester and Stronge, *Post Work*, p. 13.

emergent demand for the abolition of work. In practice, thought, both demands have existed alongside each other, and each can trace a plausible pedigree should they want.¹⁰⁷

The simplest expression of this difference is those who want to find freedom in work (as conscious, creative, purposive activity for the meeting of human needs, all broadly conceived, in the sense of Marxian social reproduction) and those who want to find freedom from the activity for the meeting of needs, freeing up time, and overcoming work, as far as is possible. These are the most generic versions of these two tendencies. The first version has found expression in more positive valuations of work, not just work-in-general, but in the possibilities and experiences of work-under-capitalism: workers made the world, and while they are denied the fruits of the efforts, one day they can win them, and transform the world, themselves, and their work.

This version of counter-culture dignity on the basis of producing and the political power of workers as emerging from this is most clearly expressed in the 1915 song, ‘Solidarity Forever’:

It is we who plowed the prairies; built the cities where they trade
 Dug the mines and built the workshops, endless miles of railroad laid
 Now we stand outcast and starving midst the wonders we have made
 But the union makes us strong.

Similarly, Brecht’s ‘Questions from a Worker Who Reads’:

¹⁰⁷ I do not think there is much use in these origin hunts or crude genealogies. Unless it is made clear what resources these histories offer us for thinking about the present, they can function as making claims for the correctness of strategy on appeals to authenticity that are not only speculative in the sense already outlined but easily slip into moralised notions of ‘real’ workers on one side or the implication that a narrow concept of ‘work’ is always a moral wrong.

Who built Thebes of the seven gates?

In the books are written the names of kings.

Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?¹⁰⁸

Post Work theorists oppose themselves to this particular tendency, on the basis of its promotion of a ‘work ethic’. This ‘work ethic’ is ‘an organizing principle of society’,¹⁰⁹ a ‘productivism’,¹¹⁰ that places work at the centre of lives and society, overvaluing it relative to other activities. This includes the counterhegemonic work ethic(s) of the labour movement. The work ethic is ‘the idea that work is a good in itself or is at least amongst the most virtuous pursuits a person can undertake’ and it takes different forms in different societies and labour regimes.¹¹¹

In opposition to this are those who think a work ethic is not *inherently* troubling. For instance, Alex Gourevitch argues for ‘socially shared labour socialism’, where necessary labour, taken outside of economic coercion, can be an expression of human freedom in democratic planned economy and ‘supported by a socialist work ethic’.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Bertolt Brecht, *Poems 1913–1956*, eds. John Willett and Ralph Manheim, trans. Michael Hamburger, Methuen, 1976, p. 318.

¹⁰⁹ Hester and Stronge, *Post Work*, p. 96.

¹¹⁰ Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, p. 13. This means arguing against some forms of Marxism. For someone who argues that this productivism is present in Marx himself, see Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, Telos Press, 1975.

¹¹¹ Hester and Stronge, *Post Work*, pp.6-9: ‘If originally the work ethic was the means by which already disciplined workers were delivered to their exploitation, it serves a more directly productive function today: where attitudes themselves are productive, a strong work ethic guarantees the necessary level of willing commitment and subjective investment’, p. 9.

¹¹² Alex Gourevitch, ‘Post-Work Socialism?’, *Catalyst*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2022, p. 11.

Jan Kandiyali and Paul Gomberg have argued that a world without work is not flourishing, that a ‘post-work society would be a disaster’.¹¹³ They argue that the positive vision of disalienated labour that Kandiyali has argued for elsewhere,¹¹⁴ based on his reading of Marx’s comments on James Mills, cannot be realised in a society without work. On this view, work is not alienated, and self-realisation takes places, in work that contributes to the good of others. This would, they argue, rule out a Post-Work society because it would make ‘truly human labour’ and the self-realisation that comes from it impossible. This is a misreading of Post Work theorists, who do not want to abolish activity for meeting needs.¹¹⁵ They do, however, differently understand and emphasise freedom.¹¹⁶

There is an important difference in belief about the extent to which work which is outside of market/capitalist coercion should be present and central to future socialist societies. However, in practice, what is being advocated for is either compatible or overlapping: a reduction of working time, the redistribution and reduction of overall labour, including by automation, all accompanied by an openness to the generation of new needs, new practices, new ways of living and being that are not visible from the standpoint of the present, but in which things like the social division of labour, and its attendant alienation, domination, and frustration of

¹¹³ Jan Kandiyali and Paul Gomberg, ‘Communism Shouldn’t Be Post-Work’, in *Debating a Post-Work Future: Perspectives from Philosophy and the Social Sciences*, eds. D. Celentano, M. Cholbi, J. Deranty and K. Schaff, Routledge, 2024, p. 177.

¹¹⁴ See Jan Kandiyali, ‘The Importance of Others: Marx on Unalienated Production’, *Ethics*, vol. 130, 2020, pp. 555–587.

¹¹⁵ Gomberg and Kandiyali list the following Post Work figures: Bastani, Benanav, Danaher, Frayne, Srnicek and Williams and Weeks (p.277), but those listed do not include the kind of disalienated production for need in the definition of work that is to be abolished. Post Work is compatible with the continuation or establishment of this kind of work but holds that this activity is not the sole or best way of being free or way of living well (some post work thinkers rule it out as an expression of freedom, but even in these cases, the kind of disalienated, per Kandiyali, activity they have in mind *could* take place in post work societies).

¹¹⁶ See Orlando Lazar, ‘Working for Others, Even When You Don’t Have To’, forthcoming for a helpful discussion and clarification of the terms of this debate, especially of Post-Work positions on necessary labour.

development are overcome. Some coercion might be involved in ensuring needs are met, at least in some transitional phase.

Despite this overlap, there remains a division: is it in work (in its transformed version, not anything like present day work-under-capitalism) or in overcoming work that this variegated future freedom will be realised and experienced? As Hester and Stronge put it, work is the problem rather than the solution.¹¹⁷ André Gorz rejects the Marxian claim that the free development of each individual is a precondition for the free development of all.¹¹⁸ For Stanley Aronowitz and William DiFazio, workers, provided they are guaranteed an income, are ‘pleased to be relieved of participation in the labor process’.¹¹⁹ One way to make sense of the difference might be the extent to which forms of non-market work ethics or non-market coercion to work might be tolerated or encouraged in future, post-capitalist societies. Perhaps there are differences in the extent to which work, in the collective activity of meeting needs sense, can be seen as positive, neutral, or negative.

The normative horizon, the consciousness and experiences of work (and in the case of work, importantly, of non-work, work not recognised as work) drawn on for each tradition, along with their assumed subjects, are different enough to say that even with overlap on what the future ideal society might be, (and even though there is, to some extent, mutual compatibility), they present a choice; a fork in the road for anti-capitalist theory and practice in relation to work.

¹¹⁷ Hester and Stronge, *Post Work*, p. 9.

¹¹⁸ Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class*, p. 10.

¹¹⁹ Stanley Aronowitz and William DiFazio, *The Jobless Future: Sci-Tech and the Dogma of Work*, University of Minnesota Press, 1994, p. 335.

5. Universal Basic Choices

How to adjudicate between these two competing visions for the future of work? (A choice between these two divergent approaches to work is a separate question to that of UBI, which is compatible with both futures.)¹²⁰ Various methods are adopted. Firstly, appeals are made to Marx's own argument. This is unsatisfactory. Firstly, Marx could be marshalled to support (versions of) both positions based on the textual evidence. Secondly, even if we found decisive proof, would that give us good grounds for adjudicating on matters of accounts of the good or freedom that are in competition with each other? This does not seem very likely. As E.P. Thompson put it: 'to return, in every motion of analysis, to propositions of Marx is like going on a cross-country run in leaden boots'.¹²¹

We could leave the matter of value to one side and look to strategy, but as argued in Section Four, this does not take us very far either. A problem here is that if there is not assumed to be some 'true' value to realise in the world, choosing different versions of similar horizons (here both broadly anti-capitalist) becomes difficult.

So far in this dissertation, I have argued that implicit models of work-under-capitalism within liberal critiques of work obscure important aspects of social relations and present political commitments as merely technical or pragmatic. This is not a question of values but of identifying where critique can become ideological. This approach is of limited use here. While UBI might be less good at bringing production into view, it is plausibly better at bringing the full gamut of proletarian life, outside the wage, into view. A social labour socialism or similar

¹²⁰ Thank you to Orlando Lazar for this important clarification.

¹²¹ E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, Merlin Press, 1979, p. 383.

approach has an easy political subject: the organised working-class. A work-ethic overcoming/Post Work approach has a multiplicity of possible subjects, but these are both less active, at least at present, and less organised (at present, and perhaps as a general tendency). As both approaches, both conceptual and as real movements to change the world, can co-exist, at least under capitalism and, to some extent, in some sort of transitional phase, then the proof might be in the pudding.

6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I considered the various versions and justifications for UBIs. I have argued that the left, right, and centrist version are different enough to be distinct. The suggestion that there is something troubling about the convergence between political left and right was then addressed, and it was argued that even on the strongest possible objection, convergence worries are overstated. The rest of the chapter was about debates within the anti-capitalist left about the strategic and normative merits of UBI. I noted the difficulty of adjudicating between two tendencies within the left in relation to the critique and overcoming of work-under-capitalism.

Where does this leave UBI? Should it be adopted as a strategy for addressing and overcoming work-under-capitalism? UBI is one of several possible approaches. If it is not taken to be comprehensive it is supportable. Supporting it or demanding it has advantages and disadvantages relative to other approaches, particularly in which aspects of work are brought into view or emphasised. This is not a particularly strong positive case for UBI. Instead, I suggest the adoption of a critical (but not hostile), strategic openness to UBI with attention to

what is gained and what is lost through such support is, to my mind, the best approach for meeting the principles of assessing ‘usefulness’ developed in this dissertation.

In a situation where a coalition was assembled which was capable of winning and defending a left-wing UBI, this choice might be approached differently: with that immense power, would UBI (including in combination with other changes to work) be the best option? Would focusing on ownership of productive assets not be another compelling option? How compatible would they be in practice? Its supporters can argue that it *is* compatible with the socialisation of the means of production and workers’ control of the firm and economy. However, if the left was in a position to actually win and retain UBI, having captured the power of the state with a mass movement behind it, this question of compatibility might become more complicated. With such immense power, the left might want to do something different.¹²² But as a choice of that kind is very, very remote, and with support for UBI—including the benefits from winning even a more minimal version of it—plausibly helping to increase worker power, for the sake of attempting to transform work-under-capitalism, why not UBI?

¹²² Hence, Gourevitch and Stanczyk, argue that in light of this, it is best to see UBI as tool to be used within post-capitalist societies, not a way of getting there: ‘a liveable basic income already presupposes an organized working class that has effective control over the shape of the economy. Instead, if and when it comes, a liveable basic income will play the role of limiting the labor discipline that may be democratically imposed on all’. (Gourevitch and Stanczyk ‘The Basic Income Illusion’). The same dilemma likely would not apply to a smaller, instrumental support UBI, along the lines of those proposed by Wright or Lazar (Wright, ‘Basic income as a socialist project’; Lazar ‘The False Promise of UBI’). In which case the compatibility problem is less of a problem—it would take less power to win and defend such UBI, which they, and others convincingly argue, would increase worker power—making the claim that UBI could lead to a transformation of work-under-capitalism more plausible.

Conclusion: Thinking Work, Redux

There is a gap between the activity of political philosophers and ‘real’ politics. The narrowing of this gap is seen, by critics of the gap, as desirable.¹ This dissertation has been motivated, in part, by a desire to close such a gap—specifically in relation to political philosophers’ treatment of work—or at least draw attention to it. I have approached this problem by looking at how philosophical models of work can produce distance between philosophy and politics.

Bridging the gap between philosophy and politics is assumed to require significant changes to a dominant mode of academic political philosophy, one which develops universal principles as a more or less systematic model and applies that model mechanically to politics.² Instead, politics is best approached by starting in a situated fashion. But where do we start and where do we look? The gap cannot be filled with an easy-going empiricism which assumes we can know where we are or take what we see at face value. We cannot easily understand what is ‘real’. This is not because we are stupid or tricked, but because reality is constituted by and constitutes our consciousness—our ability to make sense of the world is tied to our contexts and the interests that form within them.

¹ Ben Turner, ‘Situating realism, the ethnographic sensibility, and comparative political theory within the methodological turn in political theory’, *Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 27 (1), pp. 387-406, p. 387.

² See e.g. Charles Mills, ‘Ideal Theory as Ideology’, *Hypatia*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2005, pp. 165–184; Bernard Williams, ‘Realism and Moralism in Political Theory’, in *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, Princeton University Press, pp. 1-17; Raymond Geuss, *Outside Ethics*, Princeton University Press, 2005; Enzo Rossi and Matt Sleat, ‘Realism in normative political theory’, *Philosophy Compass*, 9 (10), 2014, pp. 689-701. On differences between ‘realisms’ see Lorna Finlayson, ‘With radicals like these, who needs conservatives? Doom, gloom, and realism in political theory’, *European Journal of Political Theory*, 16 (3), 2017, pp. 264-282.

One way to think about—and narrow—the gap in light of this insight is to consider how our existing models are faulty and ideological. The philosophers can look at the various ways people have interpreted the world. To do so, they need an attentiveness to power relations and dynamic social relations, an attentiveness to ideology, and a careful consideration of where their inquiries have stopped and started—where they have located the limits of ‘real’ politics.

In addition to this negative approach which looks at existing models, I suggested a tentatively positive project: addressing the question of how it might be said that one account of something could be better than another for the purpose of a political goal—in this case, for transforming work.³ I gave three criteria: the disclosure of social reality; the identification of agents; the establishment of a horizon. Through my critical evaluation of existing approaches to work in contemporary political philosophy additional positive criteria can be inferred, on the basis of their absence from these approaches. Firstly, capturing accurately the place of work in society, bringing historical and economic relations into view. Secondly, tracking experiences of workers and their work. Thirdly, the usefulness of frameworks which permit plurality rather than comprehensiveness, on the basis that they can better succeed at the first and second virtues.

In Chapter One, I argued that there are stakes to our concepts of work. This means that we should be attentive to work claims, but we need not be prescriptive or pedantic about conceptual expansions. Taking the boundaries of work for granted is a limited and ideological approach that obscures varieties of and dynamics within work-under-capitalism. At the same time, inclusion done for inclusion’s sake without attention to what is gained and lost for both concepts (work and the activity to be included) can be idealising or unhelpful. In place of these

³ I use ‘transforming’ here as neutrally and capaciously as possible, with the intention of ruling out neither of the two left-wing approaches to work outlined in Chapter Five. It is not meant to mean ‘improving’ but turning work-under-capitalism into something fundamentally different.

idealising vices, I argued for a strategic, political orientation in thinking about what work claims actually *do*.

Chapter Five took a similar approach to debates over one proposal to address the harms of work: UBI. Most of the arguments for or against UBI (from within the left) on the basis of pragmatism or strategy fail, because they involve a speculative empiricism that is hard to question, but that in practice does not prove much. Support for a UBI, then, comes mainly down to a set of divergent normative principles, between which it is hard to adjudicate,⁴ and about which people have strong intuitions and commitments.

Chapters Two, Three and Four looked at attempts to critique work-under-capitalism that, while initially seeming promising and useful, end up undermining their critical potential. There are several mechanisms by which this happens: a failure to see the whole, resulting in an idealisation of the market (in Axel Honneth's theory of recognition); a strategic orientation that construes what is possible in a way that is ideological (in Elizabeth Anderson rejection of workplace democracy); and an acceptance of liberal framings, especially revolving around a charge of 'paternalism', that render critique toothless (Rahel Jaeggi's revised alienation). I instead endorse an approach that apprehends totality, that understands that strategic claims assume and imply political claims (that there is no merely 'technical' question in politics) and is courageous about what we do when our political groundings are challenged or unstable, avoiding a retreat into a hunt for normativity that is not only fruitless but epistemically damaging.

⁴ At least within non-ideal theory approaches.

Approaches that understand work as part of wider processes that take place in and are shaped by the particular power dynamics of capitalism produce different results from approaches that do not. In such approaches, the problem of work *is* the problem of capitalism, it is not a problem of bad bosses or bad jobs. Keeping the total ensemble of capitalist relations in view is required for thinking about work historically, rather than in an idealising manner.

‘Intellectuals who exchange ideas over the heads of those whose interests they claim to defend, without founding their work on the lived experience of those people, run the risk of irrelevance and elitism’, argued the late sociologist, Michael Burawoy.⁵ But how should we approach ‘lived experience’ given that we do not have unfiltered access to reality? That models of work should ‘speak’ to actual experiences of work does not mean that philosophers or other theorists of work should act like pollsters, assuming preferences are known and knowable. Instead, the principle should be that there is use in developing concepts of work that can politicise and make sense of experience. This is the way that experience can be taken seriously without assuming direct knowledge comes from a particular situatedness. The best way to do this is through attentiveness to work practices. This does not mean reading empirical papers from other disciplines and citing them. It means thinking about the dynamic relationships between work, thinking about work and lived experience.

This positive model of conceptualising work in light of this is as follows: in place of cleaving off parts of the whole, a view of the totality is needed. Attention to the ways that ideas and practices can be ideological is needed to make sense of work, rather than taking moralities that appear around work at face value. And theories of work should be attuned to experiences of

⁵ Michael Burawoy, *The Politics of Production*, Verso, 1995, p. 19.

work, while keeping the point about ideology in mind. It is possible to do all this in support of a political goal. The model I have proposed here is of a ‘usefulness’ premised on a concept’s ability to identify agents and inspire action by bringing suffering and its political solution into view.

The positive model outlined looks similar to Marx’s theory of work and his approach to ideology. This is not because Marx is better because he is Marx. Instead, Marx is useful in having generated a method for understanding the world, and particularly, for the present discussion, for understanding the place of ideas in that world. He allows us to see ideas historically, as forms of ideology, and as containing possibilities for action and transformation. As well as failing to be useful politically (in enhancing possibilities for action), theories of work can fail because they are ideological. This is not just because we can only think with what we have nearby or what we have inherited—a model of ‘lag’ or delay, like Elizabeth Anderson posits—but because of ‘the unbreakable interconnection of all real phenomena in bourgeois society as a whole’ that the model of historic specificity reveals.⁶

So where does this leave us? If, as Raymond Geuss puts it, ‘what is “out there” is usually a farrago of truths, half-truths, misperceptions, indifferent appearance, and illusion’,⁷ where can we look? The answer offered here is that we have to look at the ways we already look at things, with an attunement to the context they have developed in. This attunement is various: to the historical nature of ideas and ways of understanding; to the connection of those ideas to relationships of power; to the ‘usefulness’ of ideas for movements, and therefore, to dynamics of existing ‘real’ politics.

⁶ Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, Monthly Review Press, 1970, p. 81.

⁷ Raymond Geuss, *A World Without Why*, Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 140.

The first two contexts are best met with a particular practical intellectual activity: ideology critique. The third context is harder to be attentive to because politics is an especially difficult to apprehend part of reality. The partiality of our own knowledge is only one problem here. We also have to contend with the fact that it involves speculation about things that are hard to measure and hard to know, as well as predicting what might happen next. This does not mean we cannot make predictions or think about general rules, but it requires an openness to the possibilities of politics, to people and to history: all three have the capacity to surprise us.

As for the methodological orientation that these insights should give us, I have proposed in this dissertation an openness to strategy and careful attention to what claims, e.g. ‘work claims’ and arguments, *do*. This is not about which ideas ‘sell best’, or a question of PR or good ‘comms’. It is about the fact that practical political activities involve these kinds of contestations (of meanings, of horizons, of subjects), and a historically-informed, strategic orientation towards these is more politically ‘useful’ (for advancing our goals) than one that moralises and idealises these activities by demanding loyalty to the original versions of concepts, or that fetishises ‘inclusion’ as an intrinsic good. This tends to lead to conclusions which are modest—noticing shifts and questioning assumptions—rather than bombastic. This is not to deny that there is an important place for utopian, generative, or simply ‘out-there’ modes of thinking. The modest approach offered in this dissertation can complement a utopian one taken elsewhere.⁸ No doubt, we need new ways to think and to want, beyond the ones we currently have.

⁸ It is likely that philosophy, even on the broad, critical model outlined here, is not particularly likely to be suited to producing utopian thinking. It is better suited to methodically plodding through claims and assumptions than it is to generating (important; de-naturalising) feats of imagination.

What could philosophy in this modest, anti-ideological mode be? We might begin by distinguishing between the particular activity practised in university departments, journals, conferences, and so on, and a general capacity for reflection that could take various forms. To take an example: at a recent talk, with the time for discussion receding, the chair suggested that there be only one question to ensure enough time for the wine reception. The speaker requested more questions and skipping the wine reception, but this was denied. This is not intended as a defence of question-and-answer sessions, which more frequently impede than encourage thinking, but illustrative of how the institutional practices of philosophy can frustrate rather than advance reflection. If there is a path forward for philosophy in contributing to radical movements, it is likely to be found in what Lorna Finlayson describes as philosophy's possibility for 'restless and insatiable troublemaking';⁹ in practices which involve 'constant vigilance' rather than reconciliation with existing methodologies.¹⁰ Philosophy, as any good dialectician knows, will only change when the world around it changes. Until then, we can use and develop its capacity for looking back, looking again, looking better and looking critically.

This modest contribution model does not assume that philosophy and philosophers eventually arrive at 'truth' by nibbling away at ideological crumbs. Rather, the assumption here is that it is difficult to say very much—or at any rate to say anything fixed or absolute. Yet there is something we do know: the organisation of work-under-capitalism stunts us. It harms us. People resist these harms—the daily humiliations, cruelties, and frustrations inflicted by work—and they will continue to do so. This does not mean philosophers can rest on their laurels. As Karl Korsch put it, 'just as political action is not rendered unnecessary by the economic action of a revolutionary class, so intellectual action is not rendered unnecessary by

⁹ Lorna Finlayson, *The Political is Political*, Rowman and Littlefield, 2015, p. 189.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

either political or economic action'.¹¹ The task for radical philosophy is to theorise work-under-capitalism in ways that further, rather than hinder, resistance.

¹¹ Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, p. 84.

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