

SLACK MOTHERFUCKER: MARXIST THEORIES OF THE ABOLITION OF WORK

“I’m working/But I’m not working for you”
Superchunk, “Slack Motherfucker”

The specter of accelerating automation is haunting the imagination of socialist Millennials and Silicon Valley executives alike. Especially among the titans of tech, there is a creeping sense that our future will be increasingly jobless. Speaking in Davos at the 2017 World Economic Forum, Salesforce CEO Marc Benioff warned that innovations in artificial intelligence were on the brink of creating millions of “digital refugees.”¹ One study by researchers from Oxford concluded that nearly half of all jobs in the U.S. are at risk of computerization in the next two decades.² The prospect of mass unemployment has led Elon Musk and other tech magnates to call for a Universal Basic Income (UBI) that would substitute cash payments from the state for wage labor.³

Marx’s dialectical view of history outlined a futuristic scenario where automation has dramatically reduced the need for human labor, enabling everyone to enjoy a decent standard of living while working less. This is the revolutionary culmination of the contradiction between productive forces and social relations under capitalism. Today, an ideal of minimal labor coupled with basic income, enabled by maximum automation, is once again nurturing utopian Marxist visions of life after capitalism.⁴ Adding sprinkles

¹ Marc Richman, “Technology’s frantic speed will create ‘digital refugees’ with no clear fix, Salesforce’s Benioff warns at Davos,” *GeekWire* (January 17, 2017).

² Carl Benedikt Frey and Michael A. Osborne, “The Future of Employment: How Susceptible Are Jobs to Computerisation?” (September 2013). <http://www.oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk/downloads/academic/future-of-employment.pdf>

³ Arjun Kharpal, “Tech CEOs back call for basic income as AI job losses threaten industry backlash,” *CNBC* (February 21, 2017).

⁴ Stanley Aronowitz et al., “The Post-Work Manifesto.” In *Post-Work: The Wages of Cybernation*, ed. by Stanley Aronowitz and Jonathan Cutler (Routledge, 2011), pp. 33-80. Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Marxism, Feminism, 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); Paul Mason, *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* (Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2015); Peter Frase, *Four Futures: Life After Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 2016).

of youthful irony and playful fantasy, a new generation of anti-capitalists are calling it Fully Automated Luxury Gay Space Communism.⁵

Unlike techno-futurists, Marxists recognize that class struggle will be the decisive factor in resolving the coming crisis of capitalist automation. We know the ruling class is not going to voluntarily provide a guaranteed standard of living with shorter working hours— people must demand and struggle for that future. Technological innovation may contain the seeds of emancipation, but the crucial issue is the social relationships surrounding technology, and these social relations are fundamentally shaped by class struggle. Historically, capitalists have used automation to disempower and discipline workers, not to liberate them. Instead of shortening hours for workers, the capitalist class can profit and maintain power by expanding a reserve army of labor. Likewise, remedies to automation and unemployment, particularly UBI, can take very different forms depending on the social relations of class power. If linked to the neoliberal agenda of the capitalist class, UBI might simply be an austere, inadequate replacement for the welfare state— after all, Milton Friedman and Charles Murray are among those who have previously supported variations of UBI.⁶

The Left will need to link job losses from automation to a demand for shorter working hours, in opposition to a class system where workers are overworked or underemployed. Automation itself need not be resisted, if linked to demands for shorter hours and basic income. Shortening the workday will provide people with more leisure time, while strengthening the bargaining power of the working class as a whole. Indeed, working class resistance and a strong labor movement could accelerate the process of automation, liberating human labor from the worst forms of drudgery and toil. Historically, capital has increased investments in automation in response to the struggles of workers for higher wages, better working conditions, and shorter hours. Instead of resisting technological displacement, we could accelerate the pace of automation through class struggles for equitable distribution, greater autonomy, and a reduction of the working day.⁷

⁵ Brian Merchant, "Fully Automated Luxury Communism," *The Guardian* (March 18, 2015); Tom Syverson, "Fully Automated Luxury Gay Space Communism": Has the Time For Universal Basic Income Finally Come?" *Paste Magazine* (June 7, 2017).

⁶ Jesse Myerson, "The Right to a Dignified Life," *Jacobin* (August 4, 2015); Shannon Ikebe, "The Wrong Kind of UBI," *Jacobin* (January 21, 2016); Matt Bruenig, Antti Jauhiainen, and Joonas-Hermann Makinen, "The UBI Bait and Switch," *Jacobin* (January 1, 2017).

⁷ Phillip Foner and David Roediger, *Our Own Time: A History of American Labor and the Working Day* (Verso, 1989); Stanley Aronowitz and William DiFazio, *The Jobless Future* (University of Minnesota Press, 1994), ch.11; Srnicek and Williams, *Inventing the Future*, ch. 6.

WORK AND LABOR

The struggle ahead must also include a cultural offensive against the ideological glorification of work for its own sake—the remnants of what Max Weber called the Protestant work ethic. If our objective is the abolition of wage labor as we know it, we must not only seize the means of production but also detach our self-identities from our jobs and de-center the role of work in everyday life.⁸ The offensive against the work ethic must take aim not only at the capitalist class, but also at liberals and unions who call for more job creation while upholding an ideological investment in the “dignity of work.” Although there has been an erosion of the industrial discipline that characterized Fordism, the work ethic has since taken new forms through a discourse of professionalism which demands affective expressions of enthusiasm and commitment. The post-Fordist “spirit of capitalism” is such that work is supposed to be a primary source of identity, meaning, and personal fulfillment.⁹ The struggle against work and the work ethic must also challenge the forms of unpaid labor mainly performed by women for the social reproduction of the family. The refusal of work must be accompanied by a critique of the family as a social institution which depends on domestic labor and care work, both waged and unwaged, in the form of housework, child care, elder care, etc.¹⁰

Italian Autonomist Marxism has been a significant theoretical influence in post-work politics. Autonomists have maintained that capital and labor can only be understood in relation to one another, and the nature of that relationship is inherently antagonistic. The imposition of wage labor, not private property or the market, is the foundation of capitalism. In the late 1960s, the “Workerist” perspective of the Autonomists restored the subjectivity of workers and placed the struggles against capitalism at the center of their analysis. The primacy of labor gives tremendous power to the working class, and the refusal of work is the ultimate expression of this power. Meanwhile, automation is not only motivated by competition between capitalists, but also serves as a means for capital to wrest control over the workplace away from labor. As Mario Tronti argued, “it is the specific

⁸ Stanley Aronowitz, “Why Work?” *Social Text* vol. 12 (1985), pp. 19-42; Aronowitz et al. “The Post-Work Manifesto”; Weeks, *The Problem with Work*; Michael Roberts, “Occupy the Hammock: The Sign of the Slacker behind Disturbances in the Will to Work,” in *Class: The Anthology*, ed. by Stanley Aronowitz and Michael J. Roberts (Wiley, 2017), pp. 171-92.

⁹ Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (Verso, 2005); Franco “Bifo” Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (Semiotext(e), 2009).

¹⁰ Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, ch. 3-4.

moments of the class struggle which have determined every technological change in the mechanisms of industry.”¹¹

My own perspective differs somewhat, because it is rooted in the humanist tradition of Marxism which is concerned with questions of alienation, labor, and species being raised in the early writings of Marx. This sort of humanism is explicitly opposed by the Italian Autonomists, as well as “anti-productivist” Marxists like Moishe Postone and Kathi Weeks.¹² From a humanist Marxist perspective, I believe it is important to maintain the distinction, which Weeks willfully collapses, between the exploitative and alienating forms of *work* under capitalism, and a transhistorical notion of *labor* that is vital to what the young Marx called species being. The implication of my perspective is that we must resist the tyranny of wage labor under capitalism, but also construct social relationships that enable people to cooperatively realize their creative potential. To extend this argument, I will turn to a text in the tradition of humanist Marxism heretofore neglected in the theoretical development of postwork politics: Herbert Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization*.¹³

The title of this paper captures some of my approach: the lyrics of Superchunk’s “Slack Motherfucker”— an anthem of sorts in the indie rock scene of the 1990s— talk about working, just not working for someone else. In 1989, Superchunk founded their own independent record label, Merge Records, while playing a central role in the music scene around Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Merge Records is one among countless independent record labels founded since the late 1970s in concert with the evolution of punk, hardcore, and alternative rock music. These record labels were products of a do-it-yourself (DIY) ethic, insisting on creative control and independence from the corporate music industry. The DIY ethic should be understood as part of the historical lineage of what Boltanski and Chiapello call an “artistic critique” of capitalism’s alienation and absence of autonomy and authenticity.¹⁴ Independent record labels exist within a system of commodity exchange, but their motives are generally not entrepreneurial— the point is to create and distribute music, not to maximize profits at all costs. The DIY ethic may take the form of small businesses like Merge Records, but it

¹¹ Mario Tronti, “The Strategy of Refusal,” in *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics*, ed. by Sylvère Lotringer and Christian Marazzi (Semiotext(e), 2007), p. 29.

¹² Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1995); Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, pp. 35-51; Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, pp. 85-89

¹³ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Beacon Press, 1966).

¹⁴ Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, ch. 7.

expresses a collective desire for creative and collaborative work that cannot be truly realized under capitalism.¹⁵

LIFE AFTER WORK

In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse not only imagined the possibility of freedom from alienated labor, he outlined a grand image of total liberation that would finally reconcile the antagonism between intellectual rationality and libidinal sensuality. *Eros and Civilization* is typically associated with the “sexual revolution” of the 1960s and 70s, but at the core of Marcuse’s analysis is a Marxist ideal of freedom from work. The book represents Marcuse’s reckoning with the ideas of Sigmund Freud. Written during the anticommunist fervor of the 1950s, Marcuse never references Karl Marx by name, yet Marx’s ghost haunts every page. At the time *Eros and Civilization* was published, Freudian psychoanalysis was having its greatest impact on American society; meanwhile, the mere mention of Marx’s name was cause for state repression, or at least intellectual disdain. Against the prevailing use of Freud for purposes of domination, Marcuse sought to reclaim the more radical and liberating implications of his thought.

Marcuse read Freud against Freud by treating his concepts as historical and sociopolitical, instead of natural and timeless. Marcuse used Freud to smuggle into the McCarthyist Fifties a Marxist utopian vision based on the growth of productive forces, freedom from alienated labor, and revolutionary liberation. Marcuse turned to Freud as a means of expanding the revolutionary ideal of emancipation and liberation that originated with Marx. Marcuse’s utopianism was consistent with Marx’s theory, but also extended it to the liberation of individuals from psychic domination and libidinal repression. Freud’s position was that the repression of humanity’s natural instincts is necessary for social order, productivity, and progress. Because civilization depends on the denial of full satisfaction, the instincts must be restrained and redirected to other activities or objects of desire. This entails obedience to what Freud called the reality principle and its values of restraint, productivity, and delayed gratification, in opposition to the pleasure principle of desire, play, and gratification. Repression in society at large is reproduced in the

¹⁵ Ryan Moore, “Friends Don’t Let Friends Listen to Corporate Rock: Punk as a Field of Cultural Production,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* vol. 36 (2007), pp. 438-74; Ryan Moore, *Sells like Teen Spirit: Music, Youth Culture, and Social Crisis* (NYU Press, 2009).
Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, p. 13.

psyche of individuals. For the sake of productivity, people learn to forget the joys of pleasure and play, and they repress their desires for satisfaction. The reality principle does not merely suppress the pleasure principle, it channels the desire for pleasure toward activities that are useful for the dominant social order. Unfulfilled needs are sublimated into productive, controllable endeavors. As Marcuse wrote, “man learns to give up momentary, uncertain, and destructive pleasure for delayed, restrained, but ‘assured’ pleasure.”¹⁶

Freud concludes that unhappiness and dissatisfaction— within the psyches of individuals, and in society as a whole— are necessary preconditions of civilization and progress. Marcuse challenged Freud’s pessimism with a dialectical approach that treated the reality principle as historical and contingent, rather than eternal and inevitable. For Marcuse, repression and domination are not timeless or unavoidable, they are products of society and therefore subject to struggle and change. Marcuse based his hopes on the increasing forces of production. As he put it, “[M]uch of the toil, renunciation, and regulation imposed upon men is no longer justified by scarcity, the struggle for existence, poverty, and weakness. Society could afford a high degree of instinctual liberation without losing what it has accomplished or putting a stop to its progress.”¹⁷ The reality principle’s dominance over the pleasure principle becomes increasingly pointless, as the forces of production develop to an extent that potentially surmounts scarcity. Individuals and society could be liberated from the need to sacrifice pleasure and satisfaction for the sake of work and productivity.

Marcuse introduced the terms “surplus-repression” and the “performance principle” to describe how a social formation shapes the character of domination. Invoking but never naming Marx, he analyzed surplus-repression as a form of exploitation, linking it to the concept of surplus-value in describing a total experience of domination and alienation. In distinguishing between basic and surplus-repression, Marcuse clarified that he did not believe it was possible or even desirable to completely eliminate repression.¹⁸ He defined basic repression as “the ‘modifications’ of the instincts necessary for the perpetuation of the human race in civilization.” With increasing economic and technological productivity, a greater portion of basic repression becomes surplus-repression.

¹⁶ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, p. 13.

¹⁷ Herbert Marcuse, “Freedom and Freud’s Theory of Instincts,” in *The Essential Marcuse*, ed. by Andrew Feenberg and William Leiss (Beacon Press, 2007), p. 163.

¹⁸ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, p. 35.

Marcuse identified the performance principle at work in both capitalist and communist forms of postwar industrial society. He introduced the concept of the performance principle to emphasize that the reality principle is historically and sociologically variable. As with repression, the point was not to wholly abolish the reality principle, but rather to transform its character in the process of liberating the pleasure principle. Under capitalism, the performance principle takes the form of moral compulsion— the “work ethic.” The obligation to compete and perform— not only at work, but even in leisure activities and personal life— becomes inescapable in the social relations of capitalism. Marcuse links his analysis of surplus-repression and the performance principle to Marx’s critique of alienation:

The performance principle, which is that of an acquisitive and antagonistic society in the process of constant expansion, presupposes a long development during which domination has been increasingly rationalized: control over social labor now reproduces society on an enlarged scale and under improving conditions....[T]heir labor is work for an apparatus which they do not control, which operates as an independent power to which individuals must submit if they want to live..Work has now become general, and so have the restrictions placed upon the libido: labor time, which is the largest part of the individual’s life time, is painful time, for alienated labor is absence of gratification, negation of the pleasure principle.¹⁹

Surplus-repression and the performance principle compel people to internalize the constant drive to work, compete, and produce. They are also evident in the vehement hostility directed against individuals who refuse to work, appear to be lazy or unproductive, or seem generally free of social constraint. Social anxieties about pleasure and freedom proliferate, demanding submission to authoritarian forces of repression: “As the reality principle takes root, even in its most primitive and most brutally enforced form, the pleasure principle becomes something frightful and terrifying; the impulses for free gratification meet with anxiety, and this anxiety calls for protection against them.”²⁰

Repressive domination by the performance principle is not inevitable. The dialectical irony is that capitalism increases the forces of production to the point that it becomes possible to abandon the performance principle— to reduce alienated labor and set free the pleasure principle. Beyond this

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 45

²⁰ Ibid, p. 67

historical moment, repressive domination by the reality principle is surplus-repression, which continues in the interests of domination, not from the necessity of survival. Marcuse's utopian ideal is nothing but a restatement of Marx's dialectical vision of a revolutionary synthesis of the contradiction between forces and relations of production.

The contradiction between the forces and relations of production was a consistent theme in Marx's thinking about capitalism. As early as 1845, in *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels note how the division of labor accelerates the development of the productive forces while at the same time deepening the alienation of workers. They described the conflict between productive *forces*, which are the cumulative development of technology, science, knowledge, and skill, and the relations of production, the social relationships between classes shaped by ownership of the means of production. Social change is fueled by the conflicts and contradictions between these forces and *relations* of production, such that productive forces outgrow the forms of social relationships which contain them. Marx and Engels argued that it was basically a matter of life and death: "Individuals must appropriate the existing totality of the productive forces, not only to achieve self-activity, but also merely to safeguard their very existence."²¹

In the *Grundrisse*, Marx's notebooks from 1857-58, the theoretical notion of conflict between forces and relations of production is grounded in his studies of economics and history. The fullest discussion of an automated society with minimal labor is elaborated in the *Grundrisse's* sections on machinery, labor, and "fixed capital"—the so-called "Fragment on Machines." Capitalism accelerates and expands the development of productive forces. Innovations in science, technology, and general knowledge make it possible, for the first time in history, to overcome the limits of scarcity. Freed from the need to work just to survive, human beings could spend more time developing their intellectual and physical capabilities.

As soon as labour in the direct form has ceased to be the great well-spring of wealth, labour time ceases and must cease to be its measure...The surplus labor of the mass has ceased to be the condition for the development of general wealth, just as the non-labour of the few, for the development of the general powers of the human head...The free development of individualities, and hence not the reduction of the necessary labour time so as to posit

²¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The German Ideology," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. by David McLellan (Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 194.

surplus labour, but rather the general reduction of the necessary labour of society to a minimum, which then corresponds to the artistic, scientific etc. development of the individuals in the time set free, and with the means created, for all of them.²²

Yet the social relations of capitalism prevent these possibilities from being realized. While growing productive forces make work increasingly unnecessary, social relations based on the exploitation of labor continue; without a strong labor movement, people find themselves working even longer hours. And thus the contradiction between the forces and relations of production—between the prospect of liberation and the reality of exploitation—only increases and intensifies as capital accumulates. This contradiction between forces and relations of production provides “the material conditions to blow this foundation sky-high.”²³

The most succinct statement of Marx’s view is to be found in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* from 1859. Marx’s method of historical materialism had led him to conclude that capitalism developed within the shell of feudalism and eventually broke through its limitations. Applying the same dialectical method, he believed that capitalism was creating the conditions for a proletarian revolution and a socialist society. This revolution would finally abolish the forms of social relations based on class exploitation. “The bourgeois relations of production are the last antagonistic form of the social process of production,” Marx wrote, “but the productive forces within bourgeois society create also the material conditions for a solution of this antagonism.”²⁴ A decade earlier, *The Communist Manifesto* had put it more dramatically: the bourgeoisie creates its own gravediggers.²⁵

Marx discarded this vision when he published the first volume of *Capital*. Especially in the mammoth fifteenth chapter of *Capital*, he is more attuned to the oppressive consequences of machinery and the deskilling of workers in the context of capitalist social relations. Once the machine is in charge of the worker, rather than vice versa, the capitalist can dictate the pace of work and control the rhythm and intensity of the workday. Technological innovation is used to discipline and control workers, to control the speed and the intensity of the work process. Declining profits lead capitalists to increase

²² Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundation of the Critique of Political Economy* (Penguin, 1973), pp. 705-6

²³ *Ibid*, p.706.

²⁴ Karl Marx, “Preface to *A Critique of Political Economy*,” in Karl Marx: Selected Writings, p. 426.

²⁵ Marx and Engels, “The Communist Manifesto,” in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, p. 255.

their rate of exploitation, squeezing longer hours and more productivity out of their workers. Automation reduces the socially necessary labor time that workers need to perform in order to maintain and reproduce their existence. And yet, since labor is the source of value, the more capital-intensive firms experience a declining rate of profit, so the intensity and speed of work increases. The contradiction only grows deeper: "If machinery is the most powerful means of raising the productivity of labour, i.e. of shortening the working time needed to produce a commodity, it is also, as a repository of capital, the most powerful means of lengthening the working day beyond all natural limits in those industries first directly seized on by it."²⁶

Nevertheless, Marx did revisit the ideal of a post-work society enabled by automation in the posthumously published third volume of *Capital*. In a remarkable passage from "The Trinity Formula," Marx returns to an enduring philosophical question about the relationship between necessity and freedom, in the context of possibilities for a reduction of the working day. Here, Marx's longstanding philosophical concerns are linked with his dialectical analysis of the contradictions of political economy:

In fact, the realm of freedom actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material production...Freedom in this field can only consist in socialized man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favorable to, and worthy of, their human nature. But it nonetheless still remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can blossom forth only with this realm of necessity as its basis. The shortening of the working-day is its basic prerequisite.²⁷

Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* restated Marx's dialectical vision through the language of Freudian psychoanalysis read against itself. But *Eros and Civilization* also went beyond Marx in calling for the collective liberation of our senses, psyches, and libidos. Marcuse addressed questions of pleasure, aesthetics, and sexuality that most Marxists had neglected, but which later emerged as central issues for the New Left and the counterculture. Echoing

²⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 526.

²⁷ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, chapter 48, p. 820?

Marx in the passage quoted above, Marcuse maintained that the reduction of the working day was a fundamental aspect of full emancipation:

Under the 'ideal' conditions of mature industrial civilization, alienation would be completed by general automatization of labor, reduction of labor time to a minimum, and exchangeability of functions. Since the length of the working day is itself one of the principal repressive factors imposed upon the pleasure principle by the reality principle, the reduction of the working day to a point where the mere quantum of labor time no longer arrests human development is the first prerequisite for freedom.²⁸

ART, (COUNTER-)CULTURE, AND THE UTOPIAN IMAGINATION

In the second half of *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse sketches an image of liberation and non-repressive civilization. Although the reality principle achieves dominance, its rule is never absolute. The pleasure principle endures in the subordinate realms of art and fantasy, periodically resurfacing in disruptive moments that Freud described as “the return of the repressed.” The memory of an original state of happiness and harmony persists in the unconscious. Marcuse argued that these insights of the unconscious were expressed in art, mythology, and philosophy, but also in more routine acts of daydreaming and fantasy. He maintained a lifelong interest in the capacity of art and culture to escape the repressive force of the reality principle. Marcuse maintained that art reveals repressed, forgotten truths which cannot be adequately represented by language.

For Marcuse, imagination and aesthetic are “unrealistic” in the sense that they have maintained their freedom from the reality principle. The aesthetic dimension preserves the subordinated ideals of pleasure, sensuousness, and beauty against domination by the intellect, technique, and reason. Art reveals the possibilities for a happier civilization, but it does so through acts of negation, in memories of oppression and protests against the existing state of things. In emphasizing the negative aspect of aesthetics, Marcuse maintained a close affinity with his Frankfurt colleague, Theodor W. Adorno. The aesthetic dimension represents the possibilities of freedom and pleasure by confronting the alienation produced by a repressive society— by negating what is, art illuminates what could be. Marcuse described this as a “Great Refusal,” which later became an influential idea within the New Left. Marcuse quoted Adorno as he introduced the idea: “This Great Refusal is the

²⁸ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, p. 152.

protest against unnecessary repression, the struggle for the ultimate form of freedom— ‘to live without anxiety.’”²⁹

The foundation for Marcuse’s ideal of non-repressive civilization is the increasing use of automation and the abolition of alienated work. Minimizing work would ensure more free time for creative exploration and the pursuit of pleasure, and it would liberate the body from its function as an instrument of labor. Vanquishing capitalism’s performance principle and surplus-repression would release the pleasure principle, transforming its relationship to the reality principle. Marcuse made it clear that these possibilities were enabled by the automation of labor and the technological development of productive forces. The prospects of freedom were directly linked to mechanization and the end of unnecessary toil: “The more complete the alienation of labor, the greater the potential of freedom: total automation would be the optimum.”³⁰

Marcuse’s utopian vision involved a reconciliation of reason and the intellect with pleasure and the senses. Under a repressive reality principle, these faculties are divided into an unequal dichotomy of higher and lower orders, with reason elevated to a position of dominance over the senses. Rather than simply inverting this hierarchy, Marcuse’s vision entailed an overcoming of the antagonism into a new form of synthesis which he called “sensuous reason” or “libidinal morality.” As he speculates on the possibilities for creating this sort of synthesis, Marcuse looks to Schiller’s ideal of aesthetic education. Schiller had imagined that the repressive force of reason could be transformed by a “play impulse” expressed in aesthetics. Marcuse reconsiders Schiller’s ideal from a Marxist, dialectical perspective on history, society, and revolution: “To the degree to which the struggle for existence becomes co-operation for the free development and fulfillment of individual needs, repressive reason gives way to a new rationality of gratification in which reason and happiness converge.”³¹

With the reduction of the working day, Marcuse believed there would be a release of energy associated with Eros, the life instincts. The function of the body in society would shift from an instrument of labor to a means of pleasure. This would certainly involve the liberation of sexual energy, but Marcuse also maintained that the shape of eroticism itself would be transformed. Here is where Marcuse differed with Wilhelm Reich. This libidinal energy would be qualitatively different from the episodic release of suppressed sexuality

²⁹ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, pp. 149-50

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 156

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

that occurs within repressive societies, which so often results in sadistic violence. In distinction from Reich, Marcuse argued it was possible to create non-repressive forms of sublimation— sexual energy could be “gratified in activities and relations that are not sexual in the sense of ‘organized’ genital sexuality and yet are libidinal and erotic.”³²

A radical shift in the instinctual structure would fundamentally alter the nature of work itself. Marcuse distinguishes between labor and work, non-alienated and alienated forms of labor. Liberated from its alienated, repressive form under capitalism, labor would be re-energized by non-repressive sublimation: “The altered social conditions would therefore create an instinctual basis for the transformation of work into play.”³³ Marcuse then turns to the 19th Century French socialist Charles Fourier to articulate his utopian vision in which labor becomes a kind of “pleasurable co-operation.” The purposes of work for collective self-preservation would remain unchanged, but the social relationships involved in the work would be radically different— more cooperative, and therefore more pleasurable. Marcuse objects to any plans to administer and organize work through rational routine, but otherwise concedes that “Fourier comes closer than any other utopian socialist to elucidating the dependence of freedom on non-repressive sublimation.”³⁴

By the time he wrote *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse had lost hope that the working class could instigate this sort of revolutionary transformation. Like many other theorists of postwar society, Marcuse believed that the working class had been fully integrated into capitalism via consumer culture. However, amidst the growth of the hippie counterculture in the 1960s, Marcuse spoke of a “new sensibility” that was both cultural and political, especially in more radical groups like the Diggers, which asserted “new instinctual needs and values” while rejecting “efficient and insane reasonableness.” As he saw it, the counterculture was uniting sexual, political, and moral rebellion into “a nonaggressive form of life” with the potential to achieve “the demonstration of qualitatively different values.”³⁵ This was as close as any revolutionary subject came to fulfilling the utopian vision of *Eros and Civilization*.

Marcuse’s pessimism about a one-dimensional society notwithstanding, a series of explosive revolts which joined working-class militants with the

³² Ibid, p. 208.

³³ Ibid, p. 215.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 218.

³⁵ Herbert Marcuse, “Liberation from the Affluent Society,” in Steven Eric Bronner and Douglas MacKay Kellner, *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader* (Routledge, 1989), p. 286.

youthful counterculture did occur in the late 1960s through the mid-1970s. They had a common enemy: Fordism. After all, Fordism was not simply a system of mass production, it was a prescription for mass consumption, which together amounted to a whole way of life. Fordism after World War II was the lifestyle of the organization man living in the lonely crowd. As Gramsci put it, Fordism amounted to nothing less than a struggle against “animality” itself: “an uninterrupted, often painful and bloody process of subjugating natural...instincts to new, more complex and rigid norms and habits of order.”³⁶ Indeed, the struggles which merged the youthful counterculture and working-class militants were centered in the automobile factories in Italy, France, and the United States. From Milan and Turin, to Cleon and Flins, to Detroit and Lordstown, young workers were at the forefront of wildcat strikes for better working conditions and control over the workplace.³⁷

The Italian Autonomists are a preeminent example of this fusion between proletarian militance and youthful counterculture in the revolt against Fordism. The Autonomists stressed workers’ subjectivity and the refusal of work during the late 1960s and 70s, in the midst of wildcat strikes and rank-and-file militancy across Italy. There was a fourfold increase in the number of strikes between 1968 and 1969, beginning in the massive factories of Pirelli Milan and FIAT Turin.³⁸ This strike wave followed the eruption of a student movement which occupied universities throughout Italy in 1968. Both the militancy of rank-and-file workers and the mass rebellion among students unfolded beyond the control of the trade unions and the parliamentary Left, particularly the Communist Party of Italy (PCI), which actively tried to suppress them. Workers not only demanded higher wages and greater benefits, but also more control over the work process— an end to speed-ups and piecework, along with more democracy in the factories, the right to local negotiation, and, above all, a reduction of working hours. Those demands went far beyond PCI slogans about “the dignity of work” and its effective truce with management. Franco “Bifo” Berardi wrote, “We want to make possible a general reduction in working time and we want to transform the organization of work in such a way that an autonomous organization of sectors of productive experimental organization may become possible.”³⁹

³⁶ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 298.

³⁷ Stanley Aronowitz, *False Promises: The Shaping of American Working Class Consciousness* (Duke University Press, 1992), pp. 21-50; Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (The New Press, 2010), pp. 42-49; Chris Harman, *The Fire Last Time: 1968 and After* (Bookmarks Publishing Collective, 1988), pp. 96-98.

³⁸ Harman, *The Fire Last Time*, p. 194.

Workerism developed as a militant approach to theory and praxis in journals like *Quaderni Rossi*, which Negri and Tronti regularly contributed to in the 1960s. Their emphasis on the revolutionary subjectivity of the working class— in opposition to orthodox Marxism’s singular focus on objective contradictions— anticipated the conflicts between rank-and-file militants and the PCI. From the workerist perspective, de-skilling was intensifying the antagonism between labor and capital, creating the conditions for spontaneous revolt. This notion of spontaneity was hostile to the PCI’s call for organization, hierarchy, and discipline. Negri’s vision of liberation from work was incompatible with the goal of full employment and the idealization of diligent workers. As he later put it,

Work which is liberated is liberation from work. The creativity of communist work has no relation with the capitalist organization of labor. Living labor— by liberating itself, by reconquering *its own use value*, against exchange value— opens a universe of needs of which work can become a part only eventually. And in this case, it is a question of work as essential, collective, nonmystified, communist work: instead of work as capitalist construction. The reversal is total, it *allows no kind of homology whatsoever*. It’s a new subject. Rich and joyous.⁴⁰

While New Left movements in most other countries were dissipating, the struggle in Italy continued to rage for most of the 1970s. The feminist movement in Italy further energized Autonomies’ efforts for a revolutionary transformation of everyday life, beyond the revolutionary transformation of the mode of production. Intense struggles over issues of abortion, divorce, housework, and rape came to the fore in culturally conservative Italy during the 1970s. The student movement and a youthful counterculture also continued to be major sources of social conflict. In its best moments, *Autonomia* was composed of an alliance between workers, feminists, and the young, which presented a vision for revolutionary changes in everyday life— hence the slogan, “we want everything.”⁴¹

³⁹ “Bifo” Berardi, “Anatomy of Autonomy,” in *Autonomia*, pp. 157-58.³³ Ibid, p. 215.

⁴⁰ Antonio Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on The Grundrisse* (Autonomea, 1991), p. 165.

⁴¹ George Katsiaficas, *The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomist Social Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life* (AK Press, 1997), pp. 27-43.

ALIENATION AND CO-OPTATION

Kathi Weeks raises the important issue of how post-Fordist capitalism has co-opted demands for better, less alienated forms work that arose from the revolt against Fordism. Since the 1970s, the paradigm of human resource management has shifted to emphasize the personal satisfaction and authenticity that can supposedly be achieved through work. Post-Fordist strategies for human resource management have sought to blur the boundaries between life and work as an antidote to alienation. Weeks thus concludes that we must demand *less* work instead of *better* work. She warns that an ideal of unalienated labor “is too readily co-opted in a context in which the metaphysics of labor and the moralization of work carry so much cultural authority in so many realms.”⁴²

In our time, the ideology surrounding work is summed up in the expression, “do what you love.” This maxim can be traced back to numerous sources, from Confucius to Thoreau to Oprah, but former Apple CEO Steve Jobs is its most influential champion. “Your work is going to fill a large part of your life,” Jobs told Stanford University’s class of 2005 in a graduation speech, “the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work.”⁴³ “Do what you love” is not just a taunting insult to the millions who actually hate their jobs, it is an ideology that conceals systemic defects by appealing to individual initiative. If you don’t love your job, it’s your own damn fault, and you should just do something else. From capital’s perspective, workers can be paid less and made to work longer hours if they’re doing what they love. The ideal of fulfilling work is routinely used to rationalize the hyper-exploitation of professionals, especially teachers, with the notion that the job is its own intrinsic reward. Similarly, the fusion of labor and leisure in the high-tech workplace provides a justification for even longer hours at work—the corporate “campus” has a state-of-the-art gym, a gourmet chef, a meditation room, and a foosball table, so why would you ever leave?

It is indisputable that the discourses of post-Fordist attempt to co-opt a collective desire for better work. However, I question whether capital has succeeded in these endeavors at co-optation.⁴⁴ The revolt against the alienating conditions of postwar Fordism created a collective demand—

⁴² Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, p. 107.

⁴³ Miya Tokumitsu, “In the Name of Love,” *Jacobin* 13, p. 12.

⁴⁴ Ryan Moore, “Alternative to What? Subcultural Capital and the Commodification of a Music Scene,” *Deviant Behavior* 26 (2005), pp. 229-252; Ryan Moore, *Sells like Teen Spirit*, chapter 4.

historical needs, in the young Marx's sense of the term— for more fulfilling types of work. Nevertheless, the promises of non-alienated work have not and can not be realized within capitalist social relations of wage labor. If anything, post-Fordist capitalism is exacerbating the contradictions between what it promises and what it can deliver. As post-Fordist capitalism has promised flexibility and creativity, it has plunged working people into a far more precarious position than that faced by previous generations of workers. If the call to “do what you love” is taken seriously, the collective praxis of working people can only point toward the abolition of capitalism.