

OCCUPY THE HAMMOCK: BEYOND THE CLASS VERSUS CULTURE DIVIDE

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the Left has experienced a modicum of success in pursuing its goals in both the arena of the so-called “culture wars” and within the political economy, or at least within the *discourse* of political economy. In terms of the culture wars, the Left has achieved meaningful, concrete improvements in the lives of gay, lesbian and transgender people. The legalization of gay marriage is one such example; the creation of trans-gender or all gender restrooms in public spaces is another. In terms of political economy, the Left has yet to score a widespread victory on issues like raising the minimum wage to \$15 dollars-an-hour, or on Medicare for all. There have been important local victories in places like Seattle, Washington, but at the national level progress towards raising the minimum wage has been slow. Nevertheless, since the sudden emergence of the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement into a global phenomenon in 2011 and the subsequent rise of Bernie Sanders as the most popular politician in the US, the Left has scored a major victory in terms of how we *talk* about the economy.

In spite of losing the Democratic nomination for President to Hillary Clinton in a tightly contested race, Sanders has not lost any momentum, due to the fact that most Americans have an ear for what he has to say about Medicare for all and other issues. Bernie has made the focus upon the corruption of American politics at the hands of “millionaires and billionaires” his unique calling card, setting him at odds with mainstream Democrats who have been losing popularity due to their relative silence on this issue. Much of Sanders’ success can be attributed to the frequented used discursive frame of a top 1% in opposition to the bottom 99%, a concept that was popularized by OWS and now firmly embedded in our political vernacular. While such a notion is a far cry from a critical-Marxist notion of a “ruling class” it remains the case— especially among millennials— that Americans are talking much more frequently and loudly about economic inequality and the political consequences of such an extremely skewed distribution of wealth than they have in recent decades.

And yet, there remains a nagging problem in how the Left— both liberals and those to the left of liberals— construes economic inequality as a separate terrain of battle from that of the culture wars. In short, the Left undermines its own success by continuing to see economic issues as distinct from cultural ones. Here I do not want to get into how some on the Left make a mistake by constructing a hierarchy between class and identity politics, where class is seen as more important, or fundamental than the other. That has already been done with great success by public intellectuals like Ellen Wills (2006). Rather, I want to focus on the strategy of the mainstream Left in terms of how it constructs its discursive interventions as a means to frame economic issues when they fight with the Right. In particular, I focus upon how liberals engage the Right on the question of welfare and work, two issues that have received considerable attention since the nation-wide “Fight for 15” campaign was launched in 2013 by fast-food workers, and that has since been appropriated by the leaders in the labor movement like the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) in their efforts to raise the minimum wage.

While it is crucially important to claim that culture “matters,” and that the Left makes a mistake when it views class, or the “economic” as somehow more important than culture, my essay goes in a slightly different direction. I want to look at the slippage of culture into the economic, so to speak, by considering how liberals and conservatives talk about work and welfare. Here I want to argue that is necessary for us to move *beyond* the conventional discourse of work and welfare. I will do this by occupying a particular metaphor; namely the metaphor of the “hammock” which is frequently used by conservatives to criticize government programs designed to aid the economically disadvantaged in order to fan the flames of working-class resentment towards individuals who receive any form of government assistance, including both the social wage (welfare) and the minimum wage.

I also intend to discuss actual hammocks, by making the case for more leisure time through shorter hours of work as the most effective means for challenging conservatives on the issues of work and welfare. My discursive intervention is aimed at creating the conditions that would make it possible to *actually climb into a hammock* for some much needed relaxation. Rather than allow the Right to convince us all that hammocks are a sign of moral depravity because they promote laziness, the Left should take a page out of the play book of Paul Lafargue’s classic work *The Right to be Lazy*, and affirm the virtues of hammocks. Liberals like Paul Krugman and Robert Reich on the other hand, paint a different picture for the Left, one of perpetual work through the now familiar— and rather ineffective— Keynesian demand for

jobs, jobs, jobs. As I argue below, this is a dead end for the Left. It is by focusing on how culture inheres in the economic that the Left stands to improve its chances to press for progressive change on matters of economic inequality.

THE DESERVING AND UNDESERVING

The willingness of workers in the service sector to organize nation-wide strikes in 2013 took both journalists and social scientists by surprise since these workers have long been considered unlikely agents of work-place resistance. Conservative journalists working at Fox News were both surprised *and* irritated by the strikes and protests. First, they interpreted the strikes as a major inconvenience for consumers of fast food. Then they framed the striking workers as an example of the “underserving poor,” a central category in conservative discourse that frames poverty as the result of deviant-individual behavior rather than structural changes in the economy. For example, much was made of the advice given to workers at McDonald’s when the company provided their employees with a video-website tutorial on how to create a sustainable monthly budget. The video claims that workers should be able live on minimum wage, or on wages not much above the minimum, as long as they remain careful and responsible with their money.¹ Right-wing journalists pointed to this as proof that poverty is the result of irresponsible behavior, leading them to the conclusion that the striking workers who ask for higher wages should be condemned on moral grounds for being greedy, since their situation was caused by their carelessness with their money. Indeed, one commentator on the Fox News show “Bulls and Bears” said in no uncertain terms that, “people are not in poverty because they are making minimum wage.”² What most alarmed conservative pundits was the sudden public attention to the possibility that Congress might raise the minimum wage, because according to conservatives, an increase in the minimum wage would diminish the incentive to work. In short, the minimum wage and other government interventions in the labor market are said to foster a culture of dependency, which for reactionaries is usually code for the lack of a will to work and an unwillingness to be obedient while at work. Another conservative position is that small businesses cannot afford to pay a higher minimum wage, but liberal economists like Krugman have already pointed

¹ <http://www.forbes.com/sites/laurashin/2013/07/18/why-mcdonalds-employee-budget-has-everyone-up-in-arms/>

² <http://video.foxnews.com/v/2569747360001/do-minimum-wage-hikes-help-or-hurt-workers/?#sp=show-clips>

out that this is not supported by evidence, so I will leave that issue to the side and focus on the question of work incentives.

Since these events, two signifiers have been consistently circulating among conservative, and to a lesser extent, liberal media outlets; namely, (1) the hammock and (2) its potential occupant, the slacker. Why these discursive markers have become such a lightning rod, and potential threat to the hegemony of neoliberalism needs exploration.³

Academics turned liberal-left pundits like Paul Krugman and Robert Reich argue that the terrain of the fight over minimum wage and other government welfare programs is empirical *not* cultural or ideological. The aim for liberals is to demonstrate, empirically, that deviant-individual behavior is not the cause of poverty. More importantly for the following discussion, liberal pundits seek to demonstrate that welfare programs have very little effect on work incentives. The right-wing argument that assistance programs create disincentives to work is referred to by Krugman as the “hammock fallacy.”⁴ In short, according to Krugman, Keynesian demand-side policies like the minimum wage, food stamps and other government assistance programs for the poor do not discourage people from working hard. Krugman makes the case that a “hammock” is necessary, but only for those who are unable to work, and he shows empirically that this is exactly what our government assistance programs for the poor are, in fact, doing. There is no rational reason, then, for ending these programs. This kind of discursive maneuver by liberals like Krugman is widely viewed by the Left as the best strategy in Trump’s post-truth world of “alternative facts.” Now is the time to defend science and it is up to liberals to force conservatives to come to terms and face

³ I use the terms conservative and reactionary in much the same way as Corey Robin, in his recent book, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism From Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). For Robin, “conservatism is... a meditation on— and theoretical rendition of— the felt experience of having power, seeing it threatened, and trying to win it back... Conservatism is the theoretical voice of this animus against the agency of subordinate classes” (p 4 and 7). I read the sign of the slacker as a provocation that excites and disturbs conservatives in-so-far as its presence threatens to undermine a certain feeling of power among reactionaries. Robin, in his analysis of power relations between employers and employees writes, “in the employment contract... workers consent to be hired by their employers, but until the twentieth century that consent was interpreted by judges to contain implicit and irrevocable provisions of servitude; meanwhile, the *exit option of quitting* was not nearly as available, legally or practically, as many might think” (italics mine, p 5). My focus on the sign of the slacker places an emphasis on the *exit option* as the most serious threat posed to conservatives in the arena of the labor relations within the current global-capitalist context. The slacker figure, in short, exists as a temptation for workers to exit their relationships with employers

⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/07/opinion/krugman-the-hammock-fallacy.html?module=Searched&mabReward=relbias%3Aw%2C%7B%22%22%3A%22R%3A16%22%7D>

the facts. Liberals believe that when they have the facts on their side they are more likely to win.

But by focusing exclusively on getting the facts right about the relationship between Keynesian welfare-state policies and the incentive to work, liberals *foreclose* the possibility of considering an alternative; maybe *less* work would be a better option for reducing poverty than the traditional Keynesian demand for full-employment, especially in the current era of widespread automation that slashes the demand for labor across all industries in the economy. A reflexive critique of the work ethic and Keynesian full-employment policies, however, is off limits for liberals, and this becomes another, although less obvious example of the separation of the cultural from the economic. By seeking to work *less*, we are saying that we do not value work for the sake of work. This is not an empirical question. This is a cultural question, one having to do with values not facts. What is the value of work? What is the value of leisure? Creating measuring tools that provide a better access to the “truth” cannot consider such questions. The assumption that work is a value in itself rather than a means towards an end remains unconscious for those liberals who labor tirelessly to show us that welfare does not make us lazy; and we all know that laziness is a sin and not a virtue, right?

It has not always been this way on the Left, when it comes to the question of how to address the problems of unemployment and economic growth. Keynesian policies that advocate full employment as the goal of government interventions displaced an older strategy of fighting for shorter hours of work that was the central plank of the labor movement from the end of the Civil War until the New Deal. The traditional labor movement demand for shorter hours of work was a two-pronged strategy. On the one hand, if all working people reduce the amount of hours that they work, they can pass on those hours to people who are unemployed. When unemployment goes down, wages go up. This is an instrumental relationship: working less is a tool to raise wages. Secondly, working fewer hours is also an end itself: more leisure time is a good that all people desire as valuable in itself. Unfortunately, this all ended with the New Deal, which replaced the traditional labor movement demand for shorter hours of work with the Keynesian policy of full-employment, where the federal government spends money to create public sector jobs as a way to drive down unemployment.⁵ Today we look back at the New Deal as the halcyon days of

⁵ See Benjamin Hunnicutt, *Work Without End* (Temple, 1985), and Jonathan Cutler, *Labor's Time* (Temple, 2004).

the Left, but perhaps it was a mistake to give up on the demand for less work. I return to this issue at the end of the essay.

There is a potentially fatal weakness in taking the strategy of merely revealing the facts. By demonstrating that government welfare programs do *not* discourage able-bodied individuals from working hard, Krugman and others on the liberal-left agree with those on the political Right that it would be immoral to resist work. The goal for liberals is to present poor people as moral citizens worthy of recognition as subjects constituted by the will to work. As a result of this cultural and ideological dynamic, liberals prefer to use the metaphor “social safety-net,” rather than “hammock,” when referring to government assistance programs that target the working-class and the unwaged. A safety-net is for *deserving* subjects, while the hammock signifies abuse by “bad subjects” in the Althusserian sense: namely, slackers.⁶ Liberals hang on to this distinction with all their might at the cost of considering alternatives to work that might enjoy much greater success with the base of the Democratic party, to say nothing of the counter-cultural left where the critique of the work ethic is alive and well.

By making a fetish out of work, the liberal-left participates together with conservatives in what C. Wright Mills refers to, in his “Letter to the New Left,” as the “labor metaphysic.”⁷ This point of view sees “labor itself as a kind of redemption by which spiritual and social needs are fulfilled and without which humanity in its most fundamental sense is impossible.”⁸ For both sides of the political aisle, to “suggest a campaign to reduce work on social and ideological grounds remains highly suspect.”⁹ The hammock, then,

⁶ A representation of the figure of the slacker that I like can be found in Richard Linklater’s 1991 film, *Slacker*. In the movie there are no main characters and no linear plot or narrative. Instead, the camera follows seemingly random characters (none of whom are working) from one scene to the next, characters that mimic a chain of sliding signifiers, endlessly circulating through the film. I discuss this issue in terms of the decline of meta-narratives at the end of this essay. For Althusser, the “bad subject” is the one who fails to be interpellated by ideology. Briefly, interpellation is the process whereby individuals are positioned as subjects by institutions like education and the news media, which for Althusser are two of the key institutions inside the ideological state apparatus within the capitalist social formation. Interpellation works by way of recognition, where the individual recognizes him or herself as an addressee of discursive hailing on the part of authoritative figures. See Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *Lenin and Philosophy*, (New York: Monthly Review Press 2001). I do not take a strictly Althusserian approach, however, as Althusser’s Lacanian perspective closes off the possibility for examining resistance and the failures of interpellation that occur during extraordinary moments, like protest activity and social movements. These moments create gaps in the interpellation process

⁷ <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2011/03/letter-to-the-next-left/>

⁸ See Stanley Aronowitz, “Why Work?” in *Social Text* Number 12 (Autumn, 1985) p 21.

⁹ *Ibid*, p 19.

exists as a metaphor at the center of both conservative and liberal discourses that attend to the object of work. For both, it exists as a potential problem, a signifier that reveals instability in the hegemony currently enjoyed by both Republicans and “new” Democrats.¹⁰ I would like to explore this instability by looking at how slackers and the so-called “hammock” have become an obsession for conservatives.

THE JANUS-FACED CAPITALIST: DISCIPLINE AND REPRESSION

Against the liberal position of Krugman and Reich, what is perhaps most interesting in the conservative response to the fast food strikes and the question of the relationship between increasing the minimum wage and work incentives is not how they get it wrong, empirically, about work incentives and the motivations of workers. Rather, it is how conservatives could not avoid coming down on the side of discipline and repression, unintentionally exposing a *relationship* between rulers and ruled that lurks in the shadows of reactionary discourse, which, under normal circumstances, focuses on the behavior and “freedom” of autonomous individuals. In other words, while commentators at conservative networks like Fox News claim they believe in individualism and the value of individual freedom, their coverage of the fast-food workers’ strikes revealed that they actually support one side of a *relationship* (employers) against freedom for those on the other side (employees). This raises a very important issue. Under certain political-economic conditions, the face of freedom mutates into the face of *unfreedom*. The labor strike is a significant phenomenon in a capitalist-political-economy precisely because it reveals a workplace relationship based upon domination that is, under normal circumstances, concealed by the discourse of neoliberalism, which places an emphasis upon rational individuals who interact as free agents in the marketplace. Conservative discourse struggles to keep the focus upon activity in the marketplace, where free individuals interact as buyers and sellers of goods. Activity in the workplace, which is characterized by unfreedom and asymmetrically structured power relationships, is outside of the gaze of neoliberal discourse. If neoliberal discourse maintains hegemony in the constitution of reality, then conservatives gain the upper hand in the national conversation about

¹⁰ “New” Democrats refers to the change in direction inside the Democratic Party after the election of Bill Clinton. After Clinton, Democrats and Republicans embraced neoliberalism and the power of Wall Street over the formation of global capitalism that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union.

freedom and happiness. In the past few decades the political Right has largely monopolized the discourse of freedom in American politics, by framing freedom within a right-wing libertarian framework.¹¹ But when strikes occur such as the fast-food workers' strikes, the political Right abruptly flip-flops from advocating freedom, to suddenly supporting its opposite, repression. *Alas, the capitalist discursive subject is Janus-faced.*

In an interview on Democracy Now, one of the fast-food workers who participated in the strikes— he works 60 hours-a-week at two jobs, one at Burger King and the other at Pizza Hut— revealed that one of the main reasons why he and his co-workers went on strike was to protest working conditions that he described as “a dictatorship at work.” This is precisely the kind of phenomenon obscured by the conservative discourse on neoliberalism, but again, strikes are exceptional social and political moments, for they break open a space that reveals the work-place relationship for what it is: namely, a confrontation between what Hannah Arendt refers to as rulers and ruled.¹² The workplace occupies an enormous part of our everyday lives. It exists as a universe of unfreedom, the elephant in the room that media pundits do not want to talk about, but nonetheless sits in the middle of our capitalist democracy. In another portion of the interview, the worker says that it is time for all workers to “*come out of the shadows* and let the public be aware of how we live our day-to-day lives... What have we got to lose by speaking up? We're already dying slowly” (italics mine).¹³

For conservatives in the media who covered the strikes, it was impossible to conceal this aspect of the workplace relationship, and this is precisely what makes these strikes and protests so interesting to examine. Indeed, once it became impossible to deny the existence of the unfree relations between rulers and ruled that constitute the workplace, conservatives were compelled to rationalize and justify the repression, unhappiness and suffering endured by these workers by way of twists and turns in their discourse. One of the most interesting of these justifications is the argument that the minimum wage is *supposed* to cause suffering. The argument here is that suffering is good because it motivates people to move up the so-called economic ladder to better-paying and more enjoyable kinds of jobs. In short, pain is required to get people to work hard. Fox News analyst Greg Gutfeld explained the

¹¹ See Stanley Aronowitz, *The Death and Rebirth of American Radicalism* (Routledge, 1996).

¹² See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 1998).

¹³ *Democracy Now* August 2, 2013.

argument on the show “The Five,” by saying, “the first step on a ladder is not supposed to be comfortable. You’re not supposed to be hanging out there. You double the salary, then you turn that rung into a hammock.”¹⁴ This argument was echoed by fellow Fox News commentator, Tracy Byrnes who argued that “the goal in life is not to be on minimum wage forever. The goal in life is to do a great job and get promoted and move out of it. So this notion that we’re gonna keep raising the minimum wage in order to share the wealth is ridiculous.”¹⁵

Both Gutfeld and Byrnes attempt to make the case that working a minimum-wage job is supposed to be a temporary phenomenon, implying that most people who play by the rules will soon work their way up the ladder to a better job. The image of the ladder, of course, is simply given in their explanations. Their discourse relies upon the myth that most fast-food workers are teenagers working their way to better jobs when they get older. The other myth that grounds these arguments is the quasi-religious narrative, which claims that the individuals who are wealthy in our society deserve to be so, because they previously suffered through working hard at low-paying jobs before becoming rich. Of course these arguments are misleading, as a cursory analysis of the empirical data reveals. According to a study conducted by the CEPR in 2013, the median age of fast-food workers is now over 28, and over one-third of fast food workers are college educated.¹⁶ The fact that these arguments do not square with empirical reality reveals that they are code for what is really at stake: the problem of getting *other* people to work, and work hard for the benefit of their rulers. In short, the function of these coded texts is to encourage working people to identify their interests with the interests of those who are in charge. But again, it is not the empirical data that is of interest here. Rather, it is the excitement and anger that is triggered by figure of the lazy worker who is unwilling to work hard. I want now to turn to the question of welfare, the other principal intervention by the government into the labor market.

¹⁴ Gutfeld’s argument was lampooned by John Oliver on the *Daily Show*. <http://thedailyshow.com/videos/wj3t4a/pay-mas---fast-food---minimum-wage>

¹⁵ <http://video.foxnews.com/v/2569747360001/do-minimum-wage-hikes-help-or-hurt-workers/?#sp=show-clips>

¹⁶ <http://www.cepr.net/index.php/blogs/cepr-blog/slow-progress-for-fast-food-workers>

DESIRE, *RESSENTIMENT* AND THE OBSESSION WITH HAMMOCKS

Lurking behind all the talk of economic opportunity and success through hard work is a certain fear: namely, the fear that workers with power may seek to change the terms and conditions of employment or worse yet, re-evaluate the work ethic. The main issue for the capitalist class is how to get *other* people (the working class) to work hard, which is essentially what pundits like Gutfeld are saying when they argue that minimum wage is *supposed* to make people suffer. Work incentives and motivation is the main issue at hand, what I am referring to as the will to work. The very low minimum wage, together with relatively high unemployment, works like Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, because the suffering of low-wage workers is supposed to set an example for the rest of us about what lies in wait if we do not keep our noses to the grindstone and do whatever our employer asks of us as a means to get ahead.¹⁷ Workers toiling away at minimum-wage jobs compete against one another in an attempt to escape the pain and stigma of living on poverty wages, while unemployed and undocumented workers compete against formally employed workers to bid down wages across the economy more generally. On the other hand, raising the minimum wage and lowering the rate of unemployment makes it more difficult for employers to control workers.

What is at stake for conservatives is the possibility that workers may choose to not work so hard, what I am calling a disturbance in the will to work. Herein lays the reason for the fear generated by the sign of the slacker in reactionary discourse: the slacker figure is always present as a *temptation* for working-class subjects to reject the ethos of the Calvinist work ethic. The slacker signifier represents a kind of instability in the text which constitutes the discourse of neoliberalism. Reactionaries rely upon what Nietzsche refers to as the feeling of "*ressentiment*" as a means to keep the slacker figure at bay.¹⁸ Rather than identify with the bohemian slackers, resentful waged-workers are encouraged to blame the slacker instead of the capitalist for their economic woes. But the job of policing the terrain that separates the slacker as *Other* from the working-class subjects of political economy is always-already threatened with the transgression of the border between the two. *We are drawn to the slacker as we fear and despise it.*

¹⁷ For a similar analysis of this dynamic at work in the welfare system in the US, see Piven and Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: the Functions of Public Welfare*, (New York: Vintage, 1993).

¹⁸ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morality*, translated by Maudemarie Clark (New York: Hackett Publishing 1998).

It is never guaranteed in advance that conservative discourse will succeed in whipping up working-class resentment against the figure of the slacker. The constant hammering away at the hammock metaphor is a sign that the relationship between rulers (capitalists) and ruled (workers), which we usually take for granted, is a rather tenuous one. Capitalists can never be sure that their efforts to reproduce relationships of domination will be successful. This phenomenon is not unlike the phenomenon of the minstrel show as interpreted by Eric Lott in his magnificent book, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. According to Lott, “the audiences involved in early minstrelsy were not universally derisive of African Americans or their culture... there was a range of responses to the minstrel show which points to an instability or contradiction in the form itself... in early blackface minstrelsy [there was a] dialectical flickering of racial insult and racial envy, moments of domination and moments of liberation, counterfeit and currency...”¹⁹ The representation of the slacker also presents the readers (audience) with a range of responses. One never knows in advance if workers will embrace or reject the sign of the slacker, because as was the case with the figure of the minstrel, there is simultaneously an attraction to, and fear and loathing of the figure of the slacker, which reveals the combinations of fear, guilt *and* desire for pleasure within our libidinal investments in these texts.²⁰ In other words, by constantly talking about “hammocks” conservatives run the risk that their discourse might backfire, because there is always slippage happening in the chain of signifiers. It is up to the Left to take advantage of such slippage by promoting the possibility of freedom through working less. The sign of the hammock then becomes another dimension of the class struggle. By conducting a conflict over the meaning and value of the metaphor of the hammock, class struggle opens up the cultural dimension, which is to say class struggle is not only about the fight to control the means of production or the distribution of wealth. In short, culture matters.

Congressman and former Vice Presidential Candidate Paul Ryan also used the metaphor of the hammock when he attacked programs that provide a social wage, like unemployment insurance, food stamps, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Social Security. During the 2012 Presidential

¹⁹ See Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) p 15 and 18. Lott also argues that “although minstrelsy was indeed in the business of staging and producing “race,” that very enterprise also involved it in a carnivalizing of race, as the range of critical response has begun to suggest, such that the minstrel show’s ideological production became more contradictory, its consumption more indeterminate, its political effects more plural than many have assumed” (p 21).

²⁰ *ibid.* p 7 and p 242. I return to this issue below where I discuss the work of George Rawick.

campaign he argued, “We don’t want to turn the safety net into a hammock that lulls able-bodied people to lives of dependency and complacency that *drains them of their will* and their incentive to make the most of their lives (italics mine).”²¹ Conservatives are correct to point out that the key issue is the possibility that workers may lose their will to work. Liberals like Krugman, on the other hand, refuse to consider that possibility, since for them the challenge is to demonstrate that welfare recipients are indeed, good subjects, just like most workers in our political economy who embrace the work ethic. But for Ryan, government assistance programs, “drain the will” of workers to “make the most of” themselves. The struggle ultimately is not empirical, but ideological; it is a struggle over the will of workers and control over the sign that marks the slacker.²²

Ryan’s is a classic reactionary discourse that conceals (unconsciously) the reality of workers creating surplus value (which is, metaphorically speaking, a hammock made by workers for capitalists insofar as labor creates capital in the first place) by employing a narrative of lazy welfare recipients who live off of the tax revenues collected from waged workers. In this way, the worker-capitalist divide is displaced by the divide between all people who “work” and those who don’t; namely, welfare recipients and bums. Conservative discourse situates capitalists and workers on the same team, against welfare recipients who are on the opposing team. The opposing-team metaphor is usually a racialized concept. “Welfare” is usually code for urban, black and lazy.²³ But again, the racist discourse on lazy welfare recipients is always a tenuous one at best; one that is not always able to interpellate individuals as obedient subjects in a straightforward way.

VOLATILE CONTRADICTIONS

It is worth examining this metaphor of the hammock at more length, because it reveals what is truly at stake from the capitalist point of view: namely, that *there is not room for two (classes) in the hammock*. There is a very interesting contradiction contained within the conservative point view. This contradiction permeates our culture at large: on the one hand, most people want to be

²¹ http://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/21/about-that-hammock/?module=Search&mabRward=relbias%3Aw%2C%7B%22%22%3A%22RI%3A16%22%7D&_r=0

²² On class struggle over the terrain of the sign, see V. N. Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (Harvard University Press, 1986).

²³ See Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy* (University of Chicago Press, 2000).

wealthy in order to not suffer a life of dull, and sometimes back-breaking work for starvation wages, whether sitting in a chair in a cubicle or displacing soil with a shovel. We all participate in the *fantasy* of occupying the hammock. The appeal of a wealthy lifestyle is motivated precisely by the desire for leisure and the rejection of delayed gratification. This desire largely explains the enormous popularity of hit television shows like “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous,” hosted by Robin Leach, or Music Television Network’s show, “MTV Cribs,” among several others. Conservative and liberal media pundits claim that most Americans embrace the work ethic, but that’s not why millions of people are watching television shows like these. The discourse on the moral value of hard work for its own sake is contradicted by many forms popular culture, because most of us fantasize about what it would be like to live a life of leisure and luxury without having to work. Popular culture reveals that while in everyday life workers may be forced to repress their desire to occupy the hammock, the desire never goes away. Rather, it is displaced onto the forms that constitute certain domains of popular culture.²⁴

The television shows that focus upon the extravagant lifestyles of wealthy people co-exist on television with numerous late-night infomercials about how to get rich *quick*, which indicates another very popular narrative in our culture, one that extols the ability to climb the so-called economic ladder with the *least* amount of energy and in the *least* amount of time possible. Furthermore, there are numerous books published every year that promise their readers that the secrets to getting rich fast are contained within their covers. This narrative exists in stark contradiction with the religious-conservative narrative that extols the virtues of suffering and endless hard work for its own sake. It is as if our culture is bi-polar. On the one hand we worship the idea of getting wealthy with no effort at all. On the other hand, we worship suffering. How are we able to cope with this cultural bi-polarity? If most of us do not desire work for work’s sake (especially for poverty wages), then why do we expect *Other* people to work long hours and endure poverty for as long as it takes, with no real expectation of getting rich quick? How can reactionary discourse handle this peculiar contradiction?

²⁴ I make this argument in more detail in my book, *Tell Tchaikovsky the News: Rock’n’Roll, the Labor Question and the Musicians’ Union 1942-1968* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2014). I examine the content of rock and roll music in terms of the desire for free time and the rejection of delayed gratification and the Calvinist work ethic. Popular culture, as Stuart Hall has argued, should be seen as a site of contestation rather than simply a form of domination as argued by the theorists of the culture industry like Horkheimer and Adorno, in their book, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. See Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular,” in *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuels, (New York: Routledge, 1981).

In short, there is a double standard at work. Certain individuals in our political-economy are celebrated for finding riches without much effort and for indulging in an excess of pleasure, whereas other (usually racialized) subjects of political-economy are supposed to suffer and delay their gratification indefinitely as a means to prove their moral worth to the rest of us. *A certain kind of person is expected to suffer for our sins.*

In the American experience, this cultural bi-polarity is often handled by displacing class onto race, which in turn allows for the construction of a discourse about “deserving” and “undeserving” poor people.²⁵ Undeserving people are framed as able-bodied adults who refuse to pull their own weight in the economy, preferring to live off of welfare benefits provided by the taxes paid by people who are waged workers. This is a crucial discursive maneuver that conservatives rely upon in order to accommodate the stark contradictions that exist in our political-economy and our culture. The “undeserving” poor are often framed in racialized terms as the so-called urban “underclass,” but there is no underclass *per se*.²⁶ Rather, the so-called underclass should be considered as a low-waged or unwaged fraction of the working-class. In cultural terms, as long as working-class people show deference and a willingness to work hard, even at low wages— the will to work— they are considered worthy, but if low-waged and un-waged working-class people stand up for themselves, they are attacked as lazy dependents who are irresponsible with their money and, as a result, mooch off of the welfare system. Ronald Reagan made good political use of this stereotype in the 1980s when he talked about the so-called “welfare queen” who, allegedly, managed to live a lavish lifestyle as a welfare recipient.²⁷ Indeed, Reagan created the blueprint for contemporary conservative pundits who attack the welfare system in the US today. Liberals, for their part, attempt to represent the urban underclass as victims of the economy rather than agents who exploit the system. In both liberal and conservative discourse, slacking is a serious offense.

²⁵ For more on the history of the relationship between race and class in the US political-economy see W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860-1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

²⁶ See Michael Katz, *The Underserving Poor: America's Enduring Confrontation With Poverty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²⁷ <http://www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2013/12/20/255819681/the-truth-behind-the-lies-of-the-original-welfare-queen>

WANTING WHAT SEEMS OFF LIMITS

Sometimes the representation of the bohemian “bum” is used in place of the racialized urban dweller to the same effect. The bum stereotype is usually a single, white man, framed as an able-bodied counter-cultural figure eager to boast about living on the public dole. Both liberals and conservatives participate in the discursive attack on the bohemian bum, because it is more difficult to frame this type of bad subject as a victim. For example, in a news segment titled, “When the Safety Net Becomes a Hammock” (*Fox News*, August 9, 2013), Fox News correspondent John Roberts features a young “surfer-bum” in San Diego who receives \$200 dollars- a-month in food stamps. The video shows images of the young man using food stamps to feast upon lobster and sushi while he informs Roberts that he prefers to wake up late most days and then surf all day with his friends. If you look closely at the background images, however, you can see clearly that the young man lives in a working-class neighborhood. It’s also important to note that the young man is not receiving any other government subsidy, and lobster cannot be on the menu every day if your budget is a meager \$200 dollars-a-month. Furthermore, we never get to see whether or not the young man works odd jobs with irregular hours to make spending cash. Nevertheless, you can practically see the blood boil in Roberts’ veins as he listens to the surfer-bum talk about his lifestyle, while wearing a smirk on his face and displaying a twinkle in his eye that seems to taunt the reporter and the nature of the inquiry. The surfer seems aware that he is participating in a theatrical performance, willing to play the part of the villain. Roberts even says that he was “taken aback” by the young man’s refusal to be ashamed of his lifestyle. One wonders if Roberts is really so angry about the fact that the man is on food stamps. Perhaps the source of outrage can be found in the fact that the surfer-bum has found a way to escape the drudgery of full-time work in order to spend more time at the beach.

In the introduction to Roberts’ feature, we are encouraged to believe that President Obama’s generous welfare policies are the cause of the increased “abuse” of food stamps in the US, because it is simply too easy to get assistance. The segment uses a typical bait and switch tactic to draw our attention away from the economic recession and the fact that the overwhelming majority of people on food stamps are not “cheaters.” Still, there is something more at stake than cheating. What is most interesting is the unusual willingness for a news reporter to reveal his anger (bias) while in the guise of an objective journalist. A little psychoanalysis goes a long way in explaining why Roberts, who represents both the reactionary bourgeois and the resentful working-class audience of Fox News, is so angry at this surfer and his lifestyle. It is

worth quoting George Rawick, the author of the classic book on American slavery and the culture of resistance created by slaves, *From Sundown to Sunup*. In his book Rawick writes,

The Englishman met the West African as a reformed sinner meets a comrade of his previous debaucheries. The reformed sinner very often creates a pornography of his former life. He must suppress even his knowledge that he had acted that way or even wanted to act that way. Prompted by his uneasiness at this great act of repression, he cannot leave alone those who live as he once did or as he still unconsciously desires to live. He must devote himself to their conversion or repression.²⁸

The surfer-bum featured by Roberts reveals that he wants to be a “rock star” in addition to being a surfer, a fantasy shared by many if not most young people living in the United States. The video shows him playing an electric guitar in between parts of the interview. Perhaps Roberts himself once had that same fantasy, but now, like most of his viewers, that fantasy has long since been repressed. Roberts tells his audiences that the young man has “chosen the life of a beach bum in this sea-side paradise” as the camera pans over a beautiful stretch of beach in La Jolla, California. It’s interesting to note that Roberts uses the phrase “sea-side paradise,” revealing that he too feels the powerful appeal of a leisurely life on the sand and in the sun. Indeed, the audience is interpellated in the same way. We are shown the object of our desire, only to have it snatched away as something we cannot have, and if we cannot have it, then certainly the surfer bum should not be allowed to enjoy it.

Toward the end of the segment Roberts says to the young man, “Is it safe to say that this notion of holding down a steady job is just something that is not in your wheel house... it’s just not something that appeals to you?” Suddenly, the interview turns on what is really at stake, as we move from considering the issue of welfare cheats to the issue of choosing not to work. It seems that, in the end, what matters more than the possibility that some individual may be able to exploit the food stamp system is the *other* possibility that a person from a working-class background can refuse the life of full-time work. Refusing work is the major offense, because most people do not see that way of life as a possibility, even as they themselves desire it, as the passage above by Rawick suggests. When people who work their fingers to the bone for very little in return see others who have been able to

²⁸ George Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1972).

escape that way of life, the common reaction is envy, anger and resentment. When an individual realizes that in spite of the fact that they have played by the rules and yet they still were not able to climb the economic ladder of success, then someone must be to blame. But in ideology, blame can never be placed at the feet of the capitalist system. Enter the figure of the slacker: either coded as surfer bum, or the racialized, urban under-dweller. Within the current context of the neoliberal discourse that glorifies work, the bum plays the role of Hester Prynne. *This phenomenon should be understood for what it is: a ritual in sado-masochism.*

This is what is meant by the metaphorical phrase, “there isn’t room for two in the hammock.” Ultimately, nobody desires long hours of degrading work at low pay, including most importantly, the master, who occupies the hammock under normal conditions. This explains, finally, why the political Right becomes so upset when workers go on strike, or when workers choose to pursue the life of the surfer bums or rock stars instead of workers. It upsets what appears to be ‘the way things are,’ to borrow a familiar phrase. As Althusser argues, ideology works by making contingent, historically mediated social relations appear as ‘obvious,’ and without need of explanation. “Ideology,” he says, “has no history.” In terms of the metaphor of the hammock, it is understood as obvious that only the master is allowed to occupy and enjoy the hammock, while the servant is expected to embrace their subject position as a worker who serves the master. In ideology, that all goes without saying. If the servant ever forgets this arrangement and dares to go on strike for a better life, or chooses the lifestyle of the surfer-bum over that of the factory worker or precarious service sector worker, then they must be punished so that they, and those who are positioned in the audience to see them, remember how things are supposed to be. This ritual of sado-masochism in everyday life is the material that animates the ideology that frames reactionary discourse, which in turn works toward the reproduction of the social relations in our political-economy.²⁹ In short, individuals *become classed subjects* through these sado-masochistic rituals that present the slacker as the primary antagonist in the theater of punishment created for the interpellation of workers.

Conservative discourse of economic ladders is a prime example of this ideology. In this section of the sado-masochistic screenplay, the master occupies the hammock, while the servant must wait and delay gratification,

²⁹ See Lynn Chancer, *Sadomasochism in Everyday Life: The Dynamics of Power and Powerlessness* (Rutgers University Press, 1992).

with the hope of someday joining the master class. In the meantime, the servant may find the opportunity to move up to the next rung of the ladder, assuming another individual is waiting in the wings ready to assume the subject position of worker on the bottom rung. Eventually, we are told, we may be able to climb into the hammock, as long as we play by the rules created by our masters. Alas, sooner or later never comes. Stephen Colbert satirized this form of reasoning when he exposed the absurdity of the McDonald's budget tutorial at the point when the spokeswoman in the video says, "try this [budget] for a month to see that you really will spend less," to which Colbert intervenes, "then try it for a year, then ten years, then 50 years, then ask yourself, 'why am I still working at McDonald's? I'm 85 years old!'"³⁰

What of the liberal-Left? What is their role in this ritual of sadomasochism? In the case of the slacker and the desire to work less, the liberal-Left is constituted as a second tier of agents that police workers, although *claiming to be on the side of the workers*, unlike their perceived opponents, the conservatives. Rather than merely discipline workers and be honest about it as the Right seeks to do, the liberal-Left discourse works toward getting workers to buy into disciplining themselves. By focusing *only* on how conservatives "get the facts wrong" about the relationship between workers and government assistance programs, liberals are effectively (unconsciously) telling conservatives not to worry. Workers are *already* working really hard all by themselves. Perhaps with a nudge and a wink, liberals encourage reactionary business leaders not to sweat it and go play golf. Let the liberals be in charge of the task of disciplining workers. After all, are not liberals much better at it? Consider "welfare reform," NAFTA, and the deregulation of Wall Street. A Democrat was in the White House when these were passed into law.

Perhaps we should go to our desktop, gather up all those liberal policy studies that seek to "prove" that people love to work for work's sake, place them in the recycle bin, and join our surfer friends for a day at the beach.

CONCLUSION: HALLELUJAH I'M A BUM!

By way of conclusion, I'd like to return to the Occupy Wall Street movement and the intervention it has made in our public discourse on inequality and the economy. Is it not the case, as Kristin Lawler argues, that the slacker signifier also animates the form and content of that movement?³¹ Most of

³⁰ <http://thecolbertreport.cc.com/videos/8fg72p/minimum-wage---mcdonald-s-spending-journal>

the participants in the actual camps constitute what some have called the formation of a new, post-industrial working class; namely, the *precariat* (as opposed to the proletariat). Journalists like Paul Mason refer to the Occupy participants— as well as the Arab Spring youth and the youth fighting against austerity in Europe- as “graduates without a future.”³² The precariat is characterized by an advanced degree and a casual attachment to work, as individuals bounce around between one low-skilled, low-paying, service-sector job to the next, in spite of having qualifications for better-paying, more desirable (or rather less painful?) and more intellectually demanding jobs.³³ Today, job security linked to economic growth, one of the defining characteristics of modernization, has become a thing of the past due to decades of advances in labor-saving technologies.³⁴ But it would be wrong to say that capital has been in the driver’s seat all along in the creation of the neoliberal, post-industrial and postmodern reality. The workers who conducted wildcat strikes in record numbers in the late 1960s and early 1970s refused to continue on with the Fordist compromise between labor and capital that provided workers with steady cost-of-living raises as compensation for giving up control over the labor process and accepting alienating working conditions.³⁵ Young workers at that time demanded a better life both inside and outside of work; indeed a main rallying-cry of both worker and student protest movements in 1968 was the demand to change everyday life.³⁶ According to Mario Tronti, it was the “strategy of refusal” among young American and European workers that partly explains why both Keynesianism and Fordism (twin pillars of modernization) failed.³⁷ What comes next?

The new social formation of global capitalism is forcing us to reconsider time spent outside of work, but under what conditions will we experience this “free” time? If work, job security, and endless economic growth provided the content of the discourse that legitimated modernity, what are the *cultural implications* of post-industrial social formations and the unwinding of what

³¹ <http://www.possible-futures.org/2011/12/01/fear-slacker-revolution-occupy-wall-street-cultural-politics-class-struggle/>

³² See Paul Mason, *Why It's Still Kicking Off Everywhere* (New York: Verso, 2013).

³³ See Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

³⁴ See Aronowitz and DiFazio, *The Jobless Future: Sci-Tech and the Dogma of Work* (Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). The second edition was published in 2010.

³⁵ See Stanley Aronowitz, *False Promises* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1992) and Aaron Brenner et. al., *Rank and File Rebellion: Labor Militancy and Revolt From Below During the Long 1970s*, (New York: Verso 2010).

³⁶ <http://www.blackstudies.ucsb.edu/1968/scope.html>

³⁷ See Mario Tronti, “Workers and Capital” in *Telos*, Number 14 (Winter 1972).

Lyotard calls the “meta-narratives” that legitimated modernity?³⁸ What is left when the meta-narratives of modernity collapse or unwind under the weight of postmodernity? One interpretation of such an “unwinding” of meta-narratives, if you will, is to see it as the condition of “slack,” as when a taught rope is suddenly released. This condition of slack upsets both liberal and conservative discourse, for as Aronowitz has argued, time outside of work (as the result of widespread automation) is the new postmodern reality, but “it’s remarkable how unprepared we are to think about it.”³⁹ Today, slackers who consciously lack the will to work are finding ways to create new forms of meaning in the time spent outside of work.⁴⁰ The decline and unwinding of the meta-narrative on labor and work (the “labor metaphysic”) has opened up space for individuals to no longer be subjected to what it is that they have become. Perhaps, then, slackers can be interpreted as working on undoing the processes that historically have produced and reproduced the classed subjects of capitalist-political economy through the installation of the will to work. This is, in part, what is at stake for Lyotard and Foucault with the end of modernity and the dialectic of the Enlightenment.⁴¹

Will the neoliberal “regime of self-improvement,” as Rudnyckyj defines it, succeed in the installation of a new will to work among subjects of the global political-economy?⁴² Or, will slackers find ways to keep the rope (noose) from tightening once again, maintaining the slackness that opens up new spaces of freedom and experimentation that transgress the limits imposed by postmodern-capitalist social relations? Slack could be read in terms of a potential promise for a new kind of freedom, constituted by an *ethos*, as described by Foucault, “in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.”⁴³ This, it seems, is how

³⁸ See Jean –Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

³⁹ “Why Work?” op. cit. p 29.

⁴⁰ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/04/02/AR2010040201452.html>

⁴¹ I realize that the phrase belongs to Horkheimer and Adorno, but I see Foucault’s reflections on the Enlightenment as part of the same project. See Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment,” in *Interpretive Social Science: A Second Look*, edited by Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan (Berkeley, Ca: University of California Press, 1987) pp 157-174. Foucault argues that “the critical ontology of ourselves... has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.” (p 174).

⁴² Daromir Rudnyckyj, “Regimes of Self-Improvement: Globalization and the Will to Work,” in *Social Text* 120, Volume 32, Number 3, Fall 2014, p 119.

⁴³ Foucault, op. cit..

the Occupy Wall Street Movement has embraced the figure of the slacker, as an experiment, one which we could take advantage of in these postmodern times. A first step would be to resuscitate the epic struggle for shorter hours of work that once animated the 19th century labor movement. As labor leaders in organizations like the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) understood, shorter-hours-of-labor decreases unemployment, and thereby increases the leverage that workers enjoy relative to capitalists.⁴⁴ Such leverage could be used to make radical changes in the routines of everyday life, because the fight for shorter hours of work is both a means and an end. It is a means to increase the power of workers relative to capitalists and an end-in-itself: leisure time. Before those steps can be taken, however, there first needs to be an ideological shift that reinterprets the value of work for work's sake, something that the IWW consistently argued in pamphlets and in songs, including Harry McClintock's iconic tunes, "Hallelujah I'm a Bum" and "The Big Rock Candy Mountain." Reactionaries who fought against the IWW referred to the acronym as "I Won't Work," as part of a strategy to delegitimize the labor organization. But this could be viewed as a mistake, because it helped broadcast precisely that the IWW fought for: less work. Perhaps it's no coincidence that the IWW has had the best success so far of any labor organization in organizing the precariat at places like Starbucks Coffee Company.⁴⁵

Another alternative worth consideration is reviving the idea of a universal, guaranteed annual income.⁴⁶ But this idea should be separated from the original context from which it emerged. In the 1970s, conservatives like Milton Friedman proposed the guaranteed income as a *technical* issue, designed to solve economic problems. The cultural and ideological dimension of work was not a topic for conversation, and it is still not up for reflection among those on the Left who are currently talking about the idea. A guaranteed income is considered by both Left and Right as an economic issue, with little or no relation to cultural problems, because the concept is framed within a context that addresses economic inequality. Thus, it is understood as a "how to" issue rather than a "why" issue (why work?). Most importantly, liberals and conservatives continue to wring their hands over the possibility that a guaranteed income would discourage people from working.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ For a more extensive analysis of the history of the shorter-hours of work movements, see Jonathan Cutler, *Labor's Time* (Temple University Press, 2004).

⁴⁵ <http://www.starbucksunion.org/about>

⁴⁶ <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/making-sense/why-americas-favorite-anarchist-thinks-most-american-workers-are-slaves/>

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

In ideology it appears as if only the master deserves access to the hammock, but when the figure of the slacker upsets the ideological rituals of sadomasochism in everyday life, we get a glimpse of how it is that workers fight for their chance to occupy the hammock. At last we have reached what is truly at stake with the fast-food workers' strikes and the discourse on hammocks among the Right and Left that has framed these recent events. Perhaps there is, after all, room for more in the hammock. It may be that a return to the ancient Greek attitude towards work is what we need; a trip back to the future. As the dramaturge Gotthold Ephraim Lessing once said, "Let us be lazy in everything, except in loving and drinking, except in being lazy."⁴⁸

⁴⁸ See Paul Lafargue, *The Right to Be Lazy*, (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing, 1989) p 21.