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The value of work and the future of the Left

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IMPORTANT SIGNS IN recent years suggest that work may be returning to centre stage in politics. Of course, work has always been political in the broad sense, so the reality of this situation is better depicted as a challenge to the way that work has been effectively depoliticised in many contexts. This is a question, then, of the different ways that work is understood, represented, and spoken about, both in political movements and in the organs of politics, most obviously in parliamentary politics, the unions of organised labour, and the associations of the employers of labour.

In this sense, the Future of Work Commission established by the Labour Party of New Zealand is to be praised for its effort to place work back on the political agenda. The Labour Party has a proud history representing working people as well as formally representing workers' movements in the parliamentary

sphere. The Future of Work Commission could therefore play an important role in returning work to the space of political contestation and as an object around which political organisation can take place. What happens when work appears on the political stage, however, is very much an open question.

This paper arises from a request to report to the Future of Work Commission on the question of the value of work in the past, present, and future politics of the Left.¹ This task is complicated, however, by the complexity of the meaning of the terms Left and Right. As is well known, these terms have always been contested, and entered something of a crisis in the 1980s when the word ‘Left’ continued to be used but was increasingly emptied of content. Today, however, the Left is again in the process of reinventing itself. This reinvention presents the task, then, of laying the foundations not only of a new politics of work but also a meaningful concept of the political Left. It is only when we are clear about the meanings of Left and Right that we can be clear about the very different kinds of politics that will result from taking a Left position on work.

This paper therefore seeks to clarify what a Left politics of work might look like today. This requires in the first place an analysis of the respective value of work to the political Left and

1 I would like to thank Grant Robertson for the invitation to write this paper and for his efforts in establishing the Future of Work Commission. Earlier versions of elements of this paper were presented at the Rosa Luxemburg School for Politics and Critique (Ohrid, Macedonia, June 24-27, 2016); the Social Movements, Resistance and Social Change III conference (Wellington, September 1-3, 2016); the Feminism and Finance seminar (University of Auckland, December 19, 2016) and the Sociology discipline seminar series (University of Auckland, May 10, 2017). Thanks to all participants for their valuable contributions and comments. Thanks to Catherine Cumming, Nathalie Jaques, Anna-Maria Murtola, and Stephen Turner for feedback on a full version paper and many important provocations. Thanks also to students in my ‘Work and Life’ and ‘Fantasies of Finance’ courses at the University of Auckland who have discussed and helped me refine these ideas over the past two years. Thanks finally to two anonymous reviewers for useful comments and to Dylan Taylor and the editorial team at *Counterfutures* for their insightful reading and many valuable suggestions. Any failings that remain are my own.

Right, to which end I argue that what distinguishes the Left and the Right regarding the value of work is not simply the quantity of value or dignity that is attributed to work. Rather, Left and Right depart in a fundamental ontological confrontation regarding the nature of what work is and the existence of the bodies from which work issues. This analysis therefore raises deeper questions regarding the very distinction between the Left and the Right. Much of what is identified as the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary Left has in recent years taken over the concepts and the ontological coordinates of the Right. I take as my target the definition of work prevalent on the Right, what I call the 'vulgar concept of work'. Given the strong and distinctive past of Left politics of work and the urgent strategic opportunity for political organisation around work, I argue for the importance for the contemporary Left of a renewed politics of work grounded on its own distinctive conception of work and its own claims for the rights of working people. A Left politics of work demands a radical reconsideration of what counts as work and the rewards that result from various activities considered as work.

The paper is divided into three parts. The first part assesses the value of work on the Left and the Right, arguing against the notion that the Left values work and workers more highly than the Right. This grounds the analysis in the second part of what it is about work that is valued by the Left and the Right. What emerges in this analysis is that the Left and Right part ways not in the value or dignity attributed to work. Rather, they maintain radically different conceptions of what constitutes work. On the basis of this distinction, the third part of the paper turns to what divides the Left and the Right as such. Because a key part of the future of the Left, I argue, arises from a specific conception of work and the politics that arises from this, I conclude by advancing five positions for a Left politics of work.

The value of work

At first glance it is rather obvious that the Left is marked by a defence and celebration of work and the working class. This is clear from the history of the modern Left: from the *sans-culottes* of the French Revolution, the striking workers of the Scottish Insurrection of 1820, the direct manifestation of the working class and its power with the rise of Chartism in the 1830s and the revolutions across Europe of 1848 to the Paris Commune of 1871. This valuing of work and workers is equally central to the formal workers' associations of the late nineteenth century, in the rise of trade unions and organisations such as the founding in 1863 of the German Workers' Association, later to become the Social Democratic Workers' Party of Germany, and the founding in 1864 of the International Working Men's Association (also known as the First International). Similarly, the valuation of work and workers was central to the rise of other workers' parties that formed out of these earlier social movements and institutions such as the British Labour party, established in 1900, and the New Zealand Labour Party, established in 1916.

The historical valuation of work on the Left can be clearly seen in Left literature and art. Hence the power of the image of the hammer and sickle to symbolise industrial and farm work, and the celebration of work and workers on International Workers' Day (usually the first of May), instituted by the Second International from 1886. These symbols, along with the great novels, films, and music celebrating work and workers, are as important for the modern Left as its formal institutions and theoretical works.

The place of work and workers on the modern Left is also clearly signalled by the historical significance and changing stakes of the strike. The capacity for the organised withdrawal or refusal of work developed in modern politics into one of the key tactics for the symbolic and financial revaluation of work. Hence the success of the modern Left in making demands over working

conditions through strikes, whether they were organised within a particular workplace, a sector of the economy, a general strike, or, for example, the women's strike to demand recognition of systematically undervalued work.

The value of work on the Left can furthermore be seen in the place of work in Left theory throughout the twentieth century.² Marx demonstrated the centrality of work to the development of capitalism and how, when organised by capital, work involves expanding and deepening misery for many in the process of producing great wealth for the capitalist class. The 'free association of producers' that he called for is an invocation to recognise and value not only the productive powers of workers but further, their capacity through self-organisation to organise their work in spite of and outside capitalist command and their capacity through political organisation to intervene so as to change their situation. Later Left thinkers have emphasised the fundamental place of work in Marx and Marxist politics.³

- 2 There is a vast literature in Left theory that maintains, in various ways, the centrality of work both in daily life under capitalism and for the prospects of political organisation. Rather than seeking to provide an exhaustive history of these important efforts, what is most important first of all is to note the persistence of Left claims over work. These often appear in changed historical conditions, in relation to changes in the world of work, asserting that despite these changes, work is still pivotal experientially and politically. For moments across this vast literature over recent years see, for example, Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, second edition (New York: Monthly Review, 1988); André Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class*, trans. Michael Sonenscher (London: Pluto, 1982); Antonio Negri, "Workers' party against work," in *Books For Burning: Between Civil War and Democracy in 1970s Italy*, trans. Arianna Bove et al. (London: Verso, 2005); Geoffrey Key, "Why Labour is the Starting Point of Capital," in *Value: The Representation of Labour in Capitalism*, ed. Diane Elson (London: Verso, 1979); and Ricardo Antunes, *The Meanings of Work: Essays on the Affirmation and Negation of Work*, trans. Elizabeth Molinari (Chicago, IL: Haymarket, 2013).
- 3 Georg Lukács, for example, writes: 'labour is particularly from a genetic point of view the starting point of the humanization of man, for the extension of his abilities, among which self-mastery is something that can never be forgotten. It is moreover for a very long space of time the only area of this development, and all other forms of human activity which are linked to various values can only appear in an independent form when labour itself has already reached a relatively high level'. In Georg Lukács, *The Ontology of Social Being 2. Marx*, trans David Fernbach (London: Merlin, 1978), 80.

On the face of it, this appears as simply an elevation of the valuation of work and workers. This is complicated considerably by the question of the particular types of work that claim pride of place in this ostensible valuation of work. While in some of its forms the Left sought to elevate in status the work of all, there was equally a tendency to elevate particular types of work and worker, generally white male industrial workers. This resulted not so much from a generalised valuation of work on the Left but rather a valuing of those already most privileged by industrial capitalism and considered most amenable to political organisation.

The particularism of this vision of who was to be fully included within the celebrated working class bears one of the most damning indictments of Left representation and political organisation of workers. At the same time, as I will argue below, the lessons that can be learned from this limited notion of who counts as a worker, and of what is considered work, are the grounds on which the future of the Left can build an analysis and politics of work. We see here a theme to which I will return: the dangers of Left representation of work assuming a received idea of what work is, what work is most valuable, and whose work is most valuable.

I will return to these questions in the next part of the paper, but first it is important to clarify the value of work on the Right. In a certain sense, the modern Left and Right are both united in the positive valuation of work. Whatever is said, in practice both take work as the ultimate source of value and of social development and improvement, and in practice both know that labour is the source of profits, even if they draw very different conclusions from that realisation.

The valuation of work on the Right can be seen in many places. Of course, it is only in a roundabout way that the Right celebrates the class of people from which work issues. In a per-

verse twist, the Right praises the value and dignity of working. Work is taken by the Right as the justification of reward and therefore as one of the key grounds for the justification of inequality. What is then advocated is not the equality of people but rather the equivalence between work and reward. Rather than explaining reward in terms of unequal starting points or an economic process of the extraction of wealth from the working class, and trying to sidestep difficult questions about how social distribution is a contestable political position, the Right justifies inequality through an imagined causal relation between work and effort. This is why work is a crucial ideological operator for the Right.

With this in mind, it is not surprising that the political parties of the Right in New Zealand praise work and working. This is a crucial part of the National Party's strategy, which includes a campaign to get New Zealand working. The National Party itself claims to be 'working for New Zealand',⁴ and 'working to build a better future for New Zealand'.⁵ National Party publicity states that it is 'working to help families get ahead in a vibrant and growing economy',⁶ and is 'working hard to ensure our education system is working for all New Zealand children'.⁷ This goes beyond publicity and is claimed as a core value: 'The National Party has always valued enterprise, hard work and the rewards that go with success'.⁸

This ideological valuation of work runs throughout the pronouncements of the Right. This often features in discussions of productivity, in the inducement to create more output from work. Thus the importance of notions that 'the long-term pros-

4 <https://www.national.org.nz/history>

5 <https://www.national.org.nz/policies>

6 https://www.national.org.nz/10_ways_national_is_helping_families_get_ahead

7 <https://www.national.org.nz/policies>

8 <https://www.national.org.nz/our-values>

perity of a country depends on productivity’, or that ‘a society can also raise incomes by working harder’.⁹ Valuation of work and, in particular, hard work rests behind former Prime Minister John Key’s defence of immigration policy on the grounds that New Zealand workers are lazy, drug addled, and ‘just can’t muster what is required to actually work’.¹⁰ Equally, in spite of the lack of evidence and notable objections, a principled valuing of work rests behind the current Prime Minister Bill English’s complaint that ‘two or three employers a week’ tell him that young New Zealand workers are drugged.¹¹

This defence of hard work is not unique to the Right in New Zealand; indeed it finds its origins and ideological encouragement elsewhere. Valuing hard work was a central rhetorical strategy of the former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, David Cameron. His injunction to work was pivotal in his repeated attacks on the poor. He asserted that ‘if you can work, you should work and not live off the hard work of others’.¹² In a magisterial reversal of the logic of the capitalist exploitation of labour and in blind concession to the legitimacy of what he called ‘the system’, he laid down the gauntlet: ‘And for that person intent on ripping off the system, we are saying—we will not let you live off the hard work of others’.¹³

9 Oliver Hartwich, *Manifesto 2017: What the Next New Zealand Government Should Do* (Wellington: The New Zealand Initiative, 2017), 24; Paul Conway, *Achieving New Zealand’s Productivity Potential* (research paper for, The New Zealand Initiative, 2016): 3.

10 <http://www.radionz.co.nz/news/political/312562/immigrants-needed-due-to-nz-workers-work-ethic,-drug-use-pm>

11 <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/89858196/bill-english-says-employers-are-regularly-telling-him-that-kiwis-cant-pass-drug-tests>

12 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2009/oct/08/david-cameron-speech-in-full>

13 <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/the-staggers/2011/05/society-government-public>. As Christian Fuchs summarises: ‘Cameronism is an ideology of hard labour: It argues that it works hard to manage the economy by fiscal austerity, reducing public spending and cutting taxes and that it does all to advance the interests of hard working Britons by reducing their taxes, immigration and welfare abuse’ Christian Fuchs, “Neoliberalism in Britain: From Thatcherism to Cameronism,” *Triple C: Communication, Capitalism, Critique*, 14 (2016): 173.

Numerous other examples could be offered to demonstrate the historical valuation of work by the Right, from contemporary political parties and ideologists, back to Nazi use of the nineteenth-century slogan ‘work makes you free’, or the Vichy regime’s replacement of the value of ‘Liberty, Equality, Fraternity’ with ‘Work, Family, Homeland’. Perhaps most important is the function that work serves in political liberalism and capitalist economics. The driving impulse for Adam Smith was the means by which the productivity of labour can be increased rather than the division of labour as such.¹⁴ Equally, John Locke was not unusual in the tradition of political liberalism in the great value that he placed on work, or in his idea that ‘We ought to look on it as a mark of goodness in God that he has put us in this life under a necessity of labour’.¹⁵

There are various reasons for the celebration of work by the Right, but at the heart of this matter is the fact that the Right is the political symbolisation of the interests of the class who live and grow rich from the work of other people. On the Right, even the act of profiting from the work of others is represented as work itself (it’s not easy collecting rent, it’s hard work running a business...). This is accompanied by the injunction that all others must work, must always work, and must forever improve themselves so as to be more productive, more reliable, and available on demand. On the question of the value of work, the Right will always have the upper hand. This is because the Right is the representation of class interests of those who benefit from the exploitation of the work of others.

14 The ‘improvement of the productive powers of labour’ is both the conceptual and the literal starting point of Smith’s economics. See Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations, Books I-III*, ed. Andrew Skinner (London: Penguin, 1986), 109ff.

15 John Locke “Labour,” in *Political Writings*, ed. David Wooton (Indianapolis, IL: Hackett, 1993), 440. On the multiple meanings of work in Locke and the contradictions in his ‘labour theory of property’ see Campbell Jones “The Meanings of Work in John Locke,” in *History of Economic Rationalities*, eds. Jakob Bek-Thomsen, Christian Olaf Christiansen, Stefan Gaarsmand Jacobsen and Mikkel Thorup (Dordrecht: Springer, 2017), 51-62.

This brief sketch of the value of work on the Left and the Right illuminates how the modern Left and Right are, within specific limits, united in their valuation of work. This valuation of work has, of course, not always been the case, and this increased valuation of work across the political spectrum is a distinctly modern phenomenon, one that clearly accompanies the rise of capitalism. As historians such as E P Thompson have shown, the effort to induce people to work, and the broader process of the construction of the working class, was a terribly difficult project, encountering resistance and refusal at every step.¹⁶ This survey of the modern valuation of work on the Left and the Right was a necessary step in the movement towards a deeper question. It will be shown, in what follows, that the Left and the Right depart on the questions of *why* they value work and what is valued in work.

Why and what the Left and Right value in work

Work is valued for a vast number of reasons. For the one who works, there can be a sense of achievement in seeing the results of the externalisation of human effort in material objects and social forms. Work involves the capacity to be involved with creating great things, whether this is a physical construction, the building of an institution, or the pleasure in witnessing the affective state of those for whom we care. Even if the desire to work is far from natural, work is widely claimed to have value for all: in working one sees the results of one's actions and in doing so constructs oneself.¹⁷

16 Edward Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1968).

17 This valuation of work runs across modern thought but is outlined perhaps most elegantly and with the richest significance in chapter four of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which develops and condenses his earlier lectures in Jena. See Georg Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); Georg Hegel, *System of Ethical Life and First Philosophy of Spirit*, trans. H.S. Harris and T. M. Knox (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1979).

At the level of the community, work provides the means of subsistence, not only for those who work, but for others unable to work or whom the community decides to exempt from work because of age, illness, injury, or any other reason. Work provides not only continued existence, it also expands the capacities of health, food production, transportation, communication, social relations, education, and recreation. The virtues of work are therefore taught to all, for its results do not just benefit the individual who works, but can also benefit the community at large.

For these very real reasons, in modern life the idea of being opposed to work as such, or seeking to reduce or limit work, becomes all but unthinkable. In the extreme: ‘The modern age has carried with it a theoretical glorification of labor and has resulted in a factual transformation of the whole of society into a laboring society’.¹⁸ This was never fully achieved, and has always met resistance; hence the profound and relentless effort to drum a ‘work ethic’ into human bodies not immediately inclined in this direction, whether this comes from the pulpit, the teacher, government officials, the Work and Income office, or the television.¹⁹ There has always been a demonisation of those unable or unwilling to work, or unwilling to work as hard and as long as possible, which has taken on a pronounced televisual and online presence in recent years.²⁰ It is vital to stress that this contemporary demonisation of the poor is strictly continuous with the relentless modern demand for ever more work, ever harder work, and ever more productive work that is found in Protestantism, in political liberalism and classical political economy, and in contemporary capitalist economics.

18 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 4.

19 The classic sociological analysis of the tactics of the efforts at moral inducement to work is provided by Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parson (London: Routledge, 1930).

20 See Owen Jones, *Chavs: The Demonisation of the Working Class* (London: Verso, 2016).

This blanket valuation of work is interrupted, however, by the vast diversity of work, and the reality that so many types of work patently fail to deliver the self-actualisation promised by the proponents of work. Forms of work that are physically debilitating or dangerous might fail in this test, as do the increasing number of jobs that are today precarious in continuity or availability. So a hierarchy of types of work emerges: from the most satisfying and valued we descend through to dangerous and precarious work and the boring and pointless work that David Graeber identifies as ‘bullshit jobs’.²¹

There are different responses to this multiplicity of work. One approach involves efforts to eliminate the worst, most dangerous, and unpleasant types of work; to modify or improve the design of work; to introduce safety standards and requirements for break periods; and to eliminate certain types of work contracts through, for instance, the criminalisation of zero-hour contracts.²² These kinds of intervention cut off the tail end of the most undesirable jobs. But it is hard to justify the inherent value and dignity of work to the worker when so much of the work on offer is debilitating, degrading, or in direct conflict with the stories a society tells itself about the value and dignity of citizens. The diversity of work and working conditions is often justified by the idea that progress is possible, that one can move upward from a bad job to a less bad job. This idea of upward mobility is sharply contradicted by the evidence regarding employment mobility; further, rather than improving work as such, employment mobility typically means that different workers are shuffled between the same set of positions. Yet this idea has a remarkable

21 David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* (New York: Simon and Schuster, forthcoming).

22 In Aotearoa New Zealand, zero-hour contracts were legislated against by the Employment Standards Legislation Bill of 2016 following union campaigns calling for their abolition.

endurance precisely because of the way it plays on the idea of a meritocratic relation between ability, effort, and reward.²³

While the positions assumed as to the supposed diversity of jobs and ideas of mobility and meritocracy show some significant differences between the Left and the Right, beyond these a much deeper set of differences regarding what is valued in work now come into view. In a certain sense, everyone benefits from the work of others. The labours of those who came before us and of those we work alongside today provide significant material and social benefits. This accumulation and socialisation of labour has informed the modern Left's valuation of work, a valuation grounded in the recognition that the ongoing work of everyone produces the possibility of a better life for all.

The obvious problem is that the benefits of the work of others are not equally distributed. This has always been the case, but is particularly so when the vast majority earn their continued existence and right to social participation by selling their wage labour to another group that accrues wealth by purchasing wage labour and setting it to work. While the employer seeks effort and output, from the standpoint of those who sell their labour-power, working involves offering more than the capacity to exert effort. This is the case with all forms of work, although it is accelerated in contemporary forms of work that rely on one 'being oneself' or displaying social and affective capacities in order to do one's work. Work always brings with it the worker. Despite our best efforts to remain alien to the work we do, the basic problem remains that the capacity to work always issues from a real, living human being, and this

23 See Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870-2033* (London: Pelican, 1958). For contemporary cases against 'meritocracy' see James Bloodworth, *The Myth of Meritocracy* (London: Biteback, 2016) and Jo Littler *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility* (Oxford: Routledge, 2017). See also Robert H. Frank, *Success and Luck: Good Fortune and the Myth of Meritocracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

requires the conditions that enabled the production and reproduction of that human being.

Meaningful Left politics has always valued something more in work than its material results. Hence the Left valuation of the entire person behind the work for their innate humanity. This is the ground for the Left insistence on the relative equality of every worker, despite, or in direct disregard for, the utility of that labour for the capitalist. This is the socialist demand that ‘no inequality of individual powers can serve as a basis for inequality of individual rewards’.²⁴ This is the often-forgotten reasoning behind the ancient idea that, because talents are differently distributed, it falls on those most capable to contribute the most. This is expressed in the modern Left premise of shared access to the wealth produced in common. It is what rests behind the principle: ‘From each according to their ability, to each according to their needs’.²⁵

At the starkest, then, the Right values work for what it produces, for productivity. The Left also values productivity but on the Left the emphasis is on the social benefits of increased productive capacities. Marx could not help but celebrate—at times excessively—the benefits of the increasing productivity of work. This emphasis led him, at times, to focus his analysis too narrowly on those forms of work in which productivity could be palpably increased, while underplaying other forms of labour where such changes in productivity were not so easily obtained.²⁶ Thomas Piketty equally emphasises the benefits of

24 Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *What is Property?*, trans. Donald Kelly and Bonnie G. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 102.

25 Karl Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” in *The First International and After: Political Writings, Volume Three* (London: Verso, 2010), 347.

26 On this important dynamic of the differential prospect for increasing the productivity of labour in different forms of work framed from the side of capitalist economics, see William Baumol et al. *The Cost Disease: Why Computers Get Cheaper and Health Care Doesn’t* (New York: Yale University Press, 2012).

productivity and economic growth more generally, noting the broad social benefits of those moments in the history of capitalism where the rate of growth could approximate or exceed the rate of return on capital.²⁷

But beyond a shared valuing of constantly increasing productivity, the Right, as the ideological and material representation of those who benefit from the work of others, find that the increasing productivity of labour, when other limits are reached, is the principal means by which increasing rates of return on capital can be achieved. By contrast, the Left has sensed that the increasing productivity of labour can be the grounds, not for an increase in the rate of profit, but rather for the reduction or elimination of either certain types of work or of work as such.

The idea of the reduction of work as such has always been met with extreme hostility from the Right, and has been attacked in wildly diverse ways. We can see this in the celebration of work in its own right, or the idea that those who are not labouring under the command of others are somehow inclined to a wasteful or socially catastrophic form of idling. Against this have been various Left appeals to the reduction of the working day, the virtues of freedom from work, the celebration of ‘the right to be lazy’, and essays ‘in praise of idleness’.²⁸

These explicit appeals reflect the variety of concrete practices of refusal of work. Sociologists have extensively documented and taxonomised the variety of ways in which and reasons for

27 Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

28 See, for example, Paul Lafargue, *The Right to be Lazy* (New York: AK Press, 2011); Bertrand Russell, *In Praise of Idleness and other Essays* (Oxford: Routledge, 2004); Tom Hodgkinson, *How to Be Idle* (London: Penguin, 2005).

which people refuse or resist work.²⁹ The Left has a strong and proud history of the refusal of work, of demands against work in order to reduce it. This involves not simply the modification of work but its limitation. Not better work, but less work, a demand to have ‘hours for what we will’. Often this reflects the demand to turn technological development away from the extension of work and towards the reduction of work and the creation of spaces for leisure.³⁰ This can be seen in the practical politics of the restriction of the working day, of paid work or of work in general, and in recent calls for an anti-work politics and a ‘world without work’.³¹

The distinctiveness of a Left position on work is, then, not to be found in the value placed on work as such. It should be remembered that Marx did not unequivocally celebrate work, as is often claimed, but rather grudgingly conceded work as a necessity, a practice that opens the realm of freedom, and above all the freedom of others. ‘The true realm of freedom, the development of human powers as an end in itself’, he wrote, lies beyond necessity, and for this, ‘The reduction of the working day is the basic prerequisite’.³²

The Left, then, values something very different in work. So far, however, we have been treating work in a rather obvious way, largely in terms of the commonsensical notion of work as pertaining to those activities recognised in paid employment. It is

29 For instance, Stephen Ackroyd and Paul Thompson, *Organizational Misbehaviour* (London: Sage, 1999); Peter Fleming, *Resisting Work: The Corporatisation of Life and its Discontents* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2015); David Frayne, *The Refusal of Work: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Work* (London: Zed, 2015).

30 See, for example, André Gorz, *Paths to Paradise: On the Liberation from Work*, trans. Malcolm Imrie (London: Pluto, 1985); André Gorz, *Critique of Economic Reason*, trans. Gillian Handyside and Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1989).

31 Recent examples include Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London: Verso, 2015).

32 Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume Three* (London: Penguin, 1990), 959.

important to stress the Left's insistence that such activities necessarily involve the worker, and that the worker as the bearer of labour-power should be valued in themselves. But the designation of what is valued in work, and valued in the worker, can be extended further to encompass the very definition of work itself. This is why the most profound challenge of the Future of Work Commission rests in the demand: 'it is time to reconsider what work is'.³³

This is not simply a timely challenge that responds to the changes brought about by the computerisation or automation of certain types of work. These are widespread platitudes. The Left has always had a different consideration of what work is and has always contested the narrowness and shallowness of the conception of work proposed by the Right. There are always changes in the way work is organised, in the superficial sense that the same thing can be organised in many different ways. But more important, and this is a clue as to the future of the Left, is the Left's ability to see in work something fundamentally different from what is registered by the Right. The Left and the Right, in short, do not so much dispute the value of an agreed-upon thing. Except when they take over the categories of the other side, which can happen in either direction, the Left and the Right disagree over the nature of the thing itself. This is an ontological dispute over the nature of work, what work is, and what should be considered work.

When the grounds of this dispute are forgotten there is a risk of lapsing into what I call the 'vulgar concept of work'. This concept is vulgar, not in the sense of being crass or sordid, but rather in that it takes what seems the most obvious form of work to reflect work as such. In this conception, work is understood to be the intentional, instrumental, purposive activity of a largely isolated individual, generally in return for money. The vulgar

33 Future of Work Commission, *The Future of Work*, 37.

concept of work is found throughout liberal political philosophy and classical political economy, and is central in contemporary capitalist economics. And even if it is far from completely stable in these traditions, this vulgar concept of work has been almost universally taken over as reflecting work as such.

It is not that, with the rise of flexible work, care work, and automation, this vulgar concept of work no longer reflects the realities of work today. It has never adequately reflected the reality of work, which is fundamentally social, enabled by a community, past and present, and, in particular, by the vast and generally unpaid work of producing and reproducing workers.³⁴ In any act of working, work draws on a vast and dispersed set of capacities that have developed over ‘thousands of centuries’.³⁵ Production, in short, has always been ‘production from the common, in common, of the common’.³⁶

The Left emphasises that work is always social and does not issue from an isolated self-possessing and self-sufficient individual. While this is often forgotten, or is thought to be a philosophical whimsy or part of an abstract ‘critique of the subject’, the Left has always had a different idea not simply of the value of work but of what is valued in work and why. This involves a distinct conception of what a human being is, what society is, and what, ultimately, work is.

34 Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012); Marilyn Waring, *Counting for Nothing: What Men Value and what Women are Worth* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

35 Marx: ‘the capital-relation arises out of an economic soil that is the product of a long period of development. The existing productivity of labour, from which it proceeds as its basis, is a gift, not of nature, but of a history embracing thousands of centuries’. Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume One* (London: Penguin, 1990), 647.

36 Campbell Jones and Anna-Maria Murtola, “Entrepreneurship and expropriation,” *Organization*, 19 (2012): 635.

The future of the Left

In the first part of this paper I sought to establish that the principal departure between the modern Left and Right over work is not reducible to the value of work. Both attribute value and dignity to work. The second part of the paper explored how the Left and Right diverge on the question of why work is valued and what in work is valued; significantly, they part ways on questions of what work is, and what is important about work and the people that work. It is not that the Left and the Right hold different positions on a shared object; rather, the objects they understand as work are fundamentally different.

Politics always involves disagreement, and the effort to eradicate or manage disagreement is also a reduction of the possibility of politics.³⁷ Politics is inevitably ontological: it involves claims about what is, and explicitly or implicitly conducts a discourse on being. Remembering that politics is ontological is crucial if we are to understand the political transformations that have taken place since the 1980s, in which institutionalised Left politics and its political organs increasingly took on the character and categories of the Right. Significant here is the institutional Left's reorientation to the ontological coordinates of the Right. With this ontological reorientation it certainly became plausible to conclude that the Left and the Right were finally talking about the same thing. In this way two positions unite into one, converging around a 'third way' or an 'extreme centre' that simply does not recognise the conflicts of the past and takes politics to be the art of the possible, the balanced and smooth administration of 'what works'.³⁸

37 Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1992); Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 2004).

38 Tariq Ali, *Extreme Centre: A Warning* (London: Verso, 2015); Campbell Jones and Shannon Walsh, "What is political organisation?" *Economic and Social Research Aotearoa* 2 (2017): 1-6.

It is an important step, then, for the Left today to put work and the future of work back on the agenda. Because the Left has historically not held the same conception of work as the Right, by itself this is nowhere near enough. It would be a grave danger for the self-defined Left, and the political movements and parties traditionally associated with it, to continue assuming the categories and the definition of work set by the Right. When it does this, Left politics is reduced to merely repeating yesterdays' slogans, but this time emptied of content. The Left, then, can easily pay lip-service as to whose side it is on, while the content of its politics, the objects around which it organises, and the course of action proposed are taken from the Right. The future of the Left requires recognising that it represents a world fundamentally different from that of the Right.

That politics arises from ontological disagreement is not a new idea. The history of the Left has always rested on the demands for the acknowledgement of the existence of those elements considered not to exist, or to have a minimal power of existence according to the Right. The development of the politics of the working class and its political organs, of the feminist struggle and its symbolic representation, the claims for the equality of all bodies that work, involve a constant struggle to articulate demands for rights to social, political, and symbolic existence. This is a demand that one's activity not be taken as reflective of nature but that action issues from wilful subjects who can withhold, refuse, and act differently, and because of this have the capacity to transform society.³⁹

The modern Left crystallised during the French Revolution in the demands for the rights of existence of a Third Estate of 'commoners'. This call for a recognition of their existence played out in the effort to place the Third Estate alongside the First

39 Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

Estate of the church and the Second Estate of the aristocracy. On the eve of the Revolution, in the call for the forming of the Estates General in which all three estates would seek to be represented, Emmanuel Sieyès would raise the call: ‘What is the Third Estate? *Everything*. What, until now, has it been in the existing political order? *Nothing*. What does it want to be? *Something*’.⁴⁰

This demand for existence runs through the history of the modern Left, hence the incredible power of the demand that ‘our work is work’.⁴¹ This involves a struggle over value in both the cultural and economic senses of the term, and the feminist struggle over the value of work that issues from differently understood bodies is of immeasurable importance for Left politics today. The struggle over valuation has been understood by some as a ‘struggle for recognition’, an effort to have one’s contribution admitted, recognised, and valued.⁴² For others, it is a demand for equality grounded in the demand for a part for those who are considered to have ‘no part’.⁴³ For others still, it is a demand for the right to appear for those whose pain, suffering, and even death are not considered worth grieving and for an effort to make life for these people more liveable.⁴⁴

It can be useful to formalise such demands for existence in terms of a politics of ‘the count’.⁴⁵ This involves the most rigor-

40 Emmanuel Sieyès, “What is the Third Estate?” in *Political Writings* (Indianapolis, IL: Hackett, 2003), 94.

41 Federici, “Wages Against Housework,” 20.

42 See Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Oxford: Polity, 1996); Axel Honneth, *The I in We: Studies in the Theory of Recognition* (Oxford: Polity, 2012); Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (London: Verso, 2004).

43 Jacques Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2006).

44 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2010), *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

45 See, for example, Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005).

ous accounting for who is counted, and who is miscounted and discounted within the count. A counter-count can always be initiated against the governing count: this demands the counting of all of those who exist. In this sense, a politics of the count and of the counter-count always contests the present miscount and discount and presses towards a different count. A politics of the count demands that the current exclusions and marginalisations be accounted for, and it is oriented towards an alternative future or a counterfuture.

A Left politics of the count regarding work contests the current miscounting and discounting of certain types of work and demands an expansion of the count. This runs through Left demands for the revaluation of diverse types of work, and for the inclusion of activities previously unrecognised as work, such as reproduction and care work, as equally deserving of recognition and inclusion in reward as other forms of 'work'. In short, the Left ontologically redefines the nature of work in ways that are more extensive, expansive, and inclusive, including in its definition of work a range of forms of unpaid work that continue to go unrecognised or under-recognised.

An expanded or, better, no longer restricted count therefore demands recognition of the relative equality of work across all of its forms. Recognising the activity of all is the ground for the rejection of the extensive differentiation in the value attributed to various types of activity. Recognition of the value of all and the connections, interrelationships, and interdependencies between diverse activities in a complex global economy is the solid ground on which rests the demand for redistribution of collectively produced wealth.

Since the Left departs from the Right on the question of what exists as work and what activities count, the Left comes to very different conclusions about what social arrangements are justifiable. It also departs on the question of where work issues

from. For the Right, work issues above all from the most obvious and immediate appearance of the source of activity in the action of an individual. For the Left, that act is profoundly enabled by the place of that individual actor in a social context. For the Left, both the immediate action and the actor themselves are fully socially embedded. The human being 'is at all events a social animal'.⁴⁶ It is constituted through interactions with others, and its actions impact upon others in turn. Recognition of the social enablement and implication of action decentres the individual with respect to reward.

It might seem at this point that ultimately the Left does value work more highly than the Right. But what I want to stress is that it values something different. The Left identifies and includes as valuable something that the Right also values, but the Right only values this as something to pillage.

My proposal is that this kind of thinking can ground positions for a project of the future of work for the Left. Without this historical memory, the Left risks uncritically taking on the concept of work from the Right. On that conception, what work is and what the value of work is, is nothing more than the present and contingent valuation of human meat on the labour market. Work is then only valued according to its value to capital and its agents, mediated by the laws of supply and demand, which is to say, by the current state of the class struggle. A Left project will, as it always has, refuse that basis of valuation and insist instead upon the uniquely human capacity for deliberation on what is, and the worth of what is.

The future of work is often portrayed as if resulting from an inexorable process of technological change that is outside of collective social deliberation. This is why, along with reconsidering the nature of what work is, any effective Left politics recog-

46 Marx, *Capital*, Volume One, 444.

nises that work is the way it is for social and political reasons. This means that it can be changed. Such is the radical nature of the Future of Work Commission when it stresses that ‘The fundamental premise of our Commission is that the future of work is not predestined, and it can be guided by our policies and our priorities’,⁴⁷ and that ‘The future of work will be guided and shaped by the choices and decisions we make’.⁴⁸

Conclusion: Five positions for a Left politics of work

Initiatives such as the Future of Work Commission present a significant opportunity. It signals that work is being recognised, once again, as an important consideration for the parliamentary Left, and this comes at a time in which new forms of political organisation and new Left political organisations are arising here and globally.⁴⁹ But nothing is to be gained from the strategy deployed by the institutional Left for too long now, that of imitating in a far from convincing form, moderated only by damage control after the fact, the politics, categories, concerns, and concepts of the Right. As the Left arises from the ashes today, in a process that contains no glimpse of magic nor of naïve hopefulness but rather faces up to the hard work ahead, we can be fortified in knowing that when we launch a politics of work there are already key elements in the tradition of the Left which have maintained a very specific understanding of the nature of work.

What can be claimed politically depends on what is and in vital ways on what appears. To say that the form of appear-

47 Future of Work Commission, *The Future of Work*, 7.

48 Future of Work Commission, *The Future of Work*, 5.

49 Jones and Walsh, “What is political organisation,” 1-6.

ance of what appears is vitally important is not to say that everything is appearance. Far from it. It is rather a principled calling into question of the self-evidence of how things appear. A Left politics of work involves making what is appear; this requires a critical moment that contests the narrowness of what appears as work. This critical and oppositional moment stresses the political consequences of both miscounting and discounting work.

What I call the ‘vulgar concept of work’ sees work only in the material exertion of effort that issues from an individual in return for a wage; it results from a historically and culturally specific idea of what work is and of what a person is. The vulgar concept of work is so improbable that it is rarely maintained in any consistent way, even by those who actively champion it. Organised and outright contestation of the vulgar concept of work provides at least five positions regarding the nature of work. Briefly enumerating these by way of conclusion might help to bring together the various threads of the analysis so far and clarify the grounds on which a Left politics of work could be built.

First, work is very different for the Left than it is for the Right. For the Left, *work is much more and involves much more than is currently recognised as work*. There are concrete political reasons capital seeks to pay as little as possible for our work. If our work can be completely miscounted, not seen to be creating value at all, while it produces and reproduces the conditions of life and indeed life itself, so much the better for the capitalist class. If our work can be discounted, paid less than the value it creates, then that class might grudgingly pay, cutting corners at every turn, and after doing so, it will want to be celebrated for having created jobs, and will assert that is them and their ingenious innovations, rather than our work, that creates wealth. We have a different count of who and what counts, a counter-count, and with this a vision of a counterfuture.

Second, while the vulgar concept of work emphasises the most immediate aspects of work, we maintain that *the action of any individual human being is mediated by the previous work of others*. This previous work of other people has created a vast and truly collective social capital which provides the basis for our present capacities for work and its immense productivity. This previous work, this dead labour that enables living labour, is manifest in our daily work and is represented by the Right as wealth and as capital. It is the basis for the expanded production of wealth and we all have a crucial stake in it. But this previous work of others and the benefits that accrue from it are monopolised by an incredibly small group of people, to the point that at the time of writing eight individuals currently command as much wealth as the poorest half of Earth's inhabitants.⁵⁰ Against this, a Left politics of work begins from the fact that this wealth does not rightfully belong to those individuals. This wealth and what it enables was not produced by those who command it and we all, by right, have a share in it.

Third, while the vulgar concept of work maintains that work issues primarily from the agency of an individual, we maintain that *work is decentred in relation to the individual*. In the immediate act of working, what a seemingly individual body exerts is the working through and working out of a vast sociality. This becomes visible in certain forms of affective and care work; more importantly, the analysis of these forms of work demonstrates the universality of this decentring of the locus of work away from the individual. This is what lies behind the insistence that production today is from the common, in common, of the common. This sense of enablement by others stresses what is called a positive freedom, a freedom that the Right does not acknowledge

50 Oxfam, 'An economy for the 99%'. Last accessed 21 July 2017. <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/economy-99>

or admit.⁵¹ Note also that in redistributing agency away from the individual, the Left redistributes what appears as work and what enables work. This is why meritocracy looks very different on the Left. For us, meritocracy requires recognition of the activities of all who have enabled the creation of our common wealth.

Fourth, while the vulgar concept of work principally recognises activities that are able to secure a wage, we maintain that *the actual contribution of work runs a different course than what is credited by the wage*. This includes, first of all, a politics of unpaid work: that work of others that is valued at precisely nothing even while it is the indispensable condition of economic life and of paid labour. This involves crediting that work of the production and reproduction of those who enter paid employment, crediting it as the origin and ground of social life, and refusing the idea that production and reproduction of life is worth nothing or merely follows from the nature of certain bodies. It also brings into play a recognition of the work of those preparing themselves for work through education, the work of those recovering from a day or a lifetime of work, and the work of those arbitrarily thrown out of work who are transitioning into new or different jobs. It includes the work of time, the work of cultivation, preservation, and repair of the natural environment, activities that are, for the vulgar concept of work, nothing but externalities.

Fifth, while the vulgar concept of work lets work appear in relation to its ability to secure individual material and symbolic reward, we maintain *the relative equality of all forms of work*. We have learned from bitter experience that paid work is paid not in relation to its productivity but in relation to the capacity for collective demands. We know that there is no evidence that wages rise automatically with economic growth, and that the period in which work and reward have approximated each other was his-

51 Friedrich Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (London: Routledge, 1960), 18.

torically brief, produced by a power that capital seeks always to outmanoeuvre.⁵² We know that the share of national and global output accruing to capital and to labour can vary remarkably over time, following a cycle that is political and representational, not the mechanical result of economic productivity or growth.⁵³ We know that international labour arbitrage across differences in wages of immobile workforces is the basis for surplus profits achieved through outsourcing. We know that the distribution of material and symbolic rewards reflects the capacity to appear as productive, as working. Our demand for the relative equality of all forms of work is a struggle against the discounting of certain workers to the benefit of others, and our historic and present demand for high progressive income taxes reflects the need for political action against the inequities of distribution that are inherent to the capitalist organisation of work on labour markets.

Together, these positions offer the grounds for a Left politics of work, which would insist: (1) that work is much more and involves much more than is currently recognised as work; (2) that the action of any individual is mediated by the previous work of others; (3) that work is decentred in relation to the individual; (4) that the actual contribution of work runs a different course than what is credited by the wage; and (5) on the relative equality of all forms of work. In building on this tradition of

52 International Labour Organisation, *World Employment Social Outlook: Trends 2017* (Geneva: International Labour Organization, 2017).

53 The Future of Work Commission notes a fall in the labour share in economic growth from 50% to 37% between 2009 and 2015 (Future of Work Commission, *The Future of Work*, p. 9). Even the right think tank the Productivity Commission notes that among the predominant reasons for the fall in the share of national income going to labour over the past thirty years has been 'decreases in labour's bargaining power', and that 'changes in policies and institutions over the past thirty years have altered the balance of bargaining power across the owners of labour and capital'. Paul Conway, Lisa Meehan and Dean Parham, "Who Benefits from Productivity Growth? The Labour Income Share in New Zealand," *New Zealand Productivity Commission Working Paper*, 2015. See also, for example, Benjamin Bridgman and Ryan Greenaway-McGrevy "The fall (and rise) of labour share in New Zealand," *New Zealand Economic Papers* (2016): 1-22.

the Left, nothing that has been said here should indicate looking backwards other than to remember and to learn from the past. In this sense, the other thing that the Left has always maintained is an orientation towards the future. If we speak of tax today, then, it will be to demand taxes on wealth, it will be to return wealth to those who have actually produced it in their work. And when we demand a social wage or massive reorientations to projects of housing, transport, health, and education, this is in recognition that need must inform distribution; again, this is because we refuse the miscounting and discounting of the work that produced our ability to provide these things in the first place.

A viable Left future will not come about through making adjustments to the present; it must be actively and creatively constructed. The future is not produced by robots, technology, or any automatic economic trajectory. Creating a Left future requires political organisation and strategic thinking. This thinking will take us beyond the most obvious politics of the existing parliamentary and extra-parliamentary Left.

Work is vital to any politics of the future. We must have the confidence to make visible both the history and the present of what we are doing as work. Because for us on the Left, work is something fundamentally different than it is for those on the Right. We might now sense why the Right wants to force the concept of work back into its narrowest confines. If the Right has been more alert to how explosive work can be as a political concept and has strenuously sought to constrain it, it is our turn to reclaim work and everything that it involves.

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