

## Introduction

### *Why Work?*

A young university lecturer enters a London pub late Friday night with a backpack of undergraduate exams in urgent need of grading, within a matter of days, in fact—external auditors are already waiting to sign off on them. She wearily looks around, tired and irritated, moving toward the crowded bar to wait. What a mess this has become, and through no fault of her own. The impossible deadline for grading the 450 exams she received that day was apparent months ago, and she had dutifully alerted university management to the coming disaster should they fail to authorize the additional paid help.

The response was lukewarm, but affirmative. Then nothing happened. After two or three more worried e-mails to her supervisor as the deadline approached, they finally agreed. *“Of course. Don’t be silly! Organize the support. The deadline needs to be met, and it’s fast approaching!”* She went to work, frantically calling colleagues and former tutors who might be able to help. Three weeks ago, yes, but now they were taking a well-deserved holiday. Finally, after three anxious days, assistance was found. But given the short notice, they could not collect the exams on campus. She would have to deliver them herself. The backpack was handed over, strained small talk ensued, and finally she made her way home, relieved but depressed about how the whole process had been mismanaged by her superiors.

This real-life scenario conveyed to the author encapsulates the theme of this book. It suggests that many jobs in the West are now regulated by a new matrix of power—*biopower*. This is where *bios*, or “life itself,” is put to work through our ability to self-organize around the formal rules, be resourceful outside the official workday, and use our social ingenuity to get things done. The presence of this power is especially obvious when the boundary between work and non-work dissolves. Both the formal and the informal spheres blend into the production process. The scenario also points to the way this type of regulation camouflages itself through moments of spontaneous self-planning, extra-employment networks and even generosity. The book suggests that there is something systematic and strategic occurring here, linked to the way in which capital accumulation is now organized, particularly in times of crisis and refusal.<sup>1</sup>

Our university employee interprets this biopolitical episode as mismanagement. It is this, but something else is happening here as well, since recent research indicates that most exploitative employment settings function similarly today. Neoliberalism in particular is experienced as incredibly disorganized and obstructive. Indeed, rather than being a one-off aberration, such disarray actually reflects its anti-democratic normalcy, especially today when it calls on us to be always poised to produce. Its ultimate aim is to secure its own untenable continuation rather than satisfy broader collective needs. Moreover, the lecturer’s social virtuosity reveals another key topic investigated in this book, that of “the commons” and the modern corporation’s parasitical reliance on it. Because neoliberal capitalism finds it almost impossible to reproduce itself on its own terms, it must draw on value outside of its official reach. Such value is embodied in the worker him- or herself, and the modern firm seeks to yoke this rich social excess to the lexicon of capitalist work relations. Today, this often takes the personified form of *self-exploitation*, as the above case demonstrates.

Let us depart the university and enter into an even stranger milieu: the modern business firm.<sup>2</sup> Something analogous is occurring here, too. A good deal of the real work does not seem to be occurring inside the corporation at all, but elsewhere. A large sports apparel conglomerate epitomizes this mentality perfectly. Here is a telling interview excerpt with the CEO (posted on YouTube as “Lessons in Leadership” [2008], emphasis added) that tells us why:

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Interviewer: I'm sure you are a cool guy, but some of the young people who look at you, they just probably see some guy in a suit . . . and think, not so cool. . . . [H]ow do you keep parting me from my money and my kids? [*General laughter.*]

CEO: The main thing I do . . . every chance we have we keep rejuvenating our company with people who are the customer. . . . [I]n the areas of design, sales, and marketing, they all have to be *young people*. . . . [T]hey know the culture; they feel that it's part of their DNA; they can talk the talk and walk the walk. I'm not the guy who can do that. . . . I make sure those people read all the relevant magazines, they travel the world, they get into the marketplace, they look at customers, they watch our competitors, they go and hang out in high schools and just observe, they go to rock concerts, they go to the mall on the weekend. All that kind of thing they have to do to know how the market ticks. . . . [W]e're not that smart, to tell the truth. . . . [W]e sort of stumbled into it; we made shorts; we copied the guy in Australia. . . . [W]e kept on going.

The CEO summarizes the nature of the contemporary corporation very well. It needs to prospect and tap external social relations (e.g., tastes, cutting-edge innovations, and perhaps even “life itself”) to generate profits, simply because it cannot do this itself. “We’re not that smart.” And might not this surplus intelligence that flourishes *despite* the capitalist enterprise also be the fulcrum of a new emancipatory movement? Perhaps, but that is taken up later.

While the corporation is now increasingly putting this life force to work, the sad irony is that for increasing numbers of employees amid it all, life has never felt so far away. Jobs utilize our public imagination and buzz of life, our vested abilities and genuine desire to self-organize, but the net payback is a moment of subtraction rather than freedom. Worry, fear, anxiety, and a nagging sense of purposelessness tend to result, or what Virno calls a lasting “not feeling at home” (Virno 2004: 34). The reason why is now becoming clear. When biopolitical institutions sap the best of the social common, they also leave us with the burnt-out remains. These negative externalities too are biopolitical: tired bodies, permanently anxious

people, and numb personalities. This is why it is no surprise that recent research has discovered work-related stress is more dangerous to your health than heavy smoking (“Burnout Is Bigger Heart Attack Risk” 2013).

Yet so many of us strive to participate. In the current climate, the only thing that worries us more than our jobs is the idea of losing them. What makes working so painful today, especially in the wake of the 2008 global economic crisis, is the peculiar impasse it has now arrived at.

On the one hand, there has been a massive divestment in the long-standing assumption that work is intrinsically good for us. Compared to yesteryear, when it was one of the key icons of social and ethical virtue, even among a militant workforce, today the idea of working holds very little progressive purchase. A senior manager whom the author spoke with recently conveyed a view that resonates with those at the bottom of the hierarchy as well: “Work is shit.” This is not an isolated opinion. According to one survey, almost 50 percent of the global workforce feels completely disengaged from their jobs, with U.S. and European workers particularly salient.<sup>3</sup> This might reflect the serious legitimacy crisis that the corporate system has suffered more generally. Even the *Harvard Business Review* recently admitted, “The legitimacy of business has fallen to levels not seen in recent history” (Porter and Kramer 2011: 4). In this context, where business firms are considered openly antithetical to the common good, it is no wonder that the joys of work feel like a distant memory.

On the other hand, however, the pressure of our jobs has never been more inclusive and totalizing. Almost everyone feels taken over by his or her work to the point where the suggestion that we could live without it seems preposterous. We are told to find a job no matter what, base our lives around it, measure our self-esteem against it, and feel guilty if we do not want it—even wreck ourselves in the name of it. This stalemate is particularly disheartening because it embodies a structural contradiction that goes to the heart of late capitalism more generally, although it may also harbor the image of an alternative to work. The ideology of work becomes all-pervasive precisely at the same moment its redundancy is apparent to all. This book aims to convince the reader that we can actually live comfortably and happily without work as we know it.

## Biocapitalism and the Myth of Economic Necessity

Why are we working now more than ever when its cultural legitimacy has reached an all-time low? The bills need to be paid, for sure. But something else is happening here. The rise of biopower in and around the workplace is inextricably linked to the shifting tactics of capitalist regulation. Following the 1970s structural crisis, the rise of neoliberal hegemony signaled to working people that the gains made after World War II were but a temporary indulgence. That this class offensive was justified with rhetoric about saving society from bankruptcy is no surprise. But history did not turn out as planned. This variant of capitalism was seriously unable to organize itself. As a result, a re-configuration took place to save it. The management function was displaced onto workers themselves. It might have looked like freedom and empowerment, but it wasn't.

Neoliberalism now sees us constantly concerned with its problems, integrating them into our life problems in order to get things done. In the workplace, this did not do away with supervisors giving orders from above. But their power has been augmented by horizontal regulative forms like self-managing teams, the portfolio career, and emotional labor. All of a sudden life itself is drawn into the logic of production. With our bosses just as likely to be controlled in the same manner, this type of power is difficult to clearly target and oppose as we used to do under Fordism.

This undoubtedly represents a quantitative shift in capitalist regulation—more time spent in the office or worrying about it due to labor intensification and the lengthening of the working day.<sup>4</sup> But it is more importantly a *qualitative* change, too. Our jobs now become something very intimate to us, especially when they rely on interpersonal aptitudes and emotional intelligence to make things happen, as many occupations do today. And when the concerns of work are embedded in our very social being, it is difficult to check out or turn off. Its influence comes from above—a supervisor or deadline—but also from the side and below. We begin to live with the imposition of work and it with us. As a result, the objective necessity of a job—paying the bills—is conflated with our personal sense of individuality and social value.

But isn't this increased level of work simply a fact of life, freeing us from poverty and economic backwardness? Not at all. I suggest in this book that the ritual of working is now fairly detached from economic necessity and even contrary to it. The real reason we work so much today (or are obsessed with its absence, if we are now part of the growing reserve army of the unemployed) has very little to do with survival. The bills and rent need to be paid, but that has nothing to do with the biopolitical flows presently investing our bodies. This is explained nicely in Himanen's *Hacker Ethic* (2001: 49):

“Survival” or “You have to do something to earn your living” is the answer a great number of people will give when asked why they work (often responding in a mildly puzzled fashion, as if this went without saying). But strictly speaking, they do not mean mere survival—that is, having food and so on. In their use, survival refers to a certain socially determined lifestyle: they are not working merely to survive but to be able to satisfy the form of social needs characteristic to a society.

In other words, the ritual of overwork today is a socially constructed fact rather than anything bound by physical necessity. Moreover, as a social meme, it has colonized almost every other sphere of life, which represents a particular neoliberal strategy of class domination. Rubbing salt into the wound is that despite all of this needless labor, many of us are still precarious, worried, and struggling. This has made the objective politics of work difficult to identify since it is literally everywhere. Indeed, appreciating the socially constructed nature of working life today has not yet translated into its utopian abolition (Rifkin 1995), reduction to more civilized levels (Gorz 2005), or some jobless dystopia (Aronowitz and DiFazio 2010). On the contrary, its scope and reach are growing.

While this description makes late capitalist regulation seem incapable, the book is actually not about the inordinate power of corporations, a view that seems to characterize much critical thinking today. In fact, I suggest that the opposite is the case. The for-profit firm is an outmoded social institution that has outlived its utility for most of those involved. Society has left it behind, which is why it is clinging on to us so forcefully. Capitalism and its fetishization of private property are swimming against the tide. This is evident in the

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way the modern firm has noticeably become parasitical in nature, riding on the extra-commercial social qualities of what Marx calls “living labor.” This is not to say that the large enterprise is not an imposing institution, as it certainly is. But it must increasingly gain sustenance from sources beyond itself: the living communities and rich sociality of the 99 percent (to borrow a term from the Occupy Movement) who have basically given up on capitalism as a workable ideal.

For example, take my current home in the city of London. Once we discard the tourist brochure on the street with all the other garbage, the bleak and abject reality following years of neoliberal brutality materializes.<sup>5</sup> The city should be impossible, and in some ways *it actually is*. The average income is close to the national average, but the cost of living is disproportionately above that figure. Rents, transport, subsistence, childcare, retirement expenditures, and so forth are massively mismatched by income. So how on earth do the majority of workers actually survive? How does the city continue? There is only one explanation (other than outlandish credit card debts). London can reproduce itself only if a hidden public takes up the slack. This is the extra-capitalist commons, the social dark matter of neoliberal society, which now might be stepping forward as a political force in its own right.

This social commons, however, is not always progressive. For example, think of the gender politics involved in the case of, say, a female secretary who has no choice but to double up with a higher-earning male counterpart. In 2012, the conservative U.K. government implicitly recognized this hidden sociality when it justified cutting youth housing welfare. The message? Let them stay at home with their parents rent-free. In this way, the commons functions as a shock absorber for an otherwise untenable London (and global) elite. But this social force that capitalism rides on is not only passive. It is also the central driver of productive value, without which the contemporary business enterprise would be unable to function. This is especially so under neoliberal conditions given its deeply anti-social precepts—hence the rise of biopower in the workplace.

## Entering the World of Work Today

I expand on these observations by way of four brief vignettes, based on real workers’ experiences and recent reports of life on the job. They

not only justify my rationale for approaching employment from the perspective of biopower and the commons but also capture significant permutations around work that this book is endeavoring to explain. While these employees are all from relatively well-paid positions, I suggest in the coming chapters that a wide variety of occupations are undergoing comparative transformations.

*“Off to the Toilet—Again?”*

I recently gave a presentation on the rise of biopower in the workplace, explaining why so many employees find it difficult to “turn off.” The reason, I proposed, is that for all intents and purposes, *we* (our bodies, social connectivity, and cognitive aptitudes) are now the firm’s means of production. After the talk I was approached by a man who happened to be a former corporate lawyer. He told me that the talk resonated with his own experiences in this sector before he decided to escape and go back to the academic life. The event that hardened his resolve to quit was described to me as follows.

Long hours, stress, and deadlines meant that to get the job done well, employees often found themselves working outside of official hours, especially in the middle of the night. Hardly anyone took vacations, not because they were afraid of being sacked, as prevalent in the old days of Fordism, but because they simply would not know what to do. These employees were so saturated with their jobs that it was difficult to see anything of worth outside of them.

Eventually, a fellow team member that the former lawyer knew was forced to take a two-week vacation, as he had not done so since joining the company. So far, so good. The said team member arranged a beach holiday in Crete with his partner. Bidding farewells, no one expected to hear from him for another two weeks. However, the office soon noticed that every two or three days our would-be vacationer appeared to mysteriously clear his work e-mails in a frenetic, compact one-hour period. Upon his return to the office, they queried this unexpected work. His reply was telling of what happens to us under biopolitical capitalism. He could not face doing nothing all day on a beach. So he smuggled his Blackberry to the seashore, retiring to the toilet for an hour to clear his e-mails, presumably giving his partner some excuse about the quality of the previous eve-



ning's meal. Our former lawyer told me that this case of work addiction was enough for him to seriously consider leaving, which he eventually did.

The vignette touches on some salient themes that this book explores in relation to corporatized biopower (i.e., the extension of work into every facet of one's life), its parasitical nature (i.e., how non-work or free work is central to capitalist productivity today) and the disfigurement it wreaks on what we might call the bio-proletariat. First of all, we see evidence of what Gregg (2011) terms "presence bleed," whereby the template of productivity becomes evermore part of one's waking and sleeping life. In this case, the job is no longer a concrete task that can be delineated in time and space, and then forgotten once the workday is over. It is now somehow inscribed inside and between us as an inexorable pressure to produce. More specifically, work becomes ironically non-instrumental, as Weeks (2011) puts it, or *inessential*. Its biopolitical abstraction detaches the performance of working from specific tasks. This decoupling ironically rivets us even tighter to a job rather than freeing us from it because working paradoxically becomes *everything*.

The vignette also tells us what happens to our lives when work becomes a universal reference point. The notion of the social factory, first posited by writers in the Italian autonomist tradition, has sometimes been used to describe this socio-economic trend. The template of work escapes the factory, infecting life itself like some poisonous gas. As Hardt and Negri (1994: 9–10) put it:

Laboring processes have moved outside the factory walls to invest the entire society. In other words, the apparent decline of the factory as site of production does not mean a decline of the regime and discipline of factory production, but means that it is no longer limited to a particular site in society. It has insinuated itself throughout all social forms of production, spreading like a virus.

In my mind, two important observations follow. First, because neoliberal capitalism cannot reproduce itself on its own terms, it actually needs non-capitalist spaces to take up the slack and absorb its shocks. Moreover, these social spaces are also active value cre-

ators for the firm, allowing it to remain organized while adhering to its own chaotic principles. This is what some have called the communist underbelly of late capitalist enterprise.<sup>6</sup> The social factory certainly appears to be a totalizing presence as work spreads into every aspect of life. But it can never be so, since neoliberal capitalism would implode without an external living commons—be it free time, artisanal enthusiasm, or life itself. Theorists of the social factory and corporate colonization often miss this crucial point when they describe it as an omniscient force. It isn't, and that makes matters far more serious.

Second, the way this autonomy *outside of capital and work* is positively lived now becomes a pertinent ethical question. For many workers like the one mentioned above, autonomous free time is experienced something like a black hole, an existential nothingness that evokes anxiety, sometimes anger and boredom, but mostly sadness (see Ehrenberg 2010 for the reasons why). Yes, I am on vacation, but every part of me is otherwise indexed to the job, and this is why my so-called free time feels so vacuous. This might also account for the growing number of advice columns and forums on the difficult art of “learning how to vacation” (“Learning How to Vacation” 2012). One employee interviewed in this telling *New York Times* piece confessed that after her holiday, “I hoped to return home at peace. Instead I was exhausted, defeated and irritable.”

The neoliberal state, on the other hand, is more worried that its citizenry will start directing this free time toward socially progressive goals, which would also publicly reveal that we do not actually need to spend all of this time working. Perhaps this is why the U.K. government lately insisted that the unemployed work without remuneration in fast-food restaurants, and more recently, at the 2012 Olympic Games (see “It’s Companies like G4S” 2012). The message is clear. You are not meant to enjoy your freedom from work! This is also why even being unemployed today weighs on us like a full-time job.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, even the playful spaces of childhood are deemed suspicious by the corporatized state. An array of entrepreneurial school programs designed to instill the virtues of continuous enterprise at an early age are commonplace in many schools (Beder 2009). In this sense, the ideology of work is dangerous because it has decoupled itself from income, task, and function and is now more about *who you are*.

*“Try Measuring This!”*

The second vignette also demonstrates the need for renewed concepts regarding the nature of much employment today. It occurred after another presentation of mine, this time in the United States. After giving a talk on *biocracy* (discussed in Chapter 1), I was approached by a management consultant. She too found some of the ideas useful for explaining what she was experiencing at work. The aspect of biocracy that interested her was the way in which most performance measures (billable hours, in her case) were so obsolete that she and her colleagues would fill them out almost randomly. The nature of the job meant not only that she was *always* on call but also that so much discretion and unwritten knowhow were required that the firm’s objective measurement system for tracking work was nearly useless. Moreover, it was not just concrete labor time that was difficult to quantify. Much of the informal work required to perform the job was completely omitted from the company’s spreadsheet. And to make matters worse, it appeared that this immeasurability had become a kind of perverse open secret—management knew it, the client saw it, and the consultants lived it. But the company enforced the measurement system nevertheless, making it feel as if control were being exerted for its own sake.

Important here is the way the body or more accurately its spontaneous social resourcefulness is integrated into the firm’s power relations to such an extent that metrics demarcating work and non-work time, for example, become meaningless. I demonstrate in this book that the utilization of living labor is crucial to the current phase of biocapitalism, not because of the corporation’s strength, but because of its core weakness. Just as neoliberal institutions find it impossible to reproduce themselves, the corporate form too frequently discovers that its own directives are impossible to enact. For this reason, living labor finds itself working around the anti-social guidelines of capitalist enterprise, mostly at the cost of the workers’ time and well-being.

If this social excess allows things to get done—while remaining inscrutable to the measures of capitalist rationality—it is only because the firm would otherwise be shambolic without it. Hence, the official edicts of managerialism often appear so needless for achieving any given task. This might seem strange until we realize that the business enterprise was never designed to functionally achieve collective goals.

This assumption is, of course, the central weakness of functional sociology, especially in the U.S. tradition inaugurated by Talcott Parsons. We must instead view corporations as primarily class-based systems, both in terms of their low-paid periphery and the relationships within the core. Management controls are essentially deployed to keep a lid on the conflict of interests at the heart of the employment relationship. Discussions by old-school business researchers are amusing in this regard because they assumed management was about coordinating activity to accomplish common objectives. Take these first impressions of a worried researcher studying a well-known U.S. plant in the 1950s:

Management is so preoccupied with its efforts to establish control over the workers, that it loses sight of the presumed purpose of the organization. A casual visitor to the plant might indeed be surprised to learn that its purpose was to get out production. Certainly, if it had been possible to enforce some of the rules described . . . the result would have been a slowing down of production. (Whyte 1955: 65–66)

This might look like bad management, but it is actually a fairly accurate definition of management in most situations characterized by class conditions, for there is nothing common in the capitalistic endeavor. This is why most of us find it so bewilderingly maladroit. Management was invented not to help get things done, but to be obeyed.

Returning to our consultant: What exactly is being put to work here that is above and beyond the numerical measures designed to track her productivity? We must avoid the temptation to evoke bourgeois categories such as personal space, family time, goodwill, and so on. No, what is being captured is something the firm structurally *cannot* and frequently *will not* (because of cost-saving imperatives) provide itself: the unquantifiable richness of living labor that, as the following chapters show, can never be entirely aligned with the capitalist agenda. It is frequently exploited yet intrinsically exceeds that exploitation.

Two important qualifications must be made. First, “life” as defined here is not just the fleshy individual organism. It is also the social aggregation that this body passes through, a stratum that conveys our *collective faculty* to act together. As Virno puts it, “The liv-

ing body becomes an object to be governed not for its intrinsic value, but because it is the substratum of what really matters: labor-power as the aggregate of the most diverse human faculties (the potential for speaking, for thinking, for remembering, for acting, etc.)” (Virno 2004: 83). In light of this, we must always think of the surplus or excess that the consultant’s timesheet fails to measure in *social terms*. Otherwise we risk making the mistake that Marx warned us of long ago, fetishizing the individual worker and thereby missing his or her social character.

And second, this collective faculty of living labor can never enter into a functional relationship with its own exploitation. Even if there sometimes do appear to be moments of stability, there is no social equilibrium. The development of the excess/capture dynamic is always defined by struggle and non-coincidence, for if the living common was but a reflection of capital, it too would be immediately consigned to the category of dead labor.

*“Bring Out the Guitar”*

If the logic of the factory has escaped the corporate precinct to infect ever more spheres of our lives, then the converse has occurred too. Perhaps the strangest aspect of life in the firm today is the managerial evocation of what used to be left alone as non-work under Fordism. This development is telling of why biopower becomes salient precisely when neoliberal capitalism enters into crisis. An example illustrates why.

In the city of London, a major trend in workplace motivation tools involves encouraging art, crafts, and music in the office. This may sound like a bad joke from the television series *The Office* (starring the frustratingly annoying David Brent, who secretly wants to be a pop star), but now life imitates art. A local commuter newspaper recently ran a story on one such company entitled “I Really Am a One-Man Band” (Chesworth 2012). The firm consults to clients with motivation, creativity, and engagement problems. As the CEO explains, “The company has successfully worked with a number of high-profile corporate clients in the City to integrate music into the working day.” Learning and reciting a guitar riff or favorite song on the job is thought to breathe life back into the office, a social sphere that has long been drained of such leisurely and artistic activities. According

to one enthusiastic client, “Within one hour I was playing ‘Hey Jude’ and after 10 lessons I have a modest repertoire.”

We might put this appearance of non-work in the office down to yet another harebrained management incentive scheme. It probably is that, but is also symptomatic of more serious trends that are investigated in this book. If the corporation and its neoliberal institutional complex cannot reproduce itself, then management sometimes attempts to stage or replicate the buzz of life in the office so that productivity doesn’t stall. Themes around non-work are crucial because they point to the social surplus lying *beyond* capitalist rationality, which, as we noted earlier, the business firm is conspicuously dependent on today. Hardt and Negri (2009: 152) emphasize the unframable nature of this social excess: “The affective and intellectual talents, the capacities to generate co-operation and organizational networks, the communication skills, and other competencies that characterize bio-political labor, are generally not site specific. You can think and form relationships not only on the job but also in the street, with your neighbours and friends. The capacities of biopolitical labor-power exceed work and spill over into life.”

This non-site-specific social surplus is qualitatively beyond capitalism but is nevertheless its chief source of wealth and the catalyst for many post-capitalist emancipatory movements presently emerging. In terms of the corporation’s interest in prospecting and capturing it, a whole host of examples from industry are evident. From replicating late night parties in call centers, to imitating slacker cool in IT firms (think of Mark Zuckerberg’s Facebook trademark “hoodie”) to workplace spirituality programs, the list goes on.

This trend is frequently interpreted by business commentators as a management-led concession, humanizing an otherwise dull and drab office setting. Perhaps. But more importantly, it is linked to the way capitalism needs to access *aggregate* living labor, which lies outside the algorithms of dead labor epitomized by the formal corporation. This aggregate excess is analogous to our agile ability to improvise around linguistic rules when speaking or choosing to remain silent. Rules on their own do not work here because of the infinite regress problem. They need a non-regressive backdrop of common knowhow, an excess that is difficult to measure or represent. This is why non-work is now such a prominent feature in many business organizations today.

*“A Banker in Disguise”*

The final vignette puts the above cases and theoretical observations in the context of the serious legitimacy crisis that work is now undergoing. It is useful for understanding why biopower is assuming its present format and the rationale behind those attempting to refuse it.

The story relates to an encounter the author had in a London East End pub during a number of banking scandals, when the financial crisis seemed interminable and the legitimacy of business (and work itself) reached new lows. At the bar, another customer recognized my antipodean accent and struck up a conversation. He seemed to have a fairly working-class background, fitting for a pub in this area, and as the conversation developed he asked what I did. “A university lecturer,” I said; “I teach and stuff.” Because he looked a little bored by that answer, I reciprocated by asking him his occupation. “I’m an investment banker.” I thought he was making fun of me, and then he explained. “I can’t come into any of these pubs in a suit, it would be suicide.” Bankers and anyone looking like they are from London’s business community were so excoriated by the London population that this man felt it necessary to dress down to avoid attracting attention. His conversation became even more interesting after another round of drinks:

It’s not only because people think banking in the city is corrupt that makes them hate us, ’cause it’s been like that for a long time; something else has changed. I think it’s what we exemplify that really gets people angry. The whole system is rotten; *all* jobs are phony; no one is happy. The atmosphere has changed a lot. Everyone thinks work really stinks, that it’s all been a bit of a con job, and we remind people of that—well, our suits do. Another beer?

The banking crisis certainly has made many of us 99 percenters very skeptical about the political, moral, and economic worth of the banking sector (and as I write, the LIBOR scandal involving Barclay’s and HSBC is currently unfolding in the world’s media). But as our disguised banker indicates, the sense of corruption seems to have cut deep into the public imagination, from suspicions about the

mendacity of environmentally friendly products, to the sanctity of international markets or the social legitimacy of so-called democratic governments (especially following the bail-outs of the banking industry), to the *idea of work itself*.

One has only to read the hundreds of online blogs and forums to notice how many of us now feel duped by the very concept of work, about the societal worth of our overworked lifestyles and the merit of our so-called important jobs. What we might call the anti-work movement is no longer the reserve of marginalized militants (e.g., the Invisible Committee), or the material for fly-on-the-wall paperbacks (such as Sam's [2009] *Checkout*) or the inspiration for post-beat poets like Charles Bukowski. For a new generation of employees for whom precarity is the norm and the glaring statistics concerning income/wealth inequality are common knowledge, working has completely lost its cultural credibility.

Much of this is due to the economic reorganization of employment and its depressing class structure. Moreover, the young working poor are now a widespread facet of the middle class in many Western societies, which gives their dissatisfaction a strong generational dimension.<sup>8</sup> But a pervasive and trans-class malaise is evident here too. As Gorz (2005) argues regarding the results of a large-scale survey in Europe, this pervasive attitude is basically one of *pointlessness*. Indeed, it is interesting here to look at the tell-all question that downsizing consultants ask employees when deciding whether they should be fired: "If you did not come in tomorrow, would it make a difference?" If they answer yes, then they have to justify their job. If they answer no, they are dismissed because they are not adding value. But would not today's reigning attitude toward work be one that answers with a resounding *no*?

As Cederström and Fleming (2012) reveal, for the working multitude in a wide variety of occupations, most feel that what they do doesn't really matter to anyone, since their job seems so far removed from authentic social needs. And this brings us to a central problem, one that underlies the biopoliticization of employment as I see it. While the work ethic is now dead and buried, we nevertheless have to act *as if* work is a virtue of the highest order. In other words, its biopoliticization renders our jobs both pointless and also the most totalizing force in our lives. And this cultivates a political mindset among the workforce that is qualitatively different from previous manifestations of discontent.<sup>9</sup>



## The Commons versus Community at Work

To make matters more complex, capitalism itself has recently invented its own version of the commons in order to counteract the anxiety-ridden and fetid atmosphere found in jobs like the ones discussed above. In particular, the notion of community has been resuscitated as a possible antidote to the widespread discontent around work. We must distinguish this trend, which is congruent with the bio-exploitation evident in the vignettes, from the substantive social common that this book seeks to explore. The currently fashionable discourse celebrating organizational communities (i.e., having a shared sense of well-being and belonging at work) follows, I would argue, from the decline and failure of the corporate therapeutics movement in the 1990s. Its passing was fairly predictable because most employees—from the university lecturer to the health care provider—never really accepted the idea that one might be happy *and* overworked, satisfied *and* dominated, serene *and* exploited, free *and* micro-managed. Such contradictions might be temporarily surmountable in certain settings, such as the fascist state or totalitarian polity—but the suture can never really hold in the context of capitalist employment relations because of the a priori class antagonism.

The revitalization of workplace community, therefore, is indicative of a highly instrumental capitalist return to “the social” following the anti-social wave of neoliberal downsizing in the West and beyond. Consumer and brand communities are now viewed with a sanguine eye, as if the spontaneous collective identities that coagulate around specific brands might foster a feeling of homeliness in a world long stripped of solidarity. Likewise, the world of work has very recently been rethought in a manner that predicates community as a positive path out of the malaise that defines work for many today. Richard Sennett’s contributions over the last few years, including *The Craftsman* (2009) and *Together* (2012), has called for the reevaluation of the social qualities of paid employment. He suggests that because most of us need to cooperate to do jobs well, we ought to officially acknowledge this fact rather than persist with outdated notions of isolated individualism, short-termism, and flexible contracts.

Erring more to the political Right, the conservative commentator David Brooks makes a surprisingly similar argument in *The Social Animal* (2011), whereby the collaborative capacities of people are cel-

brated as a panacea within an otherwise doomed civilization. For sure, the number of books on these themes continues to grow, with titles mentioning supercooperation, the gift, we-share, altruism and the unselfish gene. In my view, we ought to read most of these arguments as part of the arsenal with which a wounded neoliberalism is waging a new war—to both save itself and mollify an increasingly unhappy 99 percent. The type of community proposed by Brooks, among others, in fact undermines genuine emancipatory progress because it still believes that we might have the free joys of sociality *and* capitalism at the same time. And we know that isn't possible, as we shall soon see

Other popular tracts similarly promulgate the spurious belief that the commons might morally reform an otherwise self-destructive socio-economic paradigm. A prominent example is Barnes's (2006) *Capitalism 3.0: A Guide for Reclaiming the Commons*. On the surface, the book seems to make some useful points about what is occurring in the capitalist world today. Take its promotional descriptor:

The Commons, our shared social, environmental and artistic inheritance, is under threat from market pressures to be sold off by profit-seekers. Our common heritage is being traded away to the highest bidder. By looking at current issues like Social Security and campaign finances, Barnes creates an economic model that both reinforces the strengths of our capitalist system, and abates its damaging effects upon the current culture and future generations.

Few would disagree. But the argument soon begins to unravel. It incorrectly posits the idea that we might have the structural features of capitalism (plus its alleged benefits of wealth creation, innovation, jobs, and so on) and an open, creative public commons. This oxymoron leads Barnes to make some confusing conclusions: "Capitalism 2.0 had its moments. It defeated communism, leveled national boundaries to trade, and brought material abundance never seen before. . . . But Capitalism 3.0 has a higher purpose. To help both capitalism and the human species achieve their full potential. To do that our economic machine must stop destroying the commons and start protecting it" (2006: 167–168). Claims like this do not make sense, for obvious reasons.

On the basis of the findings presented in this book, we can clearly see the ideological trap functioning in arguments like this. First, it ignores the axiomatic nature of the capitalist project and in some cases mystifies it. A system born around the private ownership of the means of production can never genuinely incorporate its own impossibility, that of an open and gift-oriented commonwealth (Nancy 2000). The massive enclosure movement in the early industrial period is an important indicator of the system's DNA. An open community might be fragmentally built around or against the anti-social nature of private property, but never in it.<sup>10</sup>

The second problem with the capitalism *and* the commons thesis is a little more complex and pertains to an argument I explore in this book. While capitalism is structurally bound to be adversarial to the commons it is also fundamentally reliant on it. This is especially salient under neoliberalism, since it is openly hostile to the collective labor that it is simultaneously dependent on to capture economic value. This is the central spirit of class antagonism in Western capitalism today and is gathering in force as we speak.

My criticisms of the commons and capitalism argument is just another way of stating what Marx said long ago about how a false society translates into a false social experience: "To say that man is alienated from himself is to say that the society of this alienated man is a caricature of his real community" ([1844] 2013). Society becomes an antinomy of its own reflection. This formula is complicated in the biopolitical era of work, however, because while community is impossible in the shadow of corporatized relations, it is also paradoxically what this institutional form now needs most. Human resource managers might invent tools to try and imitate the living commons in the office, usually by way of evoking non-work associatives, but its inherent *impossibility* is manifest to everyone.<sup>11</sup>