Arise, you prisoners of starvation!
Arise, you wretched of the earth!
For justice thunders condemnation.
A better world’s in birth.
No more tradition’s chains shall bind us.
Arise you slaves, no more in thrall!
The earth shall rise on new foundations.
We have been naught, we shall be all.

'Tis the final conflict;
Let each stand in his place
The international working class
Shall be the human race.
— “The Internationale”

These are the common U.S. lyrics to “The Internationale,” which was written in 1871 by the Communard poet Eugène Pottier after the fall of the Paris Commune. Pottier, born in 1816, was one of the revolutionary Parisian artisans of 1848, an admirer of Proudhon, a friend of Courbet, a leader in the Paris Commune who subsequently went into exile in the United States. His poem was set to music in 1888 by a member of a Lille workers’ chorus, Pierre Degeyter. By 1910, it had been adopted as the anthem of the international workers’ movement. It later served as an anthem of the Soviet Union, but it has been translated into many languages and sung around the world. It was banned in many parts of the world in the early years of the century; it was sung by Wobblies in the Lawrence textile strike and by the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War; and it was the source of Frantz Fanon’s most famous title.

I begin with “The Internationale” because it stands as one of the first great popular representations of global labor. Somewhere in the middle of the nineteenth century—one might mark it from the famous *Manifesto of the Communist Party* of 1848, written by Pottier’s German contemporaries Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, with its final lines: “Proletarier aller Länder, vereinigt euch!” (“Proletarians of all countries, unite!”)
(superimposed over a classic Walter Crane image in fig. 1, the cover of an 1895 German pamphlet) or perhaps from the moment of the organization of the International Working Men’s Association in 1864, the Internationale that Pottier refers to in the chorus of the song—people began to see the workers of the world as constituting an interconnected global labor force sharing a common situation.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, this notion of an international working class was a powerful imaginative construct, even if it was in many ways a fiction. What had actually emerged for the first time were powerful national labor movements, uniting socialist and labor parties, trade and industrial unions, and a variety of working-class mutual aid societies and voluntary associations. But the songs of the movement—not only Pottier and Degeyter’s “L’Internationale,” but the oft-translated Italian song “Bandiera Rossa,” as well as “Solidarity Forever,” written by the U.S. Wobbly Ralph Chaplin in 1915—marked the beginning of an era that arcs from the first imaginings of a world working class to the triumph of that representation of labor in the social democratic, laborist,
and communist visions of the twentieth century to the crisis of representing labor in the late twentieth century, a crisis that is imaginative as well as organizational, cultural as well as political. Indeed “L’Internationale” and “Solidarity Forever” seem to be throwbacks to an era that is long past. Not only had—in the words of a celebrated essay by the pioneering historian of labor, Eric Hobsbawm—the forward march of labor halted, but “labor” seemed a curious anachronism.  

How do we understand the fading of this representation at a moment when a global labor force seems—to corporate employers and international financial institutions—more palpable than ever? This essay, which is part of a larger book I am writing on “workers of the world,” on what might be called the “workers’ century,” is about the project of representing global labor—imaginatively, culturally, politically. I want to suggest that the representation of global labor required, historically, two crucial breakthroughs: a new abstraction of labor, of work, and the invention of “workers” as a category; and a new sense of the globe, of the “international.” In the second part, I will argue that there are two dominant contemporary representations of global labor, one figured by the photographs of Sebastião Salgado and the other by the graphs and pie charts of the World Bank report. Though both are powerful, even inescapable, neither resolve the imaginative crisis of the figure of labor. In the final part, I address this sense of imaginative crisis that has led many contemporary thinkers to reject the very categories of “labor” and “laborer” as inadequate. It is neither possible nor desirable simply to revive the old labor hymns, but neither can we avoid the reality of the worldwide accumulation of labor. A reflection on the constitution of the category of “workers” is, I suggest, a necessary moment in any subaltern account of “workers of the world,” of the “international division of labor.”

Abstracting Work, Imagining the Globe

The first breakthrough was in representing work. This was a breakthrough of the new discourse of political economy, and the story is perhaps best told by that avid student of political economy, Karl Marx, in the first draft of his introduction to the book that would become Capital. He writes in 1857,

Labour seems a quite simple category. The conception of labour in this general form—as labour as such—is also immeasurably old. Nevertheless, when it is economically conceived in this simplicity, “labour” is as modern a category as are the relations which create this simple abstraction. . . . It
was an immense step forward for Adam Smith to throw out every limiting specification of wealth-creating activity—not only manufacturing, or commercial or agricultural labour, but one as well as the others, labour in general. . . . Now, it might seem that all that had been achieved thereby was to discover the abstract expression for the simplest and most ancient relation in which human beings—in whatever form of society—play the role of producers. This is correct in one respect. Not in another. Indifference towards any specific kind of labour presupposes a very developed totality of real kinds of labour, of which no single one is any longer predominant. . . . Indifference towards specific labours corresponds to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labour to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of chance for them, hence of indifference.4

I begin from Marx’s great insight that the apparently simple category of “labor”—just work, not weaving, tailoring, welding, teaching, cooking, driving, typing—is the product of a society that itself is able to see these indifferently, as versions of the same kind of activity, reducible to a multiplier—so many dollars and cents per hour. For not only does labor become a new kind of abstraction, the product of the new economic relations of capitalism, but so does the category of the worker or laborer to name the masses of wage earners in these new relations.

These new workers began to represent themselves as such—not only as weavers, welders, teachers, and cooks, but as workers—and they represented themselves and were represented by others, socially (through unions, mutual aid, and friendly societies, as well as through informal social networks), politically (through labor parties from the Workingman’s Party in Philadelphia in 1832 to the Workers Party in Brazil a century and a half later), and culturally (in novels, songs, films, government statistics, sociological studies, autobiographies, newspapers, and so on).

The second great breakthrough was the imagination of an interdependent globe, a world economy that was truly connected. It is not clear exactly when such a popular globalism emerges; most of the work on the nineteenth century is the story of nationalizing populations, turning peoples whose allegiance was to village or town into national citizens through schools and armies. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had seen the emergence of the “motley crew” that Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Redikker write of in The Many-Headed Hydra, a shipboard proletariat of sailors, slaves, and pirates who circulated radical ideologies from port to port. But the worldwide system of migratory labor that develops in the nineteenth century with the steamship—the proletarian mass migrations from Europe and the Asian contract labor migrations—combined with the series of imperialist wars made transoceanic connections a part of daily life in the new industrial cities, company towns, and industrial plantations.
However, in this case, the great theoretical breakthrough was made not by Marx or anyone of his generation but by Rosa Luxemburg, a half-century younger. For Marx’s generation, the international of workers was experienced as the migration of artisans across Europe and to the settler colonies, looking for work and for political refuge. Marx himself, though not an artisan, lived in the world of migrant German artisans in Paris, Brussels, and eventually London (he also thought seriously of joining the German artisan diaspora in New York). As a result, the international of workers meant two things, and one can see this in the actual day-to-day work of the First International in the 1860s: first, cross-border strike support; and second, rhetorical support for the struggles of oppressed nationalities—particularly the Irish, the Poles, and (in a slightly different way) the antislavery Union forces in the U.S. Civil War—combined with material support for the community of transnational political refugees and exiles.

But if this is the activist meaning of the international, Marx also begins to imagine the international theoretically after his arrival in London, the capital of the British Empire, where he begins a crash self-education in imperialism. Though the major focus of Capital is national—England is its “chief illustration”—Marx begins to sense a global working class through the vehicle of a global industry: the textile industry, where a complex global division of labor unites the growing and processing of fabrics, where cotton links Manchester with Charleston, Cairo, and Calcutta, the Irish immigrant factory women of Manchester with the African American slaves of the plantation South and the dispossessed handloom weavers of colonial India.

But a fuller sense of a global capitalism does not emerge until the early twentieth century, when the extraordinary young postcolonial intellectual Rosa Luxemburg—a Polish Jewish woman who leaves Warsaw as teenage activist, facing arrest, to study for a doctorate in Zurich and then become a leader of the German socialist party in Berlin—rewrites Marx’s Capital in an extraordinary way. For the third and greatest part of her masterwork The Accumulation of Capital (1913) is the first account of capitalism as global proletarianization: as the dispossession of handcraft workers and subsistence agriculturalists around the world. I won’t summarize the full theoretical argument, but let me cite the concrete examples in her narrative to show how Marx’s earlier account of the enclosures of the commons in England has been radically globalized by Luxemburg.

Luxemburg sees three aspects of this global proletarianization: first, the struggle of capital against what she calls the “natural economy” in which her examples are the British in India, the French in Algeria, and the “opening” of China during the opium wars. The second moment is the
struggle against the commodity economy — by which she means the struggle against an independent peasant and handicraft economy. Here she has a chapter on the U.S. plains and the post-Civil War revolution in American agriculture, where the struggle against the natural economy of the “Red Indians” is followed by a struggle against the commodity economy of the plains farmers (which led to populist revolt); her other example is South Africa, where again the dispossession of the native peoples is followed by British capitalist war against the Boer settlers. The third moment is the competitive struggle of capital on the international stage for the remaining conditions of accumulation: the moment of “imperialism,” the stage of “lending abroad, railroad constructions, revolutions, and wars” where she uses the example of British capital in Latin America and Egypt and of German capital in Turkey to analyze the effects of foreign debt and foreign capital investment.

Though Luxemburg’s argument became the focus of a long and now-exhausted debate, her powerful and original mapping of the global division of labor was not developed in subsequent work. For most of the twentieth century, labor was imagined through the lens of the nation. The very enfranchisement of organized workers as citizens of parliamentary nation-states and racially structured colonial empires led to the nationalizing of “labor.” If the socialist and labor parties invented the “working class” as a political actor, as Donald Sassoon has argued, they invented it as a national working class. Analytically, a “methodological nationalism” has informed most analysis of workers; from Engel’s own *The Condition of the English Working Class in 1844* to E. P. Thompson’s great study of 1963, *The Making of the English Working Class*, the nation framed the understanding of the working class.

By the end of the twentieth century, the emergence of something called “globalization” made the notion of a global labor force more palatable: the *Harvard Business Review* published the study “Global Work Force 2000: The New World Labor Market” in 1991. It seemed that the era of globalization created for the first time a world labor force, a global working class. The massive migration of the peasantry to global barrios and favelas and ghettos—not least in the United States—and the extraordinarily rapid industrialization of the world’s South has led to a vast remaking of the working classes; one economist has said that the global South’s industrialization took place “in half the time, at twice the growth rates, and with five times the North’s population in the nineteenth century.” Moreover, the eroding or end of the state policies that constituted particular national working classes with their citizen workers—the welfare states and iron rice bowls of the social democracies and the people’s democracies of mid-
century—has thrown the nationally constituted parties and unions of the labor movement in crisis.

But how have we figured this world labor force, this global working class? What are the mental maps, the imagined narratives that enable us to comprehend such an abstraction?

“Global Work Force 2000”

The final decade of the twentieth century saw two powerful attempts to represent the world’s workers as a whole: the remarkable photography project of Sebastião Salgado, the exhibition and subsequent book titled Workers: An Archaeology of the Industrial Age, and the World Bank’s landmark report of 1995, Workers in an Integrating World. Both were widely noticed; both were controversial. I am less concerned with their adequacy as representations—the debates over Salgado’s aesthetics or the World Bank’s prescriptions—than with the way their implicit narratives—one a vision of a receding industrial world, the other a vision of workers on the move—are symptoms of the dominant contemporary imaginations of the world’s workers.

Photographing workers and forms of labor around the world between 1986 and 1992, Salgado provides powerful representation of a global working class that is a contradictory synthesis of retrospection and prophecy. (If you have not seen Salgado’s work, you can view a number of the images at Salgado’s Web site [www.terra.com.br/sebastiaosalgado/]; go to his “The Majority World: Three Photo Essays” and choose “Workers.” Most of the photographs I discuss below are on the Web site.) Not only does Salgado revive the formal conventions of midcentury black-and-white documentary photography, but he also casts the work in a retrospective mode; it is, he says, “a farewell to a world of manual labor that is slowly disappearing,” “the story of an era”—the industrial era—that is coming to an end.8

The work’s division into six sections reflects the divisions of the industrial economy: part 1 is on the plantation production of agricultural commodities (for example, on the first two pages of the Web photo essay, there are images of tea plantation workers in Rwanda in 1991 and of sugar cutting brigades in Cuba in 1988); part 2 focuses on the slaughtering of animals for mass-produced food (on the third page of the Web photo essay, there are images of shellfish fishermen in Spain in 1988 and of slaughterhouse workers in South Dakota in 1988); part 3 depicts the factory production of industrial metals (iron, steel, lead, magnesium) and means of transport (bicycles, scooters, automobiles, trains, and ships) (on pages 4–6 of the
Web photo essay, there are images of auto workers in India in 1989–90 and of shipbuilding in France in 1990); parts 4 and 5 focus on the extraction of coal, gold, and oil (pages 7–9 of the Web photo essay include images of coal miners in Bihar, India, in 1989 and of oil workers in Kuwait in 1991); and part 6 photographs the building of grand public works (tunnels, dams, canals) (pages 10–11 of the Web photo essay include images of women canal workers and dam workers in India in 1989 and tunnel workers in Europe in 1990).

Salgado’s workers are not “service sector” workers: there are no waitresses or dishwashers, no janitors or department store clerks. Recalling his childhood encounter with the “great steel complexes of Minas Gerais,” he writes that “to this day, steel making is for me an almost religious experience. And the high priest of this institution called production is the steelworker. For me, the mills are like huge, powerful gods who rule the frightening production of metal that dominates our system.” Like the rest of us, Salgado is captured by a childhood sense of what workers look like.

Moreover, the grand oppositions of the age of three worlds seem to have structured the initial project: Salgado after all was trained as a development economist in São Paulo and Paris in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the power and prestige of radical Latin American dependency theory was at its height. As a result, one is not surprised by the focus on aspects of what is often called the “old international division of labor”: the plantations and mines that produce the third world’s “primary commodities” for the world market—sugar, tobacco, tea, oil, sulfur; nor is one surprised by the juxtapositions of labor in capitalist and communist societies—the opening sequence on sugarcane in Brazil and Cuba, part 3’s pairings of textile mills in Bangladesh and Kazakhstan and of shipyards in France and Poland. The project was conceived before the collapse of the European Communist states, and rhetoric of three worlds persists in its introduction: “The planet remains divided, the first world in a crisis of excess, the third world in a crisis of need, and at the end of the century, the second world—that built on socialism—in ruins.”

Perhaps the images that most dramatically draw us to the past are the famous images of the masses of mud-soaked men digging for gold in Serra Pelada, Brazil (see the first image in the Web photo essay). “You can’t locate it in history,” the critic Arthur Danto wrote of them, “you’re astonished that anything like that could happen in the contemporary world.” The gold images are perhaps the ones most circulated, and they were the first ones taken (in 1986); but they are, I would suggest, unrepresentative of the entire project.

Salgado’s portrait of the world’s workers is not completely retrospec-
These images of workers surrounded by the products of their labor—piles of jute bags in Bangladesh, of hot dogs in South Dakota, or of bicycle frames in China—restore the material basis of our apparently virtual world.

If these are not photographs of the age of heroic industrialism, like Charles Sheeler's images of a cathedral-like River Rouge, neither are these the images of deindustrialization that dominated U.S. film and photography of the rust belt: emptied factory buildings with broken windows and padlocked fences waiting for restoration as condominiums and festival marketplaces, like Jim West’s classic image of a closed Cadillac plant in Detroit (see http://jimwestphoto.com/set_economic.html). Rather, these images of workers surrounded by the products of their labor—piles of jute bags in Bangladesh, of hot dogs in South Dakota, or of bicycle frames in China—restore the material basis of our apparently virtual world.

Moreover, the photographs create a powerful sense of a world labor force. Salgado does not divide his photographs into first, second, and third world, nor even into North and South. Nor does he link countries and products in ways that would accent a divide between the technologies of an automated, computerized North and a South built on manual labor. The only U.S. workers photographed as part of the project were South Dakota meatpackers, and the book ends by juxtaposing massive public works projects: the Channel Tunnel in Europe and the Narmada Dam in India. It is not that Salgado misses the dramatic inequalities across the globe; nor does he sentimentally construct an encompassing “Family of Man.” The rhythm that develops across the four hundred photographs is built on the faces and heads of the laborers: faces and heads sometimes open and clear in portraits, sometimes obscured or cut off by the machines and materials of the labor process (for example, in the image of an automobile assembly line in Calcutta in 1989), and often covered by a variety of rhyming goggles, masks, turbans, and hard hats.

A remarkable contrast to Salgado’s photos can be seen in the second document from the mid-1990s that also marked the “discovery” of a global working class: the World Bank report of 1995, Workers in an Integrating World. On its cover (fig. 2) was Eight Builders, a 1982 painting of construction workers by one of the century’s great proletarian artists, Jacob Lawrence; inside was a remarkable portrait—in graphs, tables, pie charts, and anecdotes—of the world’s workers.
The World Bank report reminds us that the representation of labor has long been an activity of what one might call the labor apparatuses of the national and colonial state, a central part of those biopolitical regimes that regulate bodies and populations. The creation of ministries and departments of labor in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries involved not only the political struggles over the legal regulation of labor relations—the legal status of unions, strikes, and boycotts as well as the state regulation of wages and hours—but also the amassing of statistics about the labor market and of testimonies in front of legislative committees. The earliest of these “representations” of “labor” were the famed blue books of the British factory inspectors—there were more than 300 books produced by 140 inspectors in the two decades after the Factory Act of 1833. These representations of workers enabled Marx to write *Capital*.12 Within a half century, not only had other governments followed this path, but the International Labor Organization (ILO)—which was founded in 1919 as part of the League of Nations and continued in Geneva, later becoming part of the UN—began to collect worldwide statistics, imagining a global labor force.
The representational work of these labor apparatuses cannot be underestimated; their censuses and standard-of-living surveys created the categories through which we still think about work. For example, the ILO helped codify the divide between the agricultural, industrial, and service sectors, a categorization in which the service sector was never really theorized but was a residual category. Yet the debates and polemics about the apparent transformation marked by the shift from industrial to service work depend on this crude measure. Similarly, Harry Braver-man called attention to the reification of skill levels with the long-lasting divide between skilled, unskilled, and “semi-skilled,” a category that was created, in the United States, by the census bureau to account for the new machine operators and assemblers in the mass production plants. Much of the debate about deskilling depended on these categories; recent work in labor studies has shown not only that the definition of skill is a cultural product, but also that workers have continually fought over the classifications of particular jobs.

In another way, the testimonies of workers before legislative committee hearings — orchestrated by union leaders and populist politicians, to be sure — nevertheless mark a crucial moment when working people represented themselves to the state.

Thus the World Bank report is a vital stake in the way a global labor force is being represented. Though its general perspective and its policy recommendations — neoliberalism with a human face — were predictable, its representation of the global labor force set the parameters of debate and discussion for much of the last decade.

What is the picture of the world’s workers that the World Bank gives us? First, it offers a history, a narrative built on the existence and failure of two alternatives to the present: the centrally planned economies of the communist world and the postcolonial import substitution economies. It is an account of the shift from what I have called the age of three worlds to the single “integrating world.” However, and this is the second point, they see the world still divided into three, no longer ideologically but economically: higher, middle, lower income. In 1995, they wrote, the world’s labor force was made up of 2.5 billion men and women, almost twice as many as in 1965. About 60 percent of the world’s workers were in low-income countries; another quarter was in middle-income countries; the high-income countries made up 15 percent of the total. When they divide this by sector — agriculture, industry, service, unemployed, not in labor market — they find that a third of the world’s workers are not in the labor force. This is further elaborated in an extended discussion of what they see as “household labor decisions”: who works, how much (labor hours
and the controversy over the trajectory of labor hours), and where (the issue of migration).

Their general conclusion is that world inequality is increasing, that we are seeing divergence, not convergence, and they have several dramatic representations of the distribution of earnings across the world to show this. For example, the pay ratio of engineers to women textile workers is eight to one in Nairobi and three to one in Frankfurt. This dramatic difference in internal wage rates is then amplified internationally: the pay ratio of German to Kenyan engineers is seven to one, that of German to Kenyan women textile workers is eighteen to one.14

To put names to these numbers, the report opened with four miniature narratives of the world’s workers, which metaphorically account for three-quarters of the world’s workers: Duong, a Vietnamese rice farmer (“Workers like Duong, laboring on family farms in low- and middle-income countries, account for about 40 percent of the world’s labor force”); Hoa, a garment factory worker in Ho Chi Minh City (“Wage employees like Hoa, working in the formal sector in low- and middle-income countries, make up about 20 percent of the global labor force”); Françoise, a Vietnamese immigrant in France working as a waitress (“Françoise and other service sector workers in high-income countries account for about 9 percent of the global labor force”); and Jean-Paul, a now-unemployed French garment worker (“Workers in industry in high-income countries . . . make up just 4 percent of the world’s labor force”).15

This World Bank story epitomizes the narrative of the world’s working class that has come to dominate the last decade. Unlike Salgado’s linking of workers by their place in the industrial division of labor—plantations, mines, and manufacturing—the World Bank links them through a geography of jobs, a labor chain that implicitly links Duong with Jean-Paul through the processes of internal labor migration from rural agriculture to urban manufacturing (Hoa is Duong’s symbolic “daughter”) and international labor migration from former colony to former colonizer (as Françoise is Hoa’s symbolic “sister”), as well as the implied export of garment industry jobs from Toulouse to Ho Chi Minh City, from Jean-Paul to Hoa.

So far, the key imaginative form by which this new reality of a world labor force has been captured is the story of people moving across borders to find work: though transnational migrant workers make up only about 2 percent of the world labor force, they have become the figures by which we can imagine the transformations. One thinks of Gregory Nava’s great film of 1984, El Norte, which follows a Guatemalan brother and sister as they pass through the underworld of a rat-infested sewage tunnel to cross the border between Mexico and California; or of Xavier Koller’s Journey of Hope (1990), which tells the tale of a Kurdish family from Turkey crossing
Thus, the World Bank report would not lead us to conclude that workers are disappearing; deindustrialization is actually industrial relocation, as working classes are being remade and recomposed. Moreover, recent studies would suggest—here the World Bank report is less helpful—that worker self-organization and militancy has not, as is often thought, declined or disappeared. As the important work of the World Labor Research Group at the Braudel center in Binghamton has shown, labor unrest rose around the world in the 1980s and 1990s, following the shift in manufacturing, and the industrial revolution in the South. Indeed, by the end of the century we see what one labor historian has called an “unprecedented world-wide action”—a coordinated global work stoppage by dockworkers in 1997.16

Nevertheless, though the twentieth century may have been the workers’ century, hardly anyone thinks the twenty-first century will be a century of the worker. What constitutes this crisis of labor? What is wrong with the notion of work or labor, with the figure of the worker or the laborer? Why does it seem that we now need a new representation: the multitude, the subaltern? Even the scholarly representation of labor—labor history—is in crisis, challenged by new forms of subaltern studies.

The Crisis of the Figure of Labor

The crisis of labor has many aspects. First and foremost, it has appeared as a political crisis, a crisis of the social movement that constituted itself on the basis of the figure of the worker, the labor parties and trade unions that emerged in the epoch of Pottier and Degeyter’s “L’Internationale.” Union membership has fluctuated wildly over the course of the last century, with moments of accelerating growth alternating with periods of collapse. Socialist and labor parties grew more steadily and held their ground—Goran Therborn and Donald Sassoon both suggest that they reach the height of their power in the late 1970s—but rarely achieved stable majorities of the voting population; they were caught in the dilemma that Adam Przeworski identified: in order to gain electoral majorities, they had a tendency to move away from the workerist ideologies of their core constituency to broader populist and nationalist appeals; but that move away from workerist ideologies weakened the allegiance of their core constituents.17
A century after “The Internationale,” labor was often seen as an interest group, not a figure for the whole of toiling humanity.

More important, the articulation between the movement institutions and specific groups of workers—free, independent producers, workingmen earning a family wage, enfranchised (which is to say male, white, native-born) citizen workers, skilled craftworkers, or, by the mid-twentieth century, formal sector mass-production workers in the commanding Fordist industries—meant that the unions and parties of labor not only adopted the racial, gender, and national ideologies of those workers but were unable to see the toil of unwaged, unfree, unskilled, unwhite, undocumented, and unmale toilers as labor, or to see them as workers.

Thus from the beginning of the labor movement, there were challenges to its capacity to represent the “prisoners of starvation,” the “wretched of the earth,” by its sibling social movements: the women’s movement, the anticolonial and anti-imperial national movements, the antislavery movement, and the subsequent movement of postslave communities. These social movements for civil, social, and cultural citizenship often avoided or refused the figure of labor. Though Fanon adopted the phrase “les damnés de la terre” from “The Internationale,” he did it to highlight the failure of the promise that the international working class would be the human race: “Generally speaking,” he writes in the final pages of The Wretched of the Earth, “the European workers did not respond to the call. The fact was that the workers believed they too were part of the prodigious adventure of the European Spirit.” A century after “The Internationale,” labor was often seen as an interest group, not a figure for the whole of toiling humanity.

This political crisis of the labor movement is not my central concern in this essay. It has been recognized by labor movement activists for more than two decades, and its resolution depends on the success or failure of those activists to recreate a movement that wins the allegiance of working people around the globe.

Rather, I would like to address the imaginative crisis, the sense that the innocuous second half of that last sentence—“working people around the globe”—is not so innocent, but is an inadequate, superseded figure, a misleading abstraction that comes bundled with a host of suspect connotations about work and workers. What is wrong with these terms? There are two different indictments that complement each other. First, worker is said to be too specific a figure, too full of metaphoric connotations. To say worker is to conjure up a specific body: the white, male, manual laborer of the classic Wobbly poster working in the large factories of the metal-working industries, living in a heterosexual household in the working-class tenements of the smoke-filled industrial cities, and drinking at the neighborhood tavern, bar, pub, or café (see Fig. 3). The result of a century of the cultural enfranchisement of labor has been to create such a powerful iconography that it now seems not only exclusive but traditional and conservative. The
iconography of the blue-collar workingman—from Andy Capp to Archie Bunker to Homer Simpson—is that of a lovable authoritarian, patriarchal but henpecked, always singing that “those were the days.”

This is not the only image that worker brings to mind. The iconography of labor has, one might say, an entire holy family, whose second most common figure is the sweatshop daughter, the swarthy, sultry, and seduced mill girl, eternally victimized, from the Irish seamstresses of the 1840s in Manchester and New York to the Jewish and Italian shirtwaist makers of the early twentieth century to the Mexican and Malaysian maquiladora workers of the late twentieth century. The World Bank’s narrative of Jean Paul, Hoa, and Françoise is another version of this iconography.

Here we are caught in the full contradictions of figuration itself. On the one hand, powerful ideologies—those narratives we tell ourselves in order to make sense of an incomprehensible social totality, those cognitive maps by which we figure where we are—depend on richly elaborated metaphors, giant characters: as John Lennon once sang, “a working-class hero is something to be.” The creation of working-class heroes has been
an extraordinary cultural revolution, a revaluing of ordinary lives, so that tragedy is no longer the monopoly of royal houses but is the stuff of plebian families. Similarly, the invention of labor as a political actor in state politics—municipal and then national—is one of the central accomplishments of the labor movement.

On the other hand, the very materialization of labor in specific working-class heroes reduces and reifies the original promise of the metaphor to embody not a single worker but the entire dispersed wretched of the earth. So it is that the most powerful terms that have been created to replace the overly rich figure of labor are not the figures of equal metaphoric richness—*the people, women, citizen, consumer, gay,* or the various nationalities—but are those terms that attempt to repel any positive content: the *subaltern,* which, in the words of Ranajit Guha’s 1981 preface to *Subaltern Studies,* is “a name for the general attribute of subordination . . . whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, office or any other way” or the *multitude,* which is, in the words of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, “a set of singularities . . . a social subject whose difference cannot be reduced to sameness, a difference that remains different.”19

One or another of these terms may well prove to be empty enough to encompass *les damnés de la terre;* it is worth recalling, however, that this emptiness was the precise usefulness of the term *proletarian* when it was adopted by the French and German communists of the 1830s and 1840s. Long before the advancing male proletarian of the IWW posters, proletariat was derived from a Roman census term that meant “one who contributes nothing to the state except offspring”; in the early nineteenth century it referred to the “lowest stratum of poor and propertyless freemen; the term often meant living in pauperism.”20 Labor itself was an abject category whose negative connotations—“working girl” long carried the connotations of prostitution—were later transfigured: think of the curious rhetoric of knights of labor and ladies of labor in the 1880s and 1890s.

The other objection to work and labor as categories is that they are too abstract, that they reduce the tremendous variety and meanings of human activity to a notion of “abstract labor.” Perhaps the most powerful version of this argument has been made by Dipesh Chakrabarty, a “labor” historian—the author of the classic study of jute mill workers of Bengal, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal, 1890–1940*—who develops a critique of the very concept of labor. “‘Work’ and ‘labor,’” he writes, “are words deeply implicated in the production of universal sociologies. Labor is one of the key categories in the imagination of capitalism itself. In the same way that we think of capitalism as coming into being in all sorts of contexts, we also imagine the modern category ‘work’ or ‘labor’ as emerging in all kinds of histories. . . . Yet the fact is that the modern word ‘labor,’
as every historian of labor in India would know, translates into a general category a whole host of words and practices with divergent and different associations.”\(^{21}\) This universal sociology—which he shared—failed to make sense of the hathiyar puja, the worship of tools, a common festival in north Indian factories: “Like many of my colleagues in labor history, I interpreted worshiping machinery—an everyday fact of life in India, from taxis to scooter-rickshaws, minibuses, and lathe machines—as ‘insurance policy’ against accidents and contingencies. That in the so-called religious imagination (as in language), redundancy—the huge and, from a strictly functionalist point of view, unnecessarily elaborate panoply of iconography and rituals—proved the poverty of a purely functionalist approach never deterred my secular narrative.”\(^{22}\)

Chakrabarty extends this critique of universal sociologies of work to Marx’s concept of abstract labor itself, arguing—in a manner parallel to Lisa Lowe in her *Immigrant Acts*—that the abstract labor of Marx is, like the abstract citizen, “a particular instance of the idea of the abstract human—the bearers of rights, for example—popularized by Enlightenment philosophers.” I won’t try to summarize Chakrabarty’s brilliant and persuasive interpretation of Marx’s theory of abstract labor. But the difficulty he points to—and it is similar to the zero-work argument of autonomist Marxism—is that to speak the words *work* and *labor* is already to be speaking the vernacular of capitalism, the language of commodities, the idiom of political economy. To invoke workers as the figure for an emancipated humanity is already to accept the logic of capitalism. For Chakrabarty, an analytical history speaks of workers and work through the “abstracting categories of capital”—this would be a labor history. He also holds out a second history, a subaltern history, which “beckons us to more affective narratives of human belonging where life forms, although porous to one another, do not seem exchangeable through a third term of equivalence such as abstract labor.” “The subaltern,” he writes, “is that which constantly, from within the narrative of capital, reminds us of other ways of being human than as bearers of the capacity to labor.”\(^{23}\)

In many respects, Chakrabarty is right, and even Marx recognized this. It is worth recalling that the central meaning of communism for Marx was never the state ownership of the means of production, or even workers’ control of production, but the dramatic reduction of the working day. And the labor movement itself recognized it: only rarely was *worker* or *laborer* used as a salutation. The early labor movement adopted *citizen* from the French Revolution—the minutes of the First International are full of Citizen Marx—the communist movement adopted *comrade*, and the trade union movement adopted *brother* and *sister*.

Nonetheless, as many critics have argued, the labor movement often
did find itself committed to the political economy of capitalism, to a vari-
ety of productionisms that made an absolute virtue of work: trade unions
that found themselves disciplining work forces and enforcing no-strike
pledges; militants who saw women’s entry into wage labor as a necessary
step in the emancipation of women; anarcho-syndicalists whose notions
of workers’ control celebrated labor as central to manliness; Stakhanovite
communists for whom “voluntary” work brigades were necessary to the
building of socialism. The contrary traditions that, in Chakrabarty’s
words, remind “us of other ways of being human than as bearers of the
capacity to labor”—movements for sexual, spiritual, or cultural transfor-
mation—have always seemed somewhat suspect to the reality-principle
of the labor movements.

In the face of these critiques, should we abandon the figure of labor? I
think this is neither desirable nor possible. The ongoing search for a term
empty of connotations that could capture the experience of the dispos-
sessed will always be in tension with the fullness of figuration. So there is
an unavoidable dialectic between the imagination of new empty names to
stand for the incomprehensible and unimaginable totality that is toiling
humanity, the subaltern, the multitude, and the necessity of powerful and
reductive figures to map our relation to other people joined to us by this
global division of labor. We know well the dangers of taking the part for
the whole, but it is difficult to imagine the whole without those metonymic
devices (like the transnational migrants who are a tiny percentage of the
world’s workers). There have been moments where certain specific groups
of workers did play disproportionate roles in helping to define, shape, and
trigger oppositional movements.

Moreover, this crisis of the figure of labor does not signal an end to
work or to workers. Rather it marks a reconfiguration of the shape of work
and workers. Despite the heroic attempts to create stable and long-lasting
organizations and narratives to represent working people, there is no stable
working class under capitalism. “The term ‘working class,’ properly under-
stood,” Harry Braverman wrote in his classic Labor and Monopoly Capital,
“never precisely delineated a specified body of people, but was rather an
expression for an ongoing social process. . . . the working class as it exists
[i]s the shape given to the working population by the capital accumulation
process.”24 Thus a capitalist economy continually reshapes workplaces and
the working population; it destroys old industries and old work forces while
drawing new workers from around the globe and moving workplaces to new
regions. As Gareth Stedman Jones once noted, the phrase “the making of
the English”—or any other—working class is misleading; a working class
is no sooner “made” than it is unmade and remade.25 Or, to put it in the
language of the Italian autonomist thinkers, the process of class composition is always a process of decomposition and recomposition.

It is perhaps not surprising that the representations of labor often seem more solid and enduring than the labor process itself. We remain caught in the class maps we inherited from family, school, and movies. No matter what our position in the class structuring of the population, our class images are usually a generation behind the realities of class formation, behind the forces of capitalism that are reshaping the working population. Unfortunately, this is often true of the images held by the political representatives of labor, the leaders and militants of labor parties, unions, and associations.

However, insofar as states, corporations, and international financial institutions continue to represent—and exploit—a global labor force, it is necessary to engage in the contest over representing work and workers, creating new and more adequate metaphors as well as new organizations. If the notion of a global labor movement seems utopian, with only a handful of actions by dockers to point to, it is worth remembering that a century ago any national labor movement seemed just as unlikely.

One of Marx’s central dialectical insights was that capital was just another name for labor, that “accumulation of capital is therefore multiplication of the proletariat.” Similarly, since the working class is the shape capital gives to the working population, the other, more abstract, name for “workers of the world” is the “international division of labor,” a concept that emerged out of anti-imperialist dependency theory. Without rehearsing the scholarly controversies over the attempts to define the old and the new international divisions of labor, let me suggest that the concept of the international division of labor continues to be a key figure to capture the unity and division of the global labor force. If workers of the world can lead us to an unreflective assumption of working-class solidarity, the international division of labor reminds us of the structured hierarchy between waged and unwaged work, formal and informal sectors, and of the various ways we divide labor, in practice, in social science, and in popular thought. The fetish of the wage form has long concealed the hidden abode of domestic labor, reifying the totality of subaltern life into apparently distinct worlds of workplace and household. Seeing the world working class as the international division of labor (and vice versa) avoids the false concreteness of the proletariat—it does not equal industrial workers or formal-sector wage earners—and the false abstractness of homogenized labor.

It also enables us to resist a sense that there is a single trajectory toward a homogenization of workers, toward a global unity or necessary solidarity. It is understandable that the union and party politics of workers’ alliance...
constantly tempts militants to read a necessary logic of alliance into capitalism, imagining that one could move easily from the social construction of abstract labor in a capitalist economy to the actual reduction of differences among workers in the formation of specific historical working classes.

But the central dynamic of working-class life under capitalism is neither a secular trend toward homogenization, nor an infinite proliferation of differences, but the dialectic between, to use Marx’s words, competition and association. The same forces that create the conditions for competition among workers (“wage labor rests exclusively on competition between the laborers,” Marx writes in the Manifesto) also create the conditions for association. But the reverse is also true. The forms of life and struggle of the unwaged, the unemployed, the informal, the unrepresented are as central to this dialectic of competition and association as are the lives and struggles of those capital deems workers.

To the command of neoliberal globalization — “workers of the world, compete” — we must answer with that old slogan of the global justice movement: “workers of the world, unite.” But in doing so, we need to put it in new words, new songs, new figures of that yet unimagined, unrepresented collectivity.

Notes


2. This was written as one of the Working Group on Globalization and Culture’s working papers on transnational cultural studies, and I want to thank my collaborators in the Working Group (www.yale.edu/laborculture/wkg.grp_GC.html). I also want to thank the respondents to earlier versions delivered in Michigan, Johannesburg, Seattle, and Tepoztlán: John Beck, Lisa Fine, Jyotsna Singh, Bridget Kenny, Jon Hyslop, Achille Mbembe, Nikhil Singh, Reinaldo Román, Nichole Sanders, Elliott Young, Kristina Boylan, and Victor Macías.


10. Ibid., 7.
14. Ibid., 11.
15. Ibid., 1.
22. Ibid., 78.
23. Ibid., 52, 71, 94.