**Marxism, Productivism, and the Refusal of Work**

If hard work were really such a great thing, the rich would have kept it all to themselves.

UNION ACTIVIST

A cultural dominant the work ethic may be; seamless and incontrovertible it is certainly not. The previous chapter touched on one reaction to the exclusions enacted by the work ethic—namely, demands for inclusion that draw on alternative work ethics as tools of insubordination—and considered both the advantages and limitations of this response. But there are other kinds of approaches: the story of the work ethic in the United States is not only about abject subjects and their struggles for recognition but also about various disavowals of and resistances to the normative discourse of work. There is also a parallel history featuring those who failed to internalize the gospel of work—a history of “bad subjects” who resist and may even escape interpellation. One chapter of this story could center on the protests of sectors of the industrial working class whose class consciousness was articulated not by way of a laborist ethic but, as Michael Seidman describes it, “by avoiding the space, time and demands of wage labor” (1991, 169). Another might feature the perspectives of those in the rank and file who saw leisure neither as a means to recreate labor power and ensure consumption, nor as a way to spread the available employment and drive wages up, but as an end in itself, as the gratifying time of nonwork (see Rodgers 1978, 159–60). This alternate history could focus too on the segments of the black working class whose story Robin Kelley recounts, like the zoot suiters and hipsters who, “refusing to be good proletarians,” pursued a different
mode of race rebellion, seeking meaning and pleasure in the times and spaces of nonwork (1994, 163); and those second-wave feminists, including feminists associated with the wages for housework movement, who insisted that work—whether waged work or unwaged domestic labor—was not something to which women should aspire but rather something they should try to escape. This history of disidentification with the work ethic might also include various youth subcultures, from beatniks to hippies, punks, and slackers, all constituted in opposition to what E. P. Thompson calls “the Puritan time-valuation” (1991, 401). Today the rebellion against the imposition of work finds expression in the agendas of a number of activist groups and advocacy organizations, with arguably some of the most vibrant examples coming out of the European precarity movements that have responded to the increasing flexibilization and precariousness of work with a call not for the restoration of the stable and reliable—but also one-sided and all-consuming—Fordist wage relation, but rather, for the ability to secure an entirely different relation between life and work.¹

The work orientations of welfare recipients in the United States are interesting for what they reveal about how the work ethic has been both internalized and resisted. Contrary to the often-deployed “cultural deficiency” discourses, studies of the effects of the 1996 welfare reform (the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act) find much support among recipients for the idea of reform and for the familiar ethic of work in whose name it was advanced. Indeed, “poor mothers’ support for welfare reform is the single most striking indication that welfare mothers are not the social ‘outsiders’ portrayed in the Personal Responsibility Act,” reports Sharon Hays (2003, 215). But the history of the US welfare system also reveals the many ways in which recipients have become politicized in relation to work-ethic discourses. From the mid 1960s through the early 1970s, the National Welfare Rights Organization explicitly refused to accept the view that waged work is the only legitimate means of meeting consumption needs. Working the antinomy between productivism and consumerism, these activists rejected the necessity and legitimacy of the link and fought for the individual’s right to an income regardless of his or her participation in waged work (see Kornbluh 1997; Nadasen 2002).² Thus, even those so insistently targeted by the ethic’s judgments and often disenfranchised by means of its prescriptions have mounted radical and forceful challenges to its legitimacy.

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My point is simply that the history of the imposition of waged labor and its dominant ethic is incomplete without a parallel history of rebellions and refusals; the ethic generates not only oppositions and their recuperations but also lines of flight. But rather than continue to recount this history, the analysis that follows attempts to do something else: to identify and explore some theoretical resources that might illuminate and enrich antiwork politics and postwork imaginaries.

MARXISM AND PRODUCTIVISM

These theoretical tools are drawn from the Marxist tradition, admittedly both an obvious and a curious resource for a critical, let alone feminist, analysis of work: obvious for its focus on labor, curious because Marxism is so often understood in terms of its commitment to work’s acclamation, to the liberation of work from exploitation and the restoration of its dignity in unalienated form. As noted in the introduction, however, there are alternatives within the tradition, including some that couple the critique of work’s structures and relations with a more direct confrontation with its values. Autonomist Marxism is one such approach, and a concept central to that tradition—the refusal of work—is an inspiration for the political theory of and against work that I seek to develop throughout this book and central to the critical analyses, political agendas, and utopian speculations that flesh it out. To understand the refusal of work as a Marxist concept that nonetheless takes aim at a fairly broad swath of Marxist history, the chapter will begin with a brief genealogical account that will situate the refusal of work in relation to a history of conflict within Marxism over the nature, meaning, and value of work, a field of contestation for which the critique of productivism will serve as our point of entry.

The critique of productivism in Marxism was put forth perhaps most succinctly and certainly most provocatively by Jean Baudrillard in *The Mirror of Production*. According to Baudrillard, “a specter haunts the revolutionary imagination: the phantom of production. Everywhere it sustains an unbridled romanticism of productivity” (1975, 17). As he sees it, historical materialism reproduces political economy’s fetishism of labor; the evidence of Marxism’s complicity can be found in a naturalized ontology of labor and a utopian vision of a future in which this essence is fully realized in the form of an unhindered productivity. Baudrillard finds within this normative ideal—this “sanctification of work”
(36)—an allegiance to the values of worldly asceticism in which the richness, spontaneity, and plurality of social practices and relations are subordinated to the instrumental and rationalist logic of productivity, with its exaltation of activities centered on controlling nature in the service of strictly utilitarian ends. What Baudrillard identifies as Marxism’s commitment to productivism, its inability to break from the work values that have developed alongside and in support of Western capitalist social formations, represents a failure of both critical analysis and utopian imagination.

Despite the problems with Baudrillard’s totalizing indictment of Marxism in its entirety, his critique provides an opportunity to expose and reconsider the productivist assumptions and values that remain stubbornly embedded within at least some contributions to the field. Think, for example, of the critical treatment that the seductive, distracting, and—so it would seem—inevitably degrading pleasures of consumption sometimes receive. The residues of the traditional ethics of work also appear, I would argue, in the ways that the language of creativity is in some instances deployed as a synonym for labor, at least when it has the effect of not only selectively expanding what counts as labor but also elevating its status as a worthy human practice. Thus, for example, by describing postcapitalist society in terms of a liberation of creative activity, even nonwork can be imagined as a disciplined practice directed toward a laudable goal, and distanced from something that risks association with the sin of sloth. The Marxist commitment to these traditional work values is perhaps most clearly displayed in two examples from the history of the tradition—examples that often still dominate particularly non-Marxist representations of the field—which I will call socialist modernization and socialist humanism. These paradigms’ assumptions about work are brought into especially sharp relief when viewed through the lens of their respective utopian speculations about postcapitalist alternatives, one posed as an overcoming of labor’s exploitation and the other presented as a remedy for labor’s alienation. I have selected these two approaches for brief review because their commitments to the essential value of work that Baudrillard criticizes are so clearly exhibited and because they offer an instructive contrast to the examination of autonomist Marxism’s antiproducitivist approach to work that follows. In addition, the assumptions of the first two approaches about the nature and value of work are extraordinarily persistent, regularly turning up in
the critical frameworks and normative visions of a variety of analyses, both within and beyond the Marxist tradition. Their defenses of work and reiteration of its traditional values have yet to be fully reckoned with.

SOCIALIST MODERNIZATION

The utopia of modernization constitutes the characterization of a post-capitalist alternative most popularly ascribed to Marxism. In this vision, communism is equated with the full realization of the productive potential of the forces of production developed under capitalism. The critique of capital, in this version, centers on the problematic of exploitation and the contradiction between the forces and relations of production. Exploitation proceeds from the private ownership of productive forces and consists of the private appropriation of the fruits of surplus labor. According to this well-rehearsed story of capitalist development, these bourgeois property relations eventually become impediments to the full development of modern productive forces: “The conditions of bourgeois society are too narrow to comprise the wealth created by them” (Marx and Engels 1992, 9). Communism, in contrast, would democratize the economic relations of ownership and control. The relations of production—class relations—would be thus radically transfigured, while the means of production and the labor process itself would merely be unfettered.

Although it is usually associated with the political legacy of state socialism, socialist modernization does have some points of reference in the writings of Marx and the Marxist tradition. For example, in a text from 1918 consistent with this paradigm’s theory of revolution, Lenin distinguished between two phases after the overthrow of capitalism: the first, socialist phase, in which “factory discipline” is extended over the whole of society; and the final phase of true communism. The socialist stage—a lengthy period of transition between capitalism and communism whose precise duration is unknown—requires from workers “self-sacrifice,” “perseverance,” and a commitment to “the proper path of steady and disciplined labour” (Lenin 1989, 223, 226). To ensure that communism is achieved in the future, the offensive against capital must be partially suspended during the transition. Socialism thus involves a temporary intensification of capitalism, whereas communism is imagined abstractly as its pure transcendence. In the meantime, “the task that the Soviet government must set the people in all its scope is—learn to work” (240). This includes the use of piece rates, competition among
firms, and time-motion analyses. Nowhere is this utopia of modernization more clearly prefigured than in Lenin’s fascination with and admiration of Taylorism, and in his insistence on the need for an iron work discipline to combat petit bourgeois laziness, selfishness, and anarchy (see 240–41, 257). But what Lenin considered to be only a means of dealing with the difficult conditions of the immediate postrevolutionary period became, in the hands of others—as the utopia was either deferred into the ever-more-distant future or declared achieved—an end in itself. Perhaps later Soviet policies and rhetoric provide the purest examples of this ideal of modernization. With its affirmation of the heroic, world-building capacities of disciplined, proletarian labor, the vision depends upon and revolves around a valorization of the creative force of human labor, conceived narrowly as social production.

From a Marxist perspective, the problem with this version of the productivist vision is that because it is founded upon an insufficient critique of capital, its vision of an alternative preserves too many of capitalism’s structures and values. This tribute to proletarian labor and to the progressive development of productive forces replicates the fundamental attributes of capitalist society; in this account, the working class inherits and carries on the historical role of the bourgeoisie, who first revealed to us the “productive forces [that] slumbered in the lap of social labor” (Marx and Engels 1992, 8). Here we find an endorsement of economic growth, industrial progress, and the work ethic similar to the one that can be found in bourgeois political economy, with its naturalization and celebration of the processes of economic modernization. The figures of Stakhanov and Oblomov offer an official Soviet version of the political economists’ parable about the ethically deserving and undeserving, but with the class positions reversed: the worthy industrious worker and useless lazy nobleman. In this form, the critique of capitalist production does not extend, for example, to the labor process itself, and thus does not account adequately for Marx’s many pointed critiques of the mind-numbing and repetitive qualities of factory labor, or his insistence that freedom requires a shortening of the working day. This narrative limits communism to a transformation of property relations, leaving the basic form of industrial production—and even the mode of capitalist command over production—intact. The future alternative to capitalism is reduced, according to Moishe Postone’s critical reading of this logic, to “a new mode of politically administering and economically regulating
the same industrial mode of producing to which capitalism gave rise” (1996, 9). Accordingly, communism could be understood as the rationalization of capitalism, the taming and mastery of its processes.

SOCIALIST HUMANISM

A second example from the archive of Marxist history that sets itself against the modernization model but that nonetheless shares its fundamental commitment to work gained popularity among many Anglo-American Marxists in the 1960s. Whereas the modernization discourse originated in the context of revolutionary movements in Europe during the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, the development and popularization of this model of humanist Marxism coincided with the rise of the New Left. Erich Fromm’s *Marx’s Concept of Man*, published in 1961 as an accompaniment to the first US publication of Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, presents a classic statement of this reading of Marx. It is an attempt to rescue Marxism not only from its association with existing socialist regimes, but also from its more economistic and determinist tendencies. Drawing on the *Manuscripts* (which were first published in the 1920s and first translated into English in 1959), Fromm reconstructs a counter-Marx: a philosophical Marx grounded in a humanist tradition and centered on a commitment to the creative individual as unit of analysis and motor of history. Whereas the earlier model, Marxist modernization, gravitates toward *Capital* and *The Communist Manifesto* as privileged texts, this humanist discourse traces its lineage to Marx’s early writings, the *Manuscripts* and *The German Ideology*. While the utopia of modernization is conceived as a response to the critique of bourgeois property relations and the problematic of exploitation, the humanist utopia grows out of the critique of alienated labor. Whereas the former focuses on notions of social progress, social justice, and social harmony, the latter privileges the individual as a crucial category and fundamental value. Indeed, according to Fromm, Marx’s philosophy “was aimed at the full realization of individualism” (1961, 3). There is a romantic dimension to this as well, which is evident in Fromm’s descriptions of Marx’s philosophy as “a movement against the dehumanization and automatization of man inherent in the development of Western industrialism” (1961, v) and a “spiritual-humanistic” alternative to the “mechanistic-materialistic spirit of successful industrialism” (72). Together, the utopia of modernization and the humanist utopia present a
Marxist gloss on the two faces of modernity: an ideal of social and economic progress grounded in the continuing development of science and industry and the romantic revolt against the forces of rationalization accompanying that ideal.

The two visions of the future—socialist modernization and socialist humanism—are in some ways opposed to one another, but they are based on a similar commitment to labor as a fundamental human value. In the first, labor is conceived as social production and lauded as the primary mechanism of social cohesion and achievement. In the second, labor is understood as an individual creative capacity, a human essence, from which we are now estranged and to which we should be restored. Drawing on Marx’s *Manuscripts*, Fromm insists that the self-realization of man, which he understands to be Marx’s central concern, is inextricably linked to the activity of work: “In this process of genuine activity man develops himself, becomes himself; work is not only a means to an end—the product—but an end in itself, the meaningful expression of human energy; hence work is enjoyable” (1961, 41–42). The problem with capitalism is that it estranges us from our essential nature, our authentic selves; alienation is in this sense the negation of productivity (43). “For Marx,” Fromm argues, “socialism meant the social order which permits the return of man to himself, the identity between existence and essence” (69). Unalienated labor, as the reigning ideal around which a future utopian society is to be organized, is imagined as the primary means of individual self-realization and self-fulfillment. Fromm presents a long quote from the third volume of *Capital*—a famous passage in which Marx envisions a realm of freedom above and beyond a realm of necessity—and insists that all the essential elements of socialism can be found therein (59–60). In Fromm’s reading of this passage, we find the key to the humanist vision of unalienated labor: a transformation of the world of work into a cooperative process that is controlled by the individual producers. It is not the planned economy that produces freedom, but participation in the activity of organizing and planning that enables one to be free: freedom is a matter of individual independence, “which is based on man’s [the individual’s] standing on his own feet, using his own powers and relating himself to the world productively” (61).

Fromm’s cure for capitalism is not more work, as Lenin once prescribed, but better work. “The central theme of Marx,” Fromm insists, “is the transformation of alienated, meaningless labor into productive,
free labor” (1961, 43); this is the means by which we can finally realize our true humanity. It is interesting to note that in Fromm’s discussion of that famous passage from the third volume of *Capital*, the passage that he characterized as expressing all the essential elements of socialism, he quotes the passage at length up through the part where Marx states that the realm of freedom can flourish only with the realm of necessity as its basis but omits the next and concluding sentence of the paragraph, in which Marx adds that “the reduction of the working day is the basic prerequisite” (Marx 1981, 959). Later in his book, Fromm quotes a shorter section of the same passage, this time including the final sentence about the need to shorten the working day. Yet his lack of interest in the ideal of work reduction is still clear: he adds italics to emphasize every part of the quote except the final sentence, upon which he again neglects to comment (1961, 76). Why work less if work in its unalienated form as socialized production is the expression of and means to self-creation? The goal is to restore work’s dignity and worth, not to contest its status as the pillar of social value.

Unlike the modernization model, which rejected private property and the market while accepting and adapting the basic contours of capitalist discipline, the humanist paradigm incorporates a more extensive critique of work. This critique is, however, hindered by a tendency toward nostalgia for an earlier time, a romanticization of craft production that informs its visions of an alternative. Fromm argues that alienation is greater now than it was in the earlier stage of capitalism when handicraft production and manufacturing prevailed (1961, 51). Concrete labor in the production of use values is sometimes suggested in these analyses as the alternative to the abstract labor that produces exchange values. Thus, for example, in an essay that fits solidly within this humanist rubric, David McLellan presents another reconstruction, drawn largely from Marx’s early writings, of communism as an unalienated society in which we have a direct and personal connection to the products of our labor (McLellan 1969, 464): as objectifications of our laboring essence, the objects we create would serve as confirmations of our being. Instead of producing superfluous things to sell on the market in order to produce surplus value, we would produce useful things for immediate consumption. As opposed to abstract labor as both a conceptual abstraction that reduces different kinds of concrete labor to labor in general and a practical process that transforms the concrete laboring activities of individ-
uals according to the exigencies of large-scale social production, this romantic-humanist perspective tends to valorize concrete labor as an alternative.

As I noted above, at least some of these assumptions about the nature and meaning of work and the kind of speculative visions they inform can be found in sites outside the tradition of socialist humanism represented here by Fromm. Both Maria Mies and Neala Schleuning, for example, present Marxist feminist critiques of industrial capitalist modernization and visions of an alternative economy that resonate with this humanist paradigm. Mies, for example, explicitly rejects what she takes to be the Marxist view that freedom exists beyond the realm of necessity and requires a reduction or abolition of necessary labor (1986, 216). Some forms of work, she argues, should be recognized not as a burden but as a source of enjoyment and self-expression (217), including the work of mothering, peasant labor, and artisanal production—provided that they are not completely submerged in commodity production and beholden to market logics. Schleuning’s critique of modern alienated labor is grounded similarly in a model of “good work,” this one gleaned from pre-industrial reproductive labor (1990, 90–92). What makes these forms of work so fulfilling in the view of these authors is that they are all involved in the direct, immediate production of life rather than the production of things or wealth (Mies 1986, 217); they produce for use rather than for consumption (Schleuning 1990, 85). We need to have a sense of necessity and purpose in our work; to find this, we should produce useful products (Mies 1986, 218). The goal is to envision a community in which work is once again integrated with life (Schleuning 1990, 45). The length of the working day would then be irrelevant: “a long working-day and even a lifetime full of work, will not then be felt as a curse but as a source of human fulfillment and happiness” (Mies 1986, 217).

Despite the importance of these authors’ critique of unsustainable patterns of consumption and their interrogation of a commodity fetishism that functions to deflect questions about the relationship between consumer goods and the conditions under which they are produced, the link the authors affirm between support of productivism and opposition to consumerism reiterates one of the central tenets of the traditional work ethic. One of the problems with these accounts is their tendency to tether individual consumption to individual production. Affirming one
of the more direct and unyielding of the links between production and consumption, the authors hold that the ideal is to consume only that which we produce as individuals or members of a community. According to Mies, “only by consuming the things which we produce can we judge whether they are useful, meaningful and wholesome, whether they are necessary or superfluous. And only by producing what we consume can we know how much time is really necessary for the things we want to consume, what skills are necessary, what knowledge is necessary and what technology is necessary” (219). Production for direct use and consumption for clear need: each places strict limits on the other. Insisting that we must produce in order to consume and consume only what we produce is a prescription for worldly asceticism of the first order.

HUMANISM REVISITED

Just as the humanists stood opposed to the modernization model, we can get an initial sense of the autonomist tradition through its critiques of the kind of interpretive practices and utopian visions that sustain the humanist paradigm described above. In some ways, the critique of alienation that is central to the humanist critique of capitalism in its Fordist incarnation seems even more applicable to the conditions of post-Fordist labor that the autonomists, representing a more recent theoretical project, attempt to address. When more jobs require workers to supply not only manual effort but also emotional skills, affective capacities, and communicative competencies—that is, when more of the self is drawn into labor processes and managed in accordance with the exigencies of profit maximization—the problem of alienation, from both self and others, arguably grows more acute. Yet there remain problems with the critique. For example, particularly when the individual is the unit of analysis, as in many of the arguments noted above, the critique of alienation becomes attached to a prior claim about the nature of the human subject. As Baudrillard describes it, this model of the human founded in a transhistorical capacity for labor mimics the standardization and generalization of work that was established under the conditions of industrialization. To put it in other terms, the abstraction from the concrete and particular that allows one to grasp labor quantitatively is what also allows one to conceive the commensurability of its qualitative instances as the expression of an essential humanity. In this way, Baudrillard explains, “the abstract and formal universality of the commodity labor power is
what supports the ‘concrete’ universality of qualitative labor” (1975, 27). There are two points to emphasize here: first, rather than a critical standpoint outside capital, the notion of man as producer is part and parcel of the practical and ideological imposition of abstract labor; second, and more important, the notion is a mythology internal to and, with its confirmation of work’s existential rather than merely practical necessity, ultimately supportive of the work society.

Despite Baudrillard’s polemical indictment of Marxism tout court, the critique he levels at this type of analytical practice is not uncommon within the Marxist tradition, with the claim about human nature being perhaps the most widely contested. The autonomist theorist Antonio Negri, for example, expresses no interest in the problematic of alienation as a discourse of interiority, of the loss and restoration of an essential human nature. The “so-called humanism of Marx,” in which actual historical tendencies are corralled into a predictable narrative of “the organic unfolding of human nature (even if it is defined historically),” is the product of an “impatience with theory, a usage of positive utopia destined to homogenize transition and communism” (1991, 154). Possible futures are, by this means, circumscribed by ready-made visions and predictable outcomes. Baudrillard describes the practical limits of such a move in bold terms: “What an absurdity it is to pretend that men are ‘other,’ to try to convince them that their deepest desire is to become ‘themselves’ again!” (1975, 166). How can we be empowered to act on the basis of desires deemed “inauthentic”? There is, by Negri’s reading of the Grundrisse, no concept of work to restore or to liberate (1991, 10); rather, the organization and meaning of work remains open to radical reinvention. As we will see, autonomists tend to shift the analytical frame from the question of individual nature to the possibilities of collective constitution, from a self to restore to selves to invent.

The vision of an alternative that rests on the paradigm of concrete labor is also problematic from the perspective of other Marxist analytics. To see, as Schleuning and Mies do, concrete labor as a utopian alternative to abstract labor and the production of use values as a replacement for the production of exchange value is to once again imagine as outside a critical standpoint that is in fact inside. The pairings that Marx uses to develop his analysis—use value and exchange value, concrete labor and abstract labor—are part of a critical strategy, not elements of an alter-
native vision. Nietzsche’s pairing of noble morality and slave morality offers an instructive comparison: although he makes use of the distinction by measuring one against the standards of the other, he does not present a return to noble morality as either possible or desirable; the category of noble morality serves as a tool by which to advance the critique of slave morality, rather than as a vision of a better past or future. In a similar way, Marx’s categorical distinctions do not provide a remedy to the system he critiques. An alternative to capitalist society would require that we move beyond both abstract labor under capitalism and the modes of concrete labor that are also shaped by it. As another autonomist theorist, Harry Cleaver, reads Marx, “to speak of postcapitalist ‘useful labour’ is as problematic as to speak of the postcapitalist state” (2000, 129). Again, the problem is that this affirmation of labor—in this case, the useful work of particular individuals—reinforces one of the critical supports of the system it seeks to overcome.

Indeed, as Gayatri Spivak observes, posing use value against exchange value is “far too Luddite a binary opposition” to account for Marx’s argument (2000, 2). The Marx that some other interpreters, including autonomists, build on is the one whose description of life in a communist society—where one could “hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic” (Marx and Engels 1970, 53)—was not an affirmation of artisanal production, but at once a critique of the division of labor and an ironic jab at the kind of pastoral, pre-industrial visions advanced by the utopian socialists. This is the same Marx who argues explicitly in favor of the virtues of cooperation on a mass scale, a form of social labor that he distinguishes qualitatively from handicraft production. The power of social production “arises from co-operation itself,” Marx claims in Capital: “When the worker co-operates in a planned way with others, he strips off the fetters of his individuality, and develops the capabilities of his species” (1976, 447). Beginning with this stage of cooperation, the individual privileged in the humanist model is no longer the proper unit of analysis; the vision of an individual worker who produces a specific useful product is inconsistent with processes that come to incorporate general technical and scientific knowledge that cannot be attributed to specific individuals. According to Marx in the Grundrisse:
In earlier stages of development the single individual seems to be developed more fully, because he has not yet worked out his relationships in their fullness, or erected them as independent social powers and relations opposite himself. It is as ridiculous to yearn for a return to that original fullness as it is to believe that with this complete emptiness history has come to a standstill. The bourgeois viewpoint has never advanced beyond this antithesis between itself and this romantic viewpoint, and therefore the latter will accompany it as legitimate antithesis up to its blessed end. (1973, 162)

This development points not back to an older mode of organization centered on independent individuals, but rather forward to new ways of organizing work and production and new models of subjectivity.

AUTONOMIST MARXISM

The attraction of work as a model behavior and human value exerts a powerful hold not only on the liberal but also the Marxist imagination. Thus, it is not only capital that moralizes, normalizes, and mythologizes work; as Negri notes in a text from 1977, the “official socialist movement” also treats the imposition of work as if it were a “title of nobility” and continually attempts to suppress its refusal (2005, 263, 269). Autonomist Marxism’s concept of the refusal of work represents a particularly cogent and timely alternative to such productivist tendencies. The tradition of autonomist Marxism originated alongside and in response to the Italian social movements from the late 1960s and the 1970s, and although the movements that inspired the original work were crushed, the theoretical approach—together with some aspects of the political project—live on (see Dyer-Witheford 1999, 64). Since the refusal of work, both as a theoretical framework and a political agenda, grows out of the broader methodological orientation that characterizes the tradition, I will start with the more general terrain before moving on to the specific.

One way to begin is to situate the autonomist tradition in relation to the two paradigms reviewed above: socialist modernization and socialist humanism. The particular texts they tend to privilege offer one such point of contrast. Whereas Capital was key for classical Marxism and the Manuscripts was a principal text for the humanists, the Grundrisse is a particularly important resource for the autonomists. In his study of that text, Marx beyond Marx, Negri explains his attraction to it in terms of his
own political situation. Rather than a simple precursor to or early draft of *Capital*, the *Grundrisse* was written in light of a specific crisis in 1857 and is best understood as an attempt to theorize its revolutionary possibilities. Thus, in this case, “there is no possibility . . . of destroying the dynamism of this process by hypostatizing it, by rigidifying it into a totality with its own laws of development that one might be able to possess, or dominate, or reverse” (Negri 1991, 9). The autonomist theorists took their lead from the revolutionary agitation of a loose coalition of workers, students, feminists, and unemployed people that roiled Italy in the 1960s and 1970s. “We find ourselves,” Negri writes in 1979, “in a phase where the revolutionary movement is seeking new foundations, and in a way that will not be that of a minority.” In this situation, he explains, “we have nothing to do with orthodoxy” (1991, 17). Although there is a fidelity to Marx in Negri’s work that might be construed to be as orthodox as any other, what is arguably unorthodox is the willingness to invent a Marx beyond Marx—that is, to move beyond Marx’s own analyses in order to keep up with the changing forms of capitalist development and the modes of rebellion generated within. The *Grundrisse*, in Negri’s reading, restores Marx as a theorist of crisis rather than equilibrium, of subjective agency rather than objective tendencies, of antagonism and separation rather than opposition and synthesis. Perhaps what characterizes the autonomist tradition more than anything else is its attempts to restore the methodological and political primacy of subjectivity. In this sense, autonomist Marxism can be linked to that broader subtradition within Marxism that seeks to theorize not from what Michael Lebowitz describes as the “one-sided” perspective of capital and its reproduction, but from the perspective of the workers and their potential to subvert that power (1992). This insistence on the power of active subjects requires a dismantling of some of the analytical and organizational apparatuses within Marxist theory and practice that held these subjective forces in check, from the metaphysics of labor, to the Leninist party and the traditional labor union. This restoration of the primacy of subjectivity also involves a rejection of determinism, teleology, and, as we will see, a refusal of the recuperative logic of the dialectic.

The focus of this approach is on the collective as unit of analysis and locus of political agency. The thesis that exemplifies this approach—sometimes called the “leading role of the proletariat” or the “autonomist hypothesis”—concentrates on class struggle as the primary engine of
change. As Jason Read explains this thesis, which has served in some respects as the autonomist tradition’s methodological center of gravity, working-class resistance precedes and prefigures developments in capitalist production (2003, 13); workers are to be conceived not primarily as capital’s victims but as its antagonists (see Tronti 1980). By this estimation, neither capital nor labor power is the primary creative element; rather, working-class insubordination is the dynamic force in history. The hypothesis is perhaps most compelling not as a historical law or even a sociological generalization, but as a methodological rule of thumb that forces us to look for disequilibrium where we might expect to find stability, that scrambles traditional assumptions about who is active and who is reactive, and that encourages recognition of the working class not primarily in terms of its economic role but as a political agent. According to this reading of Marx, “the working class is defined by its struggle against capital and not by its productive function” (Zerowork 1975, 3).

Who might be included in this category of the working class remains an open question. It is not a sociological category but a political one, and its boundaries depend on its particular composition at specific times and places. The concept of class composition affirms the “historical transformatability of the composition of the class,” and, in Negri’s view, also the expansion of who might be included in the political formation of the working class over time (1988, 209). That is, the notion of class composition both sets the category of the working class in historical motion and broadens its reach. In terms of historical dynamics, forms of political solidarity that workers achieve provoke a reaction on the part of capital, a reorganization that has the effect of breaking the composition of the class and restoring it in a more functional mode. So, for example, Taylorist mass production was a way to destroy the labor aristocracy that had itself served to break up an earlier pattern of worker solidarity, but mass production also produces new possibilities for mass organizing (Baldi 1972, 11; Negri 1988, 205). Rather than equate the working class with the industrial proletariat, the concept of class composition also designates a broader and more open constituency of capital’s subjects, the specific formations of which are mutable (see Zerowork 1975, 4; Cleaver 2003, 43). Negri, for example, describes the changing composition of the working class in terms of a series of shifts—from the professional worker in the early industrial period; to the mass worker of high Fordism, which joined together a broader constituency of waged workers inside and
beyond the factory; to the social worker of post-Fordism, a composition that is no longer limited to waged workers but can also include those necessary to its existence and organization, like the unemployed, domestic workers, and students; and, most recently, to Hardt and Negri’s multitude, a class category that, in extending across the circuits of biopolitical social production and reproduction, realizes more fully the postworkerist commitments of the project as it developed over time (see, for example, Negri 1988, 235; Dyer-Witheford 1999, 72–76; Hardt and Negri 2000). What counts as work or social productivity and who might organize politically—together or in proximity to one another—in relation to its conditions change over time and space.

The “autonomy” of its namesake is multidimensional, referring to a number of its critical, political, and utopian commitments. The label “autonomist Marxism” refers historically to its autonomy as part of the Italian extraparliamentary Left in relation to other leftist parties and unions, as both specific historical actors and organizational forms. Autonomy in this sense refers to a double relation: an independent relationship with outside groups, but also an internal relationship among autonomist groups imagined in terms of an organizational ideal of a coalition that could encompass a plurality of participants with a variety of agendas. But perhaps more important, it refers to an affirmation of a collective capacity for autonomy vis-à-vis capital.

Three terms are critical to this last dimension of the project of autonomy: self-valorization, antagonism, and separation. The first of these, self-valorization, is one way that the collective dimension of political action has been understood within a tradition that is perhaps more attentive than others to questions of organizational form and practice. As an alternative to capitalist valorization—that is, to a system of values grounded in the production of surplus value—self-valorization is, as Cleaver describes it, not mere resistance to processes of capitalist valorization but “a positive project of self-constitution” (1992, 129; see also Virno and Hardt 1996, 264). Political organizations are aimed at both deconstructive and constructive projects; they are at once agents of critique and of invention. As sites of self-valorization, political collectivities are recognized as constitutive machines rather than merely representational vehicles. The production of autonomous self-valorization depends on the struggle for a separation from the object of critique. Separation is conceived as something different from dialectical conflict;
resistance born of separation is imagined more along lines of flight than lines of opposition. Its task is to organize struggles that neither take the form nor mirror the logic of what they contest. Separation is the path of difference—not an antithesis to be subsumed in a synthesis, but a singularity that might invent something new. Negri describes this as a rejection of a relationship between capital and its antagonists on the model of the dialectical opposition of that which is the same and that which is different, an opposition that he describes as lacking a conception of singularity (Casarino and Negri 2008, 46). Finally, antagonism must be added as a key term: an antagonistic logic of separation stands in contrast to a dialectical logic of contradiction. Whereas dialectical contradiction is an objective category, the product of a system of structures, antagonisms arise from the expressed needs and desires of historical subjects. Antagonism can in this sense be grasped as the subjectivization of contradiction. For examples of subjectivized contradictions, think of the difference between, on the one hand, the contradiction between the forces and relations of production and, on the other hand, conflicts between what we have and what we might want, between what we are and what we could become, between what we do and what we can do. Self-valorization, separation, and antagonism are thus crucial to the project of autonomy, and the means of conceiving a Marxist method—whose ideal form, at least—could be “completely subjectivized, totally open toward the future, and creative,” one that “cannot be enclosed within any dialectical totality or logical unity” (Negri 1991, 12).

THE REFUSAL OF WORK

The refusal of work as theory and practice emerges out of these methodological commitments and areas of conceptual focus. As an important slogan in the Italian social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the refusal of work is a fundamental ground of autonomist Marxism’s critical analysis and political strategy, a critical element of the project of autonomy characterized above. At one level a clear expression of the immediate desire experienced by working people around the world, the refusal of work has been developed by autonomists into a more variegated concept, one that encompasses several distinct critical approaches and strategic agendas.

The concept’s force, it should be acknowledged, comes from a prior understanding of the place of work in the critical analysis of capitalist
social formations. That is, fundamental to the refusal of work as analysis and strategy is a definition of capitalism that highlights not the institution of private property, but rather the imposition and organization of work. After all, from a worker’s perspective, earning wages—not accumulating capital—is the primary concern. The wage system remains the dominant mechanism by which individuals are integrated, either directly or indirectly, into the capitalist mode of economic cooperation. Cleaver therefore defines capital as “a social system based on the imposition of work through the commodity-form”; it is a system built upon the subordination of life to work (2000, 82). Diane Elson’s reading of Marx is helpful in fleshing this out. As she explains Marx’s theory of value, it is best understood not as a labor theory of value but as a value theory of labor. In other words, the purpose of the analysis is not to prove the existence of exploitation or to explain prices; the point is not to grasp the process by which value is constituted by labor, but rather to fathom how laboring practices are organized, shaped, and directed by the capitalist pursuit of value. “My argument,” Elson writes, “is that the object of Marx’s theory of value was labour” (1979, 123). Whereas socialist modernization and socialist humanism each imagine the possibility of a postcapitalist society in terms of the realization of the constitutive power of labor, as a matter of grasping the centrality of labor to social life or to individual existence, in this alternative reading of Marx, “labor’s constitutive centrality to social life characterizes capitalism and forms the ultimate ground of its abstract mode of domination” (Postone 1996, 361).

The crucial point and the essential link to the refusal of work is that work—not private property, the market, the factory, or the alienation of our creative capacities—is understood to be the primary basis of capitalist relations, the glue that holds the system together. Hence, any meaningful transformation of capitalism requires substantial change in the organization and social value of work.

Thus, unlike the modernization model, the autonomist tradition focuses on the critique of work under capitalism, which includes but cannot be reduced to the critique of its exploitation. In contrast to the humanists, who also critique work, autonomous Marxists call not for a liberation of work but for a liberation from work (Virno and Hardt 1996, 263). In their insistence on replacing one slogan of worker militancy, “the right to work,” with a new one, “the refusal of work,” the autonomists certainly follow in the footsteps of Marx—the Marx who, for example,
insisted that freedom depended on the shortening of the working day. But perhaps a more appropriate precursor is Marx’s son-in-law, Paul Lafargue. Leszek Kolakowski’s description of Lafargue as the proponent of “a hedonist Marxism” only makes this genealogy all the more appropriate (1978, 141–48). Of course, Kolakowski intended his label as an insult, meant to signal Lafargue’s naïveté and lack of seriousness, but it is also a fitting classification for a Marxist tradition committed to the refusal of work and open to the possibilities of a postwork future. In *The Right to Be Lazy*, Lafargue takes on the capitalist morality that “curses the flesh of the worker” and seeks to reduce the worker’s needs, pleasures, and passions (1898, 3–4). But the immediate target is the 1848 right-to-work rhetoric of the French proletariat, which, he complains, echoes and reinforces this ethic of work—evidence to Lafargue that the proletariat has “allowed itself to be seduced by the dogma of work” (8). In a ploy reminiscent of Marx’s insistence that alienated labor is the cause of private property, that the proletarians themselves recreate the system through their continued participation, Lafargue admonishes the French workers rather than the bourgeoisie for the shortcomings of capitalist production. “All individual and society [sic] misery,” he insists, “takes its origin in the passion of the proletariat for work” (8). So, for example, when the manufacturers consume luxuries in excess or when they attempt to build obsolescence into their products, they should not be blamed; they are only trying to satisfy “the crazy desire for work on the part of the employees” (31). Because of this strange and furious mania for work, the workers do not demand enough: “The proletarians have got it into their heads to hold the capitalists to ten hours of factory work.” That, he insists, is the great mistake: “Work must be forbidden, not imposed” (37). One of the most striking elements of the text is Lafargue’s rather extravagant refusal to rehabilitate nonwork by recourse to productivist values. He disdains the “capitalist creed of usefulness” and claims that once the working day is reduced to three hours, workers can begin “to practice the virtues of laziness” (41, 32). Certainly his passionate tribute to “O, Laziness, mother of the arts and the noble virtues” (41) offers a pointed contrast to seemingly more serious interpreters of Marx like Kolakowski, who supports a very different reading. Although it is true, Kolakowski concedes, that Marx did support shorter working hours, this was not to give the worker more time for “carefree consumption” as Lafargue suggests, but rather, as Kolakowski reassures us in a
language resonant of more traditional and respectable virtues, “more time for free creative activity” (1978, 148).

Despite Lafargue’s provocative tribute to the merits of laziness, the refusal of work is not in fact a rejection of activity and creativity in general or of production in particular. It is not a renunciation of labor tout court, but rather a refusal of the ideology of work as highest calling and moral duty, a refusal of work as the necessary center of social life and means of access to the rights and claims of citizenship, and a refusal of the necessity of capitalist control of production. It is a refusal, finally, of the asceticism of those—even those on the Left—who privilege work over all other pursuits, including “carefree consumption.” Its immediate goals are presented as a reduction of work, in terms of both hours and social importance, and a replacement of capitalist forms of organization by new forms of cooperation. It is not only a matter of refusing exploited and alienated labor, but of refusing “work itself as the principle of reality and rationality” (Baudrillard 1975, 141). In this sense, “work which is liberated is liberation from work” (Negri 1991, 165). Rather than conceive the refusal of work narrowly, in terms of a specific set of actions—including strikes or slowdowns, demands for shorter hours or expanded opportunities for participation, and movements for improved support for or altered conditions of reproductive work—the phrase is, I suggest, best understood in very broad terms as designating a general political and cultural movement—or, better yet, as a potential mode of life that challenges the mode of life now defined by and subordinated to work.

The refusal of work can be broken down, analytically if not practically, into two processes, one that is essentially critical in its aims and another that is more fundamentally reconstructive in its objectives. The first of these, the negative process, is what is most readily conveyed by the word “refusal” and includes the critique of and rebellion against the present system of work and its values. If the system of waged labor is a crucial cultural and institutional mechanism by which we are linked to the mode of production, then the refusal of work poses a potentially substantial challenge to this larger apparatus. But the refusal of work, as both activism and analysis, does not simply pose itself against the present organization of work; it should also be understood as a creative practice, one that seeks to reappropriate and reconfigure existing forms of production and reproduction (see Vercellone 1996, 84). This is the special twofold nature of the refusal of work upon which Negri insists (2005,
269–74). The word “refusal” may be unfortunate in the sense that it does not immediately convey the constructive element that is so central to autonomist thought. Negri describes the refusal of work as both a struggle against the capitalist organization of work and a process of self-valorization, a form of “invention-power” (274). Rather than a goal in itself, “the refusal of work and authority, or really the refusal of voluntary servitude, is the beginning of liberatory politics” (Hardt and Negri 2000, 204; emphasis added).

The refusal of work thus comprises at once a movement of exit and a process of invention. The refusal can make time and open spaces—both physical and conceptual—within which to construct alternatives. Rather than a simple act of disengagement that one completes, the refusal is, in this sense, a process, a theoretical and practical movement that aims to effect a separation through which we can pursue alternative practices and relationships. “Beyond the simple refusal, or as part of that refusal,” Hardt and Negri argue, “we need also to construct a new mode of life and above all a new community” (204). Paolo Virno develops this same idea through the concepts of exodus and exit: “The ‘exit’ modifies the conditions within which the conflict takes place, rather than presupposes it as an irremovable horizon; it changes the context within which a problem arises, rather than deals with the problem by choosing one or another of the alternative solutions already on offer” (1996, 199). In this sense, refusal, like exodus or exit, is an “engaged withdrawal (or founding leave-taking)” (197), a creative practice as opposed to a merely defensive stance. The passage from the negative moment of refusal to its constructive moment of exit and invention marks the shift from a reactive gesture of retreat to an active affirmation of social innovation. According to this reading, the refusal of work serves not as a goal, but as a path—a path of separation that creates the conditions for the construction of subjects whose needs and desires are no longer as consistent with the social mechanisms within which they are supposed to be mediated and contained. This is why, in contrast to both modernization and humanist Marxisms, Negri locates in the refusal of work not just the symptoms of exploitation and alienation, but a measure of freedom (2005, 273). The defection enacted through the refusal of work is not predicated upon what we lack or cannot do, it is not the path of those with nothing to lose but their chains; it is predicated instead on our “latent wealth, on an abundance of possibilities” (Virno 1996, 199).
By this account, the negative and positive moments of refusal can be distinguished analytically, but not isolated practically. Rather than the traditional two-stage model that posits a radical break between the transition, conceived as a negative process of dismantling, and communism, imagined as the positive construction of an alternative, the logic of this analysis suggests the value of a more substantial break between the present logic of capital and the transition—seen in this case as a process by which a different future can be constructed. That is, this formulation of the relationship between means and ends indicates the importance of pursuing more radical strategies that attempt a more significant break with the present. In this way we might also better understand the militancy of the strategy—the call to refuse and transform the present system of work, rather than simply to reconsider or renegotiate a few of its terms and conditions. Although the immoderate character of the phrase “refusal of work” may strike us today as naive or impractical, if we consider such strategies as laboratories—both conceptual and practical—in which different subjectivities can be constituted and paths to alternative futures opened, the utopian aspect of the refusal of work, its insistence that we struggle toward and imagine the possibilities of substantial social change, is essential.

THE ABOLITION OF WORK (AS WE KNOW IT)

The vision of an alternative that marks the transition from antiwork to postwork in autonomist thought is offered as a contrast to socialism, which is defined as a system that would redeem work through public ownership. In this sense, the refusal of work disavows the two visions we reviewed earlier: socialism imagined either as state-planned economy to alleviate exploitation or as small-scale production to remedy alienation—one version “means primarily disciplining the working class,” the other is “romantic” (Zerowork 1975, 6). “The problem is not,” Jean-Marie Vincent argues, “simply to liberate production, but also for humanity to liberate itself from production by ceasing to treat it as the centre of gravity of all social activities and individual action” (1991, 20). Whatever else it may be, the vision of postcapitalism privileged in the autonomist tradition is not a vision of the work society perfected, with its labors rationally organized, equally required, and justly distributed. Rather, it is a vision of the work society overcome—that is, of a society in which work is certainly not eliminated but comes to play a different role.
in the economies of social production and political obligation. Negri describes this in terms of the abolition of work, with no homology between work as it is experienced in the present and as it might be organized in the future (1991, 165). Posed in this way, the abolition of work serves not as blueprint, not even precisely as content; instead it is a marker of the disjunction between antiwork critique and postwork possibility.

The same logic of imagination that conceives the relation between the refusal of work and its abolition in terms of difference and rupture grounds it also in tendency and potential. Tendencies that point to the possibility of a postwork future include the perennial conflict generated by a system that expands the needs and desires of its subjects while simultaneously striving to minimize their wages and income. These tendencies also include the growing tension between a society that requires work to secure the means of consumption and the possibility—created by accumulated knowledge, technological developments, and expanding capacities for cooperation—of a social form in which labor does not serve this function, a social form in which, for example, working time is drastically reduced and the link between work and income severed (see, for example, Postone 1996, 361, 365; Vincent 1991, 19–20). The temporality of these antagonisms sets the method apart from other critical methods including ideology critique, in which reality is measured against its ideals or the seeming appearance of things probed for their essential truth. Negri also distinguishes this “tendential method” that reads the present in light of the future from the genealogical method that reads it in relation to the past (1991, 48–49). The former finds its critical point of contrast in the connection between the present and the future, conceived as a relation between the actual and the possible. Postone describes this as a model of immanent critique—in this case, a critique of the work society from the perspective of the emergent possibility of a social form in which work does not serve as the primary force of social mediation (1996, 49), an antiwork critique grounded in a postwork potential.

The refusal of work as both a practical demand and a theoretical perspective presupposes an appreciation of the potentially immense productive power of the accumulated capacities of social labor. “What we want,” explains another autonomist, Franco Berardi (“Bifo”), “is to apply, totally and coherently, the energies and the potential that exist for a
socialized intelligence, for a general intellect. We want to make possible a
general reduction in working time and we want to transform the organi-
sation of work in such a way that an autonomous organization of sectors
of productive experimental organization may become possible” (1980,
157–58). This affirmation of the creative powers of social labor notwith-
standing, the refusal of work does not simply replicate the productivist
glorification of work (even socialist or unalienated work). The produc-
tive powers of cooperation, knowledge, and technology are celebrated
because they carry the potential not only to contest the necessity of
capitalist control, but to reduce the time spent at work, thereby offering
the possibility to pursue opportunities for pleasure and creativity that
are outside the economic realm of production. By this measure, “the
refusal of work does not mean the erasure of activity, but the valoriza-
tion of human activities which have escaped from labor’s domination”
(Berardi 2009, 60).

Their is not only a postindividualist vision of the possibility of a
postwork organization of production, it is also a postscarcity vision. The
productive force of the accumulated powers of social labor has always
had the potential to translate into less work, but only if that change is de-
demanded. The twin demands often evoked as strategies of refusal—for
more money and less work—mark a rather sharp contrast to what Vin-
cent describes as “the notion that the struggle for a different society
must be a form of worldly asceticism” (1991, 27), that workers’ demands
should echo, not contest, the discourses of poverty, sacrifice, hard work,
and self-restraint that are part of the system’s rationalization. These
demands for more money and less work reveal precisely what Kolakow-
ski recognized—and disparaged—in Lafargue’s early articulation of the
refusal of work: the disavowal of political asceticism. In response to the
usual insistence on scarcity when it comes to such demands and the
promotion of austerity as a solution to capitalist crisis, Lafargue argued
that the task instead was the expansion of our needs and desires beyond
their usual objects, to avoid the fate of both bourgeois overconsumption
and proletarian abstention (1898, 37–38). In a similar vein, the concep-
tion of the process of liberation that one can find in the autonomist
tradition is often coded not in terms of return or restoration but of
excess and expansion: the enrichment of subjectivity, the expansion of
needs, and the cultivation of an element or quality of desire that exceeds
existing modes of satisfaction.
At this point I want to exit the terrain of Marxist theory and linger for a moment on the political agendas that we have encountered along the way. The three theoretical paradigms we reviewed yield three different prescriptions for change: respectively, demands for more work, better work, and less work. This project’s preference for less work over more work is clear enough. The demand for more work may very well be necessary in a context in which work is the only option the individual has to secure his or her livelihood, but I am arguing that the struggle for less work is critical as well. Perhaps, however, more should be said about the relationship between the calls for less work and better work, and why I focus on the former and, by comparison at least, neglect the latter. Certainly I affirm the vital importance of struggles to improve the conditions of work. But although in practical, if not in logical, terms none of these demands—including the demands for less and better work—are mutually exclusive, it is useful to recognize some of the complexities of their relationships. A brief exploration of some recent efforts to demand better work can illustrate some of the difficulties here.

Some analysts draft the work-ethic discourse into this effort by calling for a new version of the ethic, one that affirms the necessity, centrality, and value of work, but in the name of which the demand for better work can also be advanced. For example, what we might think of as a humanist work ethic affirms a vision of unalienated labor and argues that the ethical discourse of work offers a means by which to struggle toward its realization. Recent proponents of an ethic that could in this way renew our support for and investments in work but also press for better work are Al Gini and Russell Muirhead. Since, according to Gini, “work is a fundamental part of our humanity” (2000, xii) and thus is rightly at the center of our lives, our jobs should be good ones. Whereas the Protestant work ethic had been used to mystify the conditions of exploitative and alienating labor—the hierarchy, coercion, drudgery, boredom, and dangers of work—the alternative ethic that Gini defends would insist on the cultural valuing of all work and would serve as a way to make work deliver on its promises of meaning, self-fulfillment, and useful outcomes. But since work is so fundamental to what it means to be fully human, more emphasis is placed in Gini’s discussion on praising work as noble and ennobling than on urging its improvement, for “even with all of its
failings, work must be saved” (209). Ultimately, what is important is “reinfusing all work with dignity” (218) because “although we cannot always change the nature of the work, we can, however, affect the morale of the workers and the attitudes of society” (218–19). In the last analysis, any work is better than no work: “whether we are happy or numbed by what we do, work we must, and, like it or not, our work is the mark of our humanity” (224). The demand for less work receives little attention in this account; visions of postwork futures are dismissed with the claim that “it is not in our nature to be idle” (206), thereby demonstrating at once an essentialist view of labor and an impoverished imagination of the possibilities of nonwork. Muirhead proposes a similar alternative to the Protestant ethic, one that recognizes the importance of work to our lives and makes sense of our current devotion to it, while at the same time serving as a critical standard—a vision of fitting and fulfilling work—by which we can champion the demand for better work. But Muirhead both offers a more rigorous critique than Gini and pays more attention to the value of life beyond work. For Muirhead, the recognition of the ways that work falls short of its promise requires not only that we struggle to improve work, but also that we try to place limits on the work ethic’s claims. His solution is an ethic tempered by the recognition that work should not be the whole of life, an ethic that affirms the necessity and inherent value of work but nonetheless seeks to keep it in its place (2004, 175–76).

From the perspective of my project, the humanist work ethic is certainly an improvement on the dominant discourse, casting as it does a critical eye not only on the quantity of work’s compensation but on the qualities of its experience. But I want to raise some potential barriers to a practical strategy that draws on the critique of alienation and that calls for better work in a context in which such languages and concerns have been absorbed so comfortably into the warp and woof of contemporary managerial discourses. This is not a new phenomenon. As Jack Barbash reports, the critique of alienation had moved out of its “Marxist bailiwick” and into popular discussion by the early 1970s, perhaps most visibly with the publication in 1973 of a government study that found widespread dissatisfaction and disaffection among US workers: “Dull, repetitive, seemingly meaningless tasks are causing discontent among workers at all occupational levels” (quoted in Barbash 1983, 242). By the mid-1970s, managerial theories and practices were responding to this
critique of work that engaged too little of the self by shifting the focus from securing the compliance of the recalcitrant, effort-avoidant Fordist worker described in what the popular management theorist Douglas McGregor called “theory X,” to encouraging the commitment of the work-loving, self-directed, and responsibility-seeking model worker posited by McGregor’s own “theory Y” (1960). Whereas the older model of human-relations management had been developed to respond to the militant labor movement of the 1930s, the paradigm of human-resource management that emerged in the 1970s addressed a different manner of dissatisfaction and mode of rebellion. Cast in the latter framework as not just vehicles of labor power but, rather, as fully “human resources,” workers ideally were to be “empowered” to develop their capacities and maximize value at the same time.  

McGregor, one of the model’s early architects, presents this as a matter of directing individual desires toward organizational objectives: “We seek that degree of integration in which the individual can achieve his goals best by directing his efforts toward the success of the organization” (1960, 55). The two goals—better, more engaging work and more efficient labor processes—are imagined as reconcilable, at least in theory; in practice, whether a particular managerial regime puts more emphasis on improving well-being or on maximizing efficiency depends on the industry, the worker’s place in the labor hierarchy, and the balance of power between capital and labor at any given moment. For example, at one end of the labor market it may be that routinization, surveillance, and the threat of moving production offshore can suffice to induce the desired levels of effort and cooperation, whereas other sectors may need to rely on cultural engineering and careful training. 

In these latter sectors of employment in particular, the dimensions of the self that are considered part of the human resource to develop—and, thus, legitimate targets of managerial concern—continue to expand into new territories of subjectivity. Consider, for example, the new terrains opened up by the recent interest in “wellness.” As the authors of a recent overview of contemporary management concepts and regimes observe, “the idea that one’s employer provides some sort of totalized care for the worker’s wellness opens up a powerful horizon for expanding the boundaries of organized work” (Costea, Crump, and Amiridis 2008, 670). Or consider what Peter Fleming describes as the “just be yourself”
managerial discourse that asks workers to bring their “authentic” selves from outside work into work, attempting thereby to incorporate “the whole person into the production matrix” (2009, 38). Traditional distinctions between work and life are increasingly blurred by management in these its most self-consciously biopolitical modes. Whether or not the watchwords of such programs—empowerment, participation, responsibility, flexibility, and enrichment—involve empty rhetoric or meaningful improvements in the experience of work for employees, they do give employers opportunities to induce new modes and degrees of effort, and in some cases of identification. Thus, worker empowerment can boost efficiency, flexibility can serve as a way to cut costs, and participation can produce commitment to the organization, thereby “embroiling the subject in the act of organizational control” and internalizing organizational discipline (Costea, Crump, and Amiridis 2008, 668). In short, often programs presented under the rubric of work enrichment are also methods of work intensification. In a kind of bad dialectic, quality becomes quantity as the call for better work is translated into a requirement for more work.

There are two points I want to make here. The first is that by tapping into the critique of alienation, and offering more work as the solution, management discourses drain the critique of some of its force. The vision of nonalienated labor articulated by critics like Fromm, Mies, and Schleuning, in which work is reintegrated into life, may have been compelling as a critique of modernization’s doctrine and practices of separate spheres, but it loses its critical edge in the context of postmodernity’s subsumption of life into work. The affirmation of unalienated labor is not an adequate strategy by which to contest contemporary modes of capitalist control; it is too readily co-opted in a context in which the metaphysics of labor and the moralization of work carry so much cultural authority in so many realms. This is not to suggest that we should abandon the struggles for better work, for liberation from mindless and repetitive tasks, dangerous environments, numbing isolation, and petty hierarchies. It is important to recognize, however, that the language and to a certain degree the practices of work humanization have been co-opted. The ideology of human-resource management—with its various programs for humanizing work to make it a place where employees can be expected to dedicate their hearts as well as their hands and brains,
with its techniques for producing more productive models of worker subjectivity—should be recognized as an attempt to address by rendering profitable various expressions of dissatisfaction with work. In this regard, Baudrillard’s critique of a version of the Marxist critique of alienation seems particularly appropriate: “It convinces men that they are alienated by the sale of their labor power, thus censoring the much more radical hypothesis that they might be alienated as labor power” (1975, 31).

The problem, therefore, is how to advance demands for better work—how to make good on work’s promises of social utility and individual meaning—in a way that does not simply echo and reaffirm the prescription for a lifetime of work. The question I want to consider is whether the kind of affirmation of work at the heart of the work ethic can be used successfully in the struggle for better work: is it possible to demand both better work and less work without one demand neutralizing the critical force of the other? Muirhead offers one attempt to combine these efforts. To recall the earlier discussion, both Gini and Muirhead call for new ethics of work that can continue to celebrate and encourage commitment to waged work, while insisting that such work should be adequately compensated and personally satisfying. But Muirhead goes further, recognizing that these two commitments, to the affirmation of work’s inherent value and to the improvement of its conditions, can function at cross-purposes. As a way to manage this, he adds a third commitment: to keep work, even good work, in its place so that it does not consume the whole of life, which would moderate the claims about work’s value by simultaneously pursuing a politics directed at work’s reform and reduction (2004, 12). “Tempering the value of work,” Muirhead explains, “also protects against the abuse of that value in the name of practices that are exploitative—an abuse to which the work ethic is particularly prone” (176).

Despite the importance of this reform agenda—the clear need to demand both better work and less work—the initial affirmation of the inherent value of work, now linked to managerial discourses of work improvement, threatens to contradict and eclipse the call for the moderation of the work ethic’s power and to overshadow demands for work reduction. Just as affirming the value of work in the same terms as the work ethic makes it difficult to assert the claim that some work must be improved, calling for better work can easily overwhelm the argument for
less work. My second point, then, is that rather than offer a revised version of the work ethic, we must make the critique of this ethic a priority if the struggle for less work is to have a chance of success.

CONCLUSION AND SEGUE: FEMINISM AND THE REFUSAL OF WORK

The refusal of work in its broadest sense has the potential to generate some timely critical perspectives and practical agendas. In particular, it offers a challenge to the work values that continue to secure our consent to the current system. The problem is not, to cite Baudrillard’s formulation, that the worker is “only quantitatively exploited as a productive force by the system of capitalist political economy, but is also metaphysically overdetermined as a producer by the code of political economy” (1975, 31). The glorification of work as a prototypically human endeavor, as the key both to social belonging and individual achievement, constitutes the fundamental ideological foundation of contemporary capitalism: it was built on the basis of this ethic, which continues to serve the system's interests and rationalize its outcomes. The contemporary force of this code, with its essentialism and moralism of work, should not be underestimated. “In the last instance,” as Baudrillard asserts and the previous chapter argued, “the system rationalizes its power here” (31). My argument is that the metaphysics and moralism of work require a more direct challenge than the critique of alienation and humanist work ethics are capable of posing. The struggle to improve the quality of work must be accompanied by efforts to reduce its quantity. In this context, the refusal of work, with its insistence on a more thorough critique of, and a more radical break with, existing work values offers a particularly valuable perspective. Where attitudes are productive, the refusal of work—understood as a rejection of work as a necessary center of social existence, moral duty, ontological essence, and time and energy, and understood as a practice of “insubordination to the work ethic” (Berardi 1980, 169)—can speak forcefully and incisively to our present situation.

What this has to offer feminism specifically will be addressed in the next two chapters. As a preface to those discussions, I offer two brief observations. The first is that the challenges that the refusal of work poses to the realities of work today are at least as relevant to feminist concerns and agendas. Feminist calls for better work for women, as
important as they have been, have on the whole resulted in more work for women. Beyond the intensification of many forms of waged work noted above, the burdens of unwaged domestic and caring work have also increased, both because of the pressures of neoliberal restructuring along with the double day, and because of the increasingly dominant model of intensive parenting presented as what is required to develop the communicative, cognitive, and creative capacities increasingly necessary for reproducing, let alone elevating, the class status of a new generation of workers (see Hays 1996). Given all the ways that the institution of the family—on which the privatization of reproductive labor has been predicated and sustained—is so clearly not up to the task of assuming so much of the responsibility for the care of children, the elderly, the sick, and the disabled, the refusal of the present organization of reproductive labor may have much to offer contemporary feminism.  

My second observation, however, is that extending the refusal of work to the structures and ethics of reproductive labor is a far more complicated endeavor. Although what it might mean to refuse unwaged domestic work is something that we will need to explore, it is clear that this would go beyond the claim that such work should be valued differently in relation to waged work—either more or less than it is now. Indeed, extending the refusal of work into the field of unwaged domestic work undercuts some of feminism’s traditional critical standpoints: the critique of a normative expectation of domesticity for women from the standpoint of the benefits and virtues of waged work, and the critique of the heartless world of exploitative waged work from the perspective of domestically cultivated caring ethics or nonalienated craft production. Rather than critique either work or family from the standpoint of the other, this feminist version of the refusal of work encompasses both as sites and objects of refusal. This broader project of refusal poses challenges both for antiwork critique and postwork imagination. Feminist antiwork critique would need to accomplish several things at once: to recognize unwaged domestic work as socially necessary labor, contest its inequitable distribution (the fact that gender, race, class, and nation affects who does more or less), and, at the same time, insist that valuing it more highly and distributing it more equitably is not enough—the organization of unwaged reproductive labor and its relationship with waged work must be entirely rethought. For feminist postwork imagination, it raises the following question: if we refuse both the institution of waged work...
work and the model of the privatized family as the central organizing structures of production and reproduction, what might we want in their stead? In the next chapters, I bring Marxist and feminist traditions together to think about how to challenge and begin to reimagine the structures and ethics of both waged and unwaged work within the practical territory of political claims making—or, more specifically, demanding.