
After Labor

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Wage work, it is said, is disappearing in the “new” age of capital, to rising alarm across the world. Yet there is little agreement about why, where, or in what measure. Or what might take its place in the foreseeable future. We—scholars, politicians, pundits, people at large—seem unable to think beyond a universe founded on mass employment. Why not? After all, capital has *always* striven to free itself as far as possible from a dependency on labor, with considerable success over the long run. This despite the fact that historical anthropologies have tended to focus on the “unmaking of particular working classes” primarily in recent decades.¹ Or the fact that there have been times in the global north during which organized labor *has* managed to exercise its political and economic muscle—although, as is now widely recognized, more people have *always* been wageless than waged.²

But if mass employment has always been threatened by erasure, always more aspiration than actuality, why does it remain so central to both popular and theoretical understandings of economy and society under capitalism, alike left and right? Why does it “dominate and pervade everyday life . . . more completely than at any time in recent history”?³ How might this relate to anxieties about its imminent

This article is an expanded version of a talk presented on April 12, 2019, at a conference held in honor of the late Moishe Postone, on “Capitalism and Social Theory.” Postone was our close friend and colleague for some 30 years at the University of Chicago. We dedicate it to him, to his extraordinary, inspirational scholarship and pedagogy, and in fond memory of our many long conversations on this and many other topics.

1. August Carbonella and Sharryn Kasmir, “Introduction: Toward a Global Anthropology of Labor,” in *Blood and Fire: Toward a Global Anthropology of Labor*, ed. Sharryn Kasmir and August Carbonella (New York: Berghahn, 2014), 1–29, 2. For their own part, Carbonella and Kasmir are careful to note the long, complex history and geography of struggles between capital and labor—and of the sustained repression of the latter by the former. They also stress the making and remaking, not just the unmaking, of working classes.

2. Michael Denning, “Wageless Life,” *New Left Review* 66 (November–December 2010), accessed November 30, 2018, <https://newleftreview.org/II/66/michael-denning-wageless-life>.

3. Andy Beckett, “Post-Work: The Radical Idea of a World without Jobs,” *Guardian*, January 19, 2018, accessed February 4, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jan/19/post-work-the-radical-idea-of-a-world-without-jobs>.

demise? More generally, what exactly *is* unique about the contemporary moment in the long story of labor? As we fail to imagine an age after work, we appear ever more haunted by the nightmare of our own redundancy, by surreal images of a world in which value is produced by other means: not merely by finance or artificial intelligence but by workers who are simultaneously human and nonhuman, living and dead, present and absent.

What, finally, does all this tell us about the afterlife of *homo faber*?

Answers to these questions, we would submit, are greatly enriched by extending our gaze beyond the Archimedean vantage of Euro-America. The latter may be the source, and the horizon, of so much of our theory. But, we shall argue, a comprehensive grasp of the history of work, of its future(s) and of global capitalism at large, needs to embrace the enduring entailment of the Euromodern world in its antipodean outsides—the source, after all, of so much of its animating energy *and* its most precarious, devalued, dehumanized forms of labor. It is a history whose southern past the north appears to be reliving in this respect, as in so many others.⁴

I

In the late 1990s, zombies began to appear in South African popular discourse. Although foreshadowed in local cultural imaginings, their arrival was both sudden and unexpected. Yet the timing was not serendipitous. It occurred as the already fragile infrastructure of black life was threatened, quite abruptly, by a radically shrinking employment market.⁵ There was a cruel irony here. Wage labor was being made superfluous just when decolonization was supposed to put an end to the racial capitalism of *apartheid*, promising secure, dignified, decently paid “work for all.” But the transition to democracy coincided with a worldwide wave of neoliberal reform. In the upshot, postauthoritarian societies like South Africa experienced the new dispensation as an anguished mix of enfranchisement and dispossession, of rights-based recognition and “jobless growth,” a politely evasive term for mass unemployment.⁶

It was then that rumors spread about an invading army of surrogate workers: on one hand, of migrants from the north—said to be diseased, desperate, crime-prone—

4. See Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Theory from the South: Or, How Euro-America Is Evolving toward Africa* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2012); Ulrich Beck, *The Brave New World of Work* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2000). The first chapter of Beck’s volume, note, is entitled “The Brazilianization of the West.”

5. Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, “Alien-nation: Zombies, Immigrants and Global Capitalism,” *CODESRIA Bulletin* 3/4 (1999): 17–28.

6. All this while, in South Africa, according to *The Economist*, the economy was thriving. See *The Economist*, “Jobless Growth: The Economy Is Doing Nicely—but at Least One Person in Three Is Out of Work,” Special Report, June 3, 2010, accessed January 15, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2010/06/03/jobless-growth>.

who were ready to toil at cutthroat rates; on the other, of a host of beings, raised from the dead, who served in a surging, secretive nocturnal economy. Together, these unwelcome interlopers were held to account for the shrinking labor market. And so it was that wage work, at once valorized and excised, present and absent, returned in phantasmic guise. Zombies (*dithotsela*; also *diphoko*), specters that lacked the animating qualities of personhood, bodied forth in popular rhetoric and song, in rumor and media rapportage, in legal disputes and industrial conflicts.⁷ Because they lack human needs, zombies are pure surplus value. They exist, as Marx might have put it, “by sucking living labor.”⁸ To be sure, they have been a ghostly presence, what Walter Benjamin termed a “profane illumination,” throughout the history of capitalism.⁹ As figurations of slavery and colonial extraction, they probably entered the US vernacular during the occupation of Haiti between 1915 and 1943, to be repurposed by the culture industry as the “scientifically-reanimated, undead,” versatile incarnations of late modern monstrosity, predation, and horror.¹⁰ Hence, in recent times, the circulating tropes of “voodoo economics,” “zombie banks,” “zombie companies,” and the like; tellingly, South Africa’s deeply indebted national electricity company, Eskom, said to be “the world’s largest power utility,” has been described as a “state-owned zombie apocalypse.”¹¹ No wonder, then, that activists staging a public protest “to reclaim [Cape Town] for the poor,” came costumed as zombies.¹²

As a product of arcane, preternatural accumulation, zombies bear uncanny similarity to more recent figures of proletarian undoing, like the “equisapiens”—half horse, half black man—of Boots Riley’s searing movie, *Sorry to Bother You* (2018).

7. Comaroff and Comaroff, “Alien-nation,” 20–21.

8. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1976), 342; see Terrell Carver, *The Postmodern Marx* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 14; also Tyler Malone, “The Zombies of Karl Marx: Horror in Capitalism’s Wake,” *Literary Hub*, October 31, 2018, accessed January 10, 2019, <https://lithub.com/the-zombies-of-karl-marx-horror-in-capitalisms-wake>.

9. Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken, 1978), 179.

10. For a nuanced account of the popular origins of the zombie figure in the French Caribbean, see Gudrun Rath, “Zombi/e/s,” in *Zombies: Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften 1/2014*, ed. Gudrun Rath (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2014), 1–19; Malone, “The Zombies of Karl Marx.”

11. Edward J. Kane, “The Savings and Loan Insurance Mess,” *Society* 29, no. 3 (1992): 4–10; Comaroff and Comaroff, *Theory from the South*, 240. See also *The Economist*, “The March of the Zombies,” February 27, 2016, accessed January 15, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/business/2016/02/27/the-march-of-the-zombies>; *Daily Maverick*, “Eskom—The Terrorist Attack from Within,” Editorial, February 12, 2019, accessed February 13, 2019, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-02-12-eskom-the-terrorist-attack-from-within/>.

12. Suné Payne, “‘Old Nats’ Come Back to Life in Mother City Demonstrations,” *Daily Maverick*, September 30, 2019, accessed October 1, 2019, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-09-30-old-nats-come-back-to-life-in-mother-city-demonstrations/>.

This, interestingly, evokes a point arising out of Moishe Postone's analysis of the iconography of anti-Semitism.¹³ Writing about racial capitalism, Hylton White, after Postone, suggests that if Jews epitomize the "racial body of money" as "will without labour," then blacks are "labour without will, . . . labour-in-itself: a brute biological force in need of mastery."¹⁴ Riley's "horse people" are precisely that power, horse power, in genetically engineered form: half man, half beast, fully exploitable. They are the invention of WorryFree, a fictive firm producing low-cost, mutant workers that, presumptively, are more effective than robots.¹⁵ Shades here of the "animal spirits" that have appeared in various efforts to grasp the essence of man under capitalism, from Marx, who associated them with the force that "heightens the efficiency" of the worker, to Keynes, who saw them as "[the worker's] spontaneous urge to action."¹⁶

Robots, of course, are the other contemporary nemesis of *homo faber*. A new sociological study entitled "'You're Fired,' Says the Robot" reports the prevalence, in the American workplace, of technophobia: an "anxiety-related" syndrome centered obsessively on robotics and artificial intelligence.¹⁷ Nor is it only in America. An anguished op-ed in 2018 by the head of the University of Johannesburg featured a picture of the "first humanoid robot in South Africa."¹⁸ White in color, the national flag painted on its "chest"—note the difference here between local machine-worker and foreign migrant worker—it stared defiantly into the apprehensive eyes of its black creator.¹⁹ Like the zombie, the android is a body without life or, as Deleuze would have it, without organs.²⁰ Eviscerated, it makes real the phantasm of production *sans* human toil. Even in the face of the putative obliteration of wage employment,

13. Moishe Postone, "Anti-Semitism and National Socialism: Notes on the German Reaction to 'Holocaust,'" *New German Critique* 19, no. 1 (1980): 97–115.

14. Hylton J. White, "How Is Capitalism Racial? Fanon and Critical Theory," *Social Dynamics* 46, no. 1 (forthcoming, 2020).

15. Jordan Minor, "Sorry to Bother You and Other Black Animal Analogies," *Geek.Com*, July 25, 2018, accessed January 15, 2019, <https://www.geek.com/movies/sorry-to-bother-you-and-other-black-animal-analogies-1747261/>.

16. Marx, *Capital*, 1:443–4; John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (London: Macmillan, 1936), 161–62.

17. Paul K. McClure, "'You're Fired,' Says the Robot: The Rise of Automation in the Workplace, Technophobes, and Fears of Unemployment," *Social Science Computer Review* 32, no. 2 (2018): 139–56, 145.

18. Tshilidzi Marwala, "The Fourth Industrial Revolution and the Prospect of Human Irrelevance," *Sunday Times* (South Africa), December 23, 2018, accessed January 10, 2019, <https://www.timeslive.co.za/sunday-times/opinion-and-analysis/2018-12-23-the-fourth-industrial-revolution-and-the-prospect-of-human-irrelevance/>.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

we remain entrapped in its fetishized logic. The android and the zombie, alike, appear as *doppelgängers* of living labor returned, if only to be effaced: an “estranged recognition” of the otherwise unthinkable.²¹ Recall, here, the underworld workers, zombie killers in red hard hats and overalls, that, almost robotically, invade the urban(e) landscapes of Jordan Peele’s film *Us*; the US, that is. They underscore, in surreal form, the fact that “it is capitalist accumulation itself that constantly produces, in direct relation with its own energy and extent, a relatively redundant working population.”²² Both—zombies and androids—will have cause to reappear in our story as it unfolds.

II

In one of his last essays, Moishe Postone reiterated his long-standing dissent from what he described as “traditional Marxism.”²³ It concerned the role of labor under capitalism.

Rather than the means by which humans transform nature to their purposes everywhere, Postone insisted, labor is a “form of mediation” peculiar to capitalism.²⁴ Plainly put, the latter is a *historical* formation in which wage work is “the primary constituter of the social world.”²⁵ Marx’s own critique of proletarian toil, added Postone, aimed *not* at its melioration, but at its total overcoming. For Marx, capitalism could not be transcended by way of a more equitable distribution of profits or the seizure by workers of surplus value. Both would leave intact existing relations of production.²⁶ Both, moreover, would sustain the so-called treadmill that drives processes of accumulation and, with it, the contradiction at the core of capitalist modernity: namely that, with its historical unfolding—most recently with financialization, a techno-revolution, and other transformations of the longer run—wage labor becomes “increasingly anachronistic,” increasingly irrelevant to the generation of

21. Comaroff and Comaroff, *Theory from the South*, 149.

22. Marx, *Capital*, 1:782; see Denning, “Wageless Life.”

23. Moishe Postone, “Critical Theory and the Historical Transformations of Capitalist Modernity,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Theory*, ed. Michael J. Thompson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 137–63, 148.

24. *Ibid.*, 149.

25. This phrase is taken from Martin Jay’s review of Postone’s *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*. See Martin Jay, “Review: Marx after Marxism,” *New German Critique* 60 (1993): 181–91, 183; Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

26. In his earlier writings, Marx, along with Engels, argued that the solution to the problem was the transfer to the proletariat of the ownership of the means of production. See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, ed. Gareth Stedman Jones (London: Penguin Classics, 2014). But it is another reading of Marx with which Postone was concerned here.

wealth.²⁷ And yet it remains essential to the economic system of which it is an elemental part, essential to the *endogenous* sense of how value is created under that system.

Thus it is that capitalism appears ceaselessly to “generate what is ‘new,’ while regenerating what is the ‘same,’” moving beyond the necessity, but continuing to assert the indispensability, of proletarian labor.²⁸ Although it may, out of its internal tensions, point to the *possibility* of giving way to other kinds of social order, it seems systematically to *prevent* their realization. Thus it is, too—and here we add our own gloss on the contradiction as posed by both Marx and Postone—that, as wage work is devalued and displaced, it tends to return in refigured, reimagined, dehumanized forms. Hence the zombie, the robot, and the mutant, each a specter of human toil under erasure, toil that retains the traces of its original meaning yet, in Derrida’s terms, “rubs it out.”²⁹ But the zombie, a shadow of the idealized proletarian, evokes yet more: the muted story of (in)human labor, born of imperial plunder and colonial dispossession, deemed *by nature* to be a ready, disposable source of exploitation.

III

Modernist conceptions of work connive in this doubling; in the counterpoint, that is, of its (ir)relevance and (in)dispensability. However utilitarian their normative underpinnings, those conceptions draw on the submerged theological roots of liberal thought, in which labor is the defining attribute of species being: of the capacity to transcend nature, acquire property, make history, reach for the gods. Marx was not alone in seeing work as mindful practice, the stuff of “*exclusively human*” existence.³⁰ But under capitalism, he observed, it was uniquely entailed in a system bent on creating value by variously *dehumanizing*, exploitative means—which, by extension, makes *unalienated* toil a phantasmic, unrealizable ideal. Even more, a contradiction in terms.

This paradoxical proposition—that labor is integral to the ontology of human existence yet is undone by the historical conditions under which it has evolved—is germane to Postone’s (widely shared) dilemma about the inability of capitalist

27. Moishe Postone, “The Current Crisis and the Anachronism of Value: A Marxian Reading,” *Continental Thought and Theory* 1, no. 4 (2017): 38–54, esp. 50.

28. *Ibid.*, 48, 50.

29. Nicole Anderson, *Derrida: Ethics under Erasure* (London: Continuum International, 2012), 4. See also Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 61; Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, “Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony,” *American Ethnologist* 26, no. 2 (1999): 279–303, esp. 290.

30. Marx, *Capital*, 1:127; emphasis added.

systems to move beyond a rootedness in proletarian toil. It is critical, too, for making sense of contemporary debates about the nature of work and its futures.³¹

Romantics early and late have insisted that labor transcends its instrumental function: it is artful, ethical, redemptive.³² Liberal and Marxist thinkers too, even while seeing it as materially productive, remunerated activity, invest wage work with dignifying, emancipatory potential.³³ This is in spite of the fact that it has *always* been, for the most part, coerced—a consequence of dispossession, albeit of diverse kinds at different times and places.³⁴ Relevant here, also, is the feminist objection that received conceptions of employment have remained irredeemably narrow and masculinist, perennially ignoring the essential contribution of unpaid domesticity to the generation of wealth and social value.³⁵ Likewise the crucial observation of scholars of racial capitalism to the effect that the structural articulation of race *with* gender has served to discount, exploitatively, both black and female labor, thereby providing a double subsidy to commodity production.³⁶

The corollary is clear: waged and unwaged toil are everywhere interdependent and alike “socially necessary.” They always have been under capitalism, as have, simultaneously, multiple modes of extraction. Recall, here, Rosa Luxemburg’s insistence that capital has relied, throughout its history, on various practices of primitive accumulation; despite its strenuous efforts to efface the fact, these more or less

31. For a useful overview of those possible futures, see Derek Thompson, “A World without Work,” *Atlantic*, July/August 2015, accessed December 3, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/07/world-without-work/395294/>. See also James Ferguson, *Give a Man a Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

32. John Hughes, *The End of Work: Theological Critiques of Capitalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).

33. Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 12; Andrea Muehlebach, *The Moral Neoliberal: Welfare and Citizenship in Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

34. See, e.g., Carbonella and Kasmir, “Introduction,” 6–7, after David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

35. See, e.g., Silvia Federici, *Wages against Housework*, Archives et collections spéciales/Archives and Special Collections, #1141 (London: Power of Women Collective and the Falling Wall Press, 1975); Margaret Coulson, Branka Magaš, and Hilary Wainwright, “The Housewife and Her Labour under Capitalism—A Critique,” *New Left Review* 1/89 (1975): 51–71; Lourdes Benería, “Conceptualizing the Labor Force: The Underestimation of Women’s Economic Activities,” *Journal of Development Studies* 17, no. 3 (1981): 10–28. As Wilma Dunaway points out, there have also been “mainstream American economists” who, since the 1920s, have argued that these unpaid household activities ought to be taken into account in the gross national product. See Wilma A. Dunaway, introduction to *Gendered Commodity Chains: Seeing Women’s Work and Households in Global Perspective*, ed. Wilma A. Dunaway (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 11.

36. See, e.g., Harold Wolpe, “Capitalism and Cheap Labour-Power in South Africa: From Segregation to Apartheid,” *Economy and Society* 1, no. 4 (1972): 425–56; Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed, 1983); Neville Alexander, *One Azania, One Nation: The National Question in South Africa* (London: Zed, 1979).

violent forms of “accumulation by dispossession” have never disappeared.³⁷ Hence, for example, the coining of hybrids like “peasantariat” or “semi-proletariat” to describe colonial class formations, to whose traces we shall return.³⁸ Hence also the ideological implications entailed in defining, classifying, and ascribing relative value, or no value at all, to human activity: it mobilizes axes of difference (race, gender, age, civic status) and types of toil (skilled/unskilled, material/affective, familial/productive) to recognize, prioritize, rationalize, and reward their putative value.³⁹ Or not.

Self-evidently, then, capitalism—colonial and metropolitan, past and present—has, from its very beginnings, been more diverse, more synthetic in its labor regimes than its hegemonic narratives, or critical scholarship, are wont to suggest.⁴⁰ The more general point? That it has reenacted, over and over again, if in different mutations and manifestations, the contradiction at its core, asserting the centrality of “free” wage labor while simultaneously undermining it.⁴¹

The proliferation of occupations, skills, and kinds of compensation implicated in the restructuring of capitalist production since the late 1970s plays out much the same contradiction in a different key. The labile routines, flexible contracts, and deregulated modes of accumulation that comprise lives and livelihoods in the here and now—their uncertainties, precarities, ruptured temporalities—may *seem* unprecedented. In the age of the “gig” economy, of rampant financialization and rising self-employment, they may even appear to have emancipatory possibilities. Hence the celebration by “post-workists” of “[life] beyond the colonizing power” of formal employment and the daily grind of David Graeber’s “bullshit jobs”; also by those who claim that more fluid, “intelligent” forms of labor might eventuate in a new commons, a new civility, a new “grammar of the multitude.”⁴² But much of

37. Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, trans. Agnes Schwarzcchild (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951); Harvey, *New Imperialism*, 144.

38. Jack Parson, “The Peasantariat and Politics: Migration, Wage Labor, and Agriculture in Botswana,” *Africa Today* 31, no. 4 (1984): 5–25; Immanuel Wallerstein, “Semi-Peripheral Countries and the Contemporary World Crisis,” *Theory and Society* 3, no. 4 (1976): 461–83; Dave Broad, “The Periodic Casualization of Work: The Informal Economy, Casual Labor, and the *Longue Durée*,” in *Informalization: Process and Structure*, ed. Faruk Tabak and Michaeline A. Crichlow (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 23–46.

39. See, e.g., Laura Bear, Karen Ho, Anna Tsing, and Sylvia Yanagisako, “Gens: A Feminist Manifesto for the Study of Capitalism,” *Cultural Anthropology*, March 30, 2015, accessed January 30, 2018, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/652-gens-a-feminist-manifesto-for-the-study-of-capitalism>; Sylvia Yanagisako, “Immaterial and Industrial Labor: On False Binaries in Hardt and Negri’s Trilogy,” *Focaal* 64 (2012): 16–23.

40. Bear et al., “Gens.”

41. Filipe Calvão, “Unfree Labor,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 45 (2016): 451–67; Bear et al., “Gens.”

42. See, e.g., Peter Frase, *Four Futures: Life after Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 2016); David Frayne, *The Refusal of Work: Rethinking Post-Work Theory and Practice* (London: Zed, 2015), 67; David Graeber, “On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs,” *Strike! Magazine* 3 (2013): 10–11; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude*:

what look to be new sorts of occupation actually go back a long way, unremarked and unremunerated, only to have returned in renamed, rebranded guise. The flexibility and casualization associated with the neoliberal turn merely put a technoeconomic gloss—in the name of efficiency, growth, disruption—on forms of job insecurity, piece work, underemployment, corporate-friendly contracts, and the scanting of labor protections integral to the *longue durée* of capitalism. Emergent categories like “affective”⁴³ and “immaterial” work may acknowledge feminist demands for recognition of the unwaged, largely invisible labor of domestic reproduction. But they also tend to sentimentalize that labor, not unlike the sentimentalization that, historically, has confined women’s activities to the “priceless” space of the home. And rationalize its material devaluation. Even when recognized now as a bona fide job, affective toil—cleaning, caring, waste management—remains the underpaid housework of the public domain.

How, then, is the contradiction at the core of the relationship between capital and labor addressed and resolved in these, our troubled times? Why do received forms of work—rendered anachronistic, redundant, or surplus to requirement—nonetheless retain their elemental (“ontological”?) significance? And why do they keep returning, often in metamorphosed, sometimes spectral, guise? How, more broadly, are we to think about an anthropology of labor under capitalism for the twenty-first century?

IV

A brief historical parenthesis at this point, albeit a rather important one. It comes again courtesy of Moishe Postone who, following Thomas Piketty and others, reminds us that the history of inequality over the past century has not been linear.⁴⁴ To the contrary, it has fluctuated visibly, in consonance with other economic indexes and local conditions and in tandem with the fortunes of labor.

After a period of deepening inequality in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there came a phase, after World War II, during which income disparities were sharply reduced, only to be followed, from the 1970s, by a resurgent, ever more extreme skewing of wealth and political power. This trajectory, Postone notes, was global, its three periods—pre-World War II, 1945 to the 1970s, and mid-late

War and Democracy in the Age of Empire (New York: Penguin, 2004), 109; Paulo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004).

43. What Arlie Hochschild long ago called “emotion work.” See Arlie Russell Hochschild, “Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure,” *American Journal of Sociology* 85 no. 3 (1979): 551–75.

44. Postone, “The Current Crisis,” 40–41; Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

1970s to the present—each being marked by a distinctive trend in average rates of economic growth: relatively low and slow in the first, more than doubled in the second, and decreasing palpably in the third.⁴⁵ The pattern is clear. Both growth *and* per capita gross domestic product (GDP) rose, in the middle phase, as wages increased and levels of inequality dropped; conversely, both have waned as wages have stagnated and levels of inequality risen. Since 1973, he adds, living standards have fallen observably for most Americans—and, he might have added, for many across the planet—as wealth gaps have widened. That optimal second period, post-1945, is the one associated, in the archaeology of capital, with state-centric Fordism, underpinned by a Keynesian ideology of economic management and by sanguine imaginings, at least partly realized, of a world of full employment, workers' rights, and comprehensive social welfare, extending to the protection of citizens against joblessness, homelessness, ill health, and indigence.

A quick look at employment figures in this regard—figures that, as we shall argue, are to be read as much for what they hide as for what they reveal—is indicative. In the United States, for example, joblessness in the second half of the 1960s, when much more of the active population was counted than it is today, never rose higher than 3.8 percent. In the early years of the Reagan administration, as the Fordist era gave way to the neoliberal, it rose above 8 percent; to 10.8 percent in 1983.⁴⁶ What is more, the African American rate appears to have been roughly double that of whites.⁴⁷ Alike the United Kingdom, whose figures for 1945–1971 varied between 1.2 and 2.7 percent. In 1983, under Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party, it reached 12.9 percent⁴⁸—with people of color even *more* likely to suffer joblessness than in the United States at the time.⁴⁹ This is all the more striking in light of the fact

45. Postone, "The Current Crisis."

46. Kimberly Amadeo, "Unemployment Rate by Year since 1929 Compared to Inflation and GDP," *Balance*, January 21, 2019, accessed January 28, 2019, <https://www.thebalance.com/unemployment-rate-by-year-3305506>.

47. Arthur Delaney, "The Black-White Unemployment Ratio Has Barely Budged: Lower African-American Unemployment Doesn't Fix a Glaring Racial Disparity," *HuffPost*, August 15, 2018, accessed February 28, 2019, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/black-white-unemployment-trump_us_5b7434c4e4b02b415d746e36.

48. Ewan McGaughey, "Will Robots Automate Your Job Away? Full Employment, Basic Income, and Economic Democracy" (Working Paper no. 496, Centre for Business Research, University of Cambridge, 2018), https://www.cbr.cam.ac.uk/fileadmin/user_upload/centre-for-business-research/downloads/working-papers/wp496.pdf.

49. Office for National Statistics, "Unemployment," Gov.UK: Ethnicity Facts and Figures, October 19, 2019, accessed November 30, 2019, <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/work-pay-and-benefits/unemployment-and-economic-inactivity/unemployment/latest>. See also Randeep Ramesh, "Black People More Likely to Be Jobless in Britain than US, Research Reveals," *Guardian*, April 13, 2012, accessed February 28, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/13/black-people-unemployed-britain-us>.

that, in 1978, the Conservatives put out an election slogan, designed by ad agency Saatchi & Saatchi, that screamed “Labour Isn’t Working.”⁵⁰

Significantly, the history of trade unions in the United States and United Kingdom echo these trends. In 1954, 34.8 percent of all American wage workers were union members, a figure that dropped to 20.1 percent in 1983, soon after the attack on labor by the Reagan administration. It now stands at 11.3 percent.⁵¹ British unions, at their height in the 1960s and 1970s, were radically undermined during the 1980s at the behest of the Thatcher government and its corporate backers; as archives released a few years back show, Mrs. Thatcher set out quite explicitly to “crush” these politically influential organizations.⁵² The ironies here are unmistakable. If growth and GDP are taken to be significant indexes of material well-being, both the United States and the United Kingdom were at their healthiest during times when jobless rates were at their lowest, unions at their strongest, and inequality at its most attenuated; times, also, when the vision prevailed of new nations in the global south aspiring to forge modern economies in the aftermath of colonialism. Of course, any number of contingencies affect fluctuations in employment and inequality, among them inflationary cycles, recessionary pressures, market corrections, and political upheavals. But our point does not lie in the specificity of these numbers. It lies in the fact that they speak, if tacitly, to a historical consciousness that recalls the post–World War II decades, in respect of national economies and societies, in a particular way.

Those decades, the coming-of-age years of the still powerful “baby boomer” generation, sustain a paradigmatic presence in the contemporary sociological imagination. This, in many ways, was the moment at which liberal democratic modernity, as retrospectively remembered, reached its optimistic zenith: at which talk of

50. For a history of this ad campaign, see “Labour Isn’t Working,” Wikipedia, last modified October 31, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Labour_Isn%27t_Working. At the time the poster was unveiled—with its fabricated photograph of a long queue outside an employment office—the jobless figure had risen, but it remained under 6 percent.

51. Drew DeSilver, “American Unions Membership Declines as Public Support Fluctuates,” *FactTank*, Pew Research Center, February 20, 2014, accessed January 27, 2019, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/02/20/for-american-unions-membership-trails-far-behind-public-support/>.

52. Alan Travis, “National Archives: Margaret Thatcher Wanted to Crush Power of Trade Unions,” *Guardian*, August 1, 2013, accessed January 27, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2013/aug/01/margaret-thatcher-trade-union-reform-national-archives>. Conservative revisionists, however, prefer to blame their demise on globalization. See, e.g., *The Telegraph*, “‘Margaret Thatcher Didn’t Destroy Unions, It Was Globalisation,’ Claims Professor,” September 18, 2009, accessed January 27, 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/margaret-thatcher/6203425/Margaret-Thatcher-didnt-destroy-unions-it-was-globalisation-claims-professor.html>. A more technical view argues that high inflation in the 1970s weakened organized labor by creating a superfluity of jobs. See Larry Elliott, “We’re Working like It Is 1975, but the Jobs Boom Isn’t All It Seems,” *Guardian*, March 21, 2019, 4.

the Great Society, in its various global northern variants, appeared most persuasive; at which poverty and insecurity seemed to recede in the face of the norm of lifelong employment; at which the struggle for civil rights and the recognition of difference, most notably in respect of race and gender, looked like it had made permanent advances. But hiding in the plain sight, just off camera, there lurked persisting forms of exclusion, inequity, and raw injustice: in the impoverished US inner cities, for example, and the bleak estates of Northern Ireland; in the poorer reaches of immigrant England, the site of xenophobic outbreaks; in the violent theaters of neo-imperial warfare in Southeast Asia; and in innumerable other places. Recall that when Martin Luther King Jr., was assassinated in Memphis in 1968, he was there in support of a strike of African American sanitation workers, protesting their dangerous, poorly paid, minimally protected jobs.

Some would see, in these sites of immiseration and in the penumbra of the Cold War, the possibility of popular struggles against the structures of capitalist power; *vide* C. Wright Mills's "Letter to the New Left" in the *New Left Review* of late 1960, the rise of socialist and black power struggles in the West, the birth of the Non-Aligned Movement, and the emergence of leftwing regimes in former colonies.⁵³ At the same time, however, there occurred, contrapuntally, a resurgence of conservative forces that opposed any kind of welfare *etatism*—in the United States, New Deal liberalism, in the United Kingdom and Europe, labor-driven socialism—casting them as a danger to individual freedom and the harbinger of totalitarianism.⁵⁴ From the 1970s onward, as we noted earlier, those forces were to capture the political center and push ideological orthodoxy in a contrary direction. Capital responded to the gains made by workers' and civil rights movements in Euro-America in the mid-twentieth century, and the falling rate of profit from the late 1960s,⁵⁵ by devising new free trade mechanisms under a "program of global restructuring . . . oriented toward altering labor markets and the organization of work."⁵⁶ And so the long, dialectical struggle between capital and labor entered its latest chapter. Wherever it could, the former, embodied in an ever more sovereign corporate sector, pushed for privatization, deregulation, casualization, financialization, reduced legal liability, and policies of austerity at home—and reconfigured, flexibilized, outsourced

53. C. Wright Mills, "Letter to the New Left," *New Left Review* 5 (1960): 18–23.

54. Barry Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative* (Shepherdsville, KY: Victor Publishing, 1960).

55. See, e.g., Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from Long Boom to Long Downturn, 1945–2005* (New York: Verso, 2006).

56. Dave Broad, "Decomposition of Industrial Commodity Chains, Household Semiproletarianization, and Arenas for Resistance at the Center," in *Gendered Commodity Chains: Seeing Women's Work and Households in Global Perspective*, ed. Wilma A. Dunaway (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 209–24, esp. 215.

production abroad, in places where workers were more abject, less protected, and often forced into wage slavery of one kind or another. In rising numbers, moreover, these workers, under conditions of increasing uncertainty and precarity, have been compelled to migrate northward to find menial jobs, thereby further depressing earned incomes and employment markets in Euro-America, in which *de facto* indenture is itself hardly unknown.⁵⁷

Still, for all the reverses that have occurred since, the postwar conjuncture continues, in critical respects, to be the received template against which social expectations tend to be measured, even as the deficit between those expectations and lived reality grows with every passing year. And so it remains plausible to speak, in the future perfect tense, of mass employment and secure salaried work for all (see below)—undergirded by a modernist mythos honed in an age in which labor seemed to approach the most equitable pact possible with capital; in which also, as we have said, the liberal idyll appeared within reach. It is a mythos that lingers on, even as, for more and more people, its promise recedes into the realm of the unreachable, the unreal, the unrecognizable. And gradually, especially for rising generations, the unthinkable.

Which takes us back into realities present, a present continuous now nearly 50 years in the making, a present without a foreseeable *denouement*.

V

These past decades have seen the convergence of two processes that, together, have shaped the latest chapter in the relationship between capital and labor. The first of those processes, patently, lies in the morphing planetary workplace as corporate capital, and its regime of accumulation, has rebuilt global commodity chains. Partly by recommissioning the structures of colonial extraction, partly by “capturing” postcolonial states, it has recalibrated its operations, decentralizing and rendering mobile its sites of manufacture and its lines of distribution. Already in the 1970s, this was anticipated, conceptually, in the so-called New International Division of Labor, founded on an “eclectic synthesis of Marxist and world-systems/dependency theory.”⁵⁸ The realignment it entailed was most visibly marked by the migration of proletarian jobs from north to south, primarily, as noted earlier, in response

57. Against those who dispute the applicability of the term “slavery” to contemporary “unfree” labor, Jane Anna Gordon makes a strong argument for its continuing applicability, albeit under transformed historical conditions; see Jane Anna Gordon, *Statelessness and Contemporary Enslavement* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

58. Folker Fröbel, Jürgen Heinrichs, and Otto Kreye, *The New International Division of Labour: Structural Unemployment in Industrialised Countries and Industrialisation in Developing Countries*, trans. Pete Burgess (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Guido Starosta, “Revisiting the New International Division of

to falling rates of profit, rising worker demand for better wages, and various forms of deregulation. In what was still commonly referred to then as the Third World, labor, of course, was not just much cheaper and less protected; it was also pliantly centered, in large measure, on the household, kin, communal, and ethnic ties and religious networks. Violent extraction at these edges of empire has *always* been the underside of the Euromodern romance of free labor. Here everyday economic life necessitated a labile mix of subsistence and petty commodity production, “putting out” and occasional contract work, migrant employment, and “penny capitalism” in the informal sector—often implicating creative credit management and the “phatic labor” that “produces communicative channels” from which value could be garnered.⁵⁹ These were, and are, social ecologies in which material deficit imposes on individuals and families, especially women, an onus for diversified survival strategies—which perforce often include, in addition to informal enterprise, taking the lowest-paid, most insecure sweatshop jobs available.

No surprise, then, that it is the former colonies of the south to which both corporate capital and its rogue competitors—think blood diamonds, human trafficking, narco-commerce—have turned in the quest to extract optimal returns. Fabrication in these contexts tends to be reduced to its most elemental, to one operation in the supply chain, paid minimally for each productive act and nothing else, and likely to move on abruptly if conditions favor doing so. In the age of the “planetary labor market,” writes Mark Graham, “millions of jobs can now be done from almost anywhere on Earth,” even at the level of the microtask, enabling firms to take advantage of a “global reserve army” on a per-click or per-pick rather than a per-person basis.⁶⁰ Employees in remote reaches of rural Central Africa, for example, may toil in the most advanced of tech industries, sometimes in open-air factories, carrying out routine, repetitive, piecemeal tasks—like basic data recognition and classification—that machines cannot yet perform. But these workers are told almost nothing about the complex productive process of which they are merely one dispersed part, nor about the fact that the very work they are doing is likely soon to render them

Labour Thesis,” in *The New International Division of Labour: Global Transformation and Uneven Development*, ed. Greig Charnock and Guido Starosta (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 79–103, esp. 85.

59. Sol Tax, *Penny Capitalism: A Guatemalan Indian Economy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953); Keith Hart, “Informal Income Opportunities and Urban Employment in Ghana,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 11, no. 1 (1973): 61–89; Deborah James, *Money from Nothing: Indebtedness and Aspiration in South Africa* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015); Julia Elyachar, “Phatic Labor, Infrastructure, and the Question of Empowerment in Cairo,” *American Ethnologist* 37, no. 3 (2010): 452–64, esp. 453.

60. Mark Graham, “The Rise of the Planetary Labour Market—and What It Means for the Future of Work,” *NSTech*, January 29, 2018, accessed January 30, 2019, <https://tech.newstatesman.com/guest-opinion/planetary-labour-market>.

and their kind redundant. In theory, adds Graham, flexible geographies of production *could* distribute jobs across the world. But in practice, those geographies exert “huge downward pressure on wages and working conditions” everywhere and at the same time decimate wage labor markets in the north.⁶¹

Kaushik Basu, just one voice in a fast-growing literature on the topic—aptly dubbed, by Dadush and Shaw, “Globalization, Labor Markets, and Inequality”⁶²—refers to this effect of planetary articulation as “labor-linking.”⁶³ The open-air factories of the Central African countryside and the shuttered industries of US inner cities are tied, integrally, to one another even when the forces that link them drop out of visibility. What is more, some postcolonial work continues to survive mechanization because African workers are still often cheaper than machines. Even quite highly skilled workers, as Nina Sylvanus shows, may be less costly to capital than their robotic replacement—as they are in African ports, where, unlike in, say, Hamburg or Rotterdam, crane operators have not been substituted by nonhuman “solutions.”⁶⁴ At least not for now. Nonetheless, the formal employment market, even in its most abject sectors, has shrunk in *both* north and south. And the global reserve army grows larger by the year.

Here is where the second of the processes comes into play, dialectically. With the attenuation and casualization of so much of the labor force in the north, there has arisen a lively facsimile of the informal sectors of the south; all the more so with the long-term fall in real wages and, concomitantly, the capture of increasing numbers of people, workers and postworkers alike, in a vortex of spiraling, inescapable debt—which, in many parts of the world, is becoming *the* structuring principle of socio-material existence. This creeping informalization is being subsumed partly by the growing “gig economy” and partly by other “economies” that are proliferating in inverse relation to formal work: the sharing economy, the caring economy, the artisanal economy, the hospitality economy, the criminal economy, the intimate

61. *Ibid.*

62. Uri Dadush and William Shaw, “Globalization, Labor Markets, and Inequality,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 2, 2012, accessed February 15, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2012/02/02/globalization-labor-markets-and-inequality-pub-47028>. See also their “Is the Labor Market Global?” *Current History* 111, no. 741 (2012): 9–13.

63. Kaushik Basu, “Globalization of Labor Markets and the Growth Prospects of Nations” (Policy Research Working Paper 7590, World Bank Group, Office of the Chief Economist [Development Economics Vice Presidency], March 2016), accessed February 17, 2019, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/23929/Globalization00prospects0of0nations.pdf;sequence=1>, 3.

64. Nina Sylvanus, “Harboring the Future: The Togolese Techno-Port, Governance, and Global Economics in West Africa” (unpublished paper presented at the African Studies Workshop, Harvard University, November 12, 2018); cited with the permission of the author. Sylvanus’s own research has been based in the port of Lomé, Togo.

economy, the carceral economy—none of them either conventionally proletarian or regularly waged. Each depends to a significant extent on commodifying the means of ordinary life; means once viewed, in mainstream Euro-America, as beyond the market, but now treated as microcapital to be put to the purposes of accumulation.⁶⁵

Focused on the household, and more broadly the private sphere, informalization ruptures the line between production and reproduction, male and female, work and leisure normatively separated with the rise of industrialization. And so the infrastructure and accoutrements of the domestic domain—bedrooms, cars, computers, printers, smartphones, kitchen appliances, dining room tables—are turned into speculative assets, yielding disposable income from their commercial deployment. Thus does *everything* and *everybody* become capital, in prospect or in practice, *everybody* and *everything* the object of financialization—including, maybe most of all, as Foucault reminds us, the neoliberal self.⁶⁶ Of course, informal enterprise has *always* existed, more or less overtly, in northern contexts, especially among the poor. What has changed is their proportionate relation, in labor demographics, to formal employment, alike proletarian and white collar, domestic and migrant, male and female; their recognition as a measurably significant part of material, social, psychic, and ethical life; and their global reappropriation, through “platform” business and algorithmic rentier capital, back into the formal sector that spun them off. With real macrosocioeconomic consequences.⁶⁷

This last, “platforming,” on which there is also a burgeoning literature, covers a wide spectrum, much of it involving the financialization of “informal” activities, activities with a long history in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. At one end are the giants, like Uber and Airbnb, which upscale and techno-rationalize ride and room “sharing” (i.e., petty rental) arrangements not dissimilar to those that arose among colonial urban populations and live on, ubiquitously, today. On a more modest scale are such things as Japan’s lively “rent-a-family” industry, epitomized by *Family Romance*, a company that—building on “traditional” caring arrangements with analogues across the global south—markets “human affection” and “the comforts of

65. Randy Martin, *Financialization of Daily Life* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002); Paul Langley, “Uncertain Subjects of Anglo-American Financialization,” *Cultural Critique* 65, no. 1 (2007): 67–91.

66. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, trans. Graham Burchell, ed. Michel Senellart (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

67. See, e.g., Koen Frenken and Juliet Schor, “Putting the Sharing Economy into Perspective,” *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transition* 23 (2017): 3–10; on the transformative effects, e.g., of Airbnb on the sociology of cities across the world, see Rebecca Mead, “Airbnb Moves In: In Tourist-Clogged Barcelona, Some Locals See the Service as a Pestilence,” *New Yorker*, April 29, 2019, 32–37. There is a fast-growing, transdisciplinary literature on this topic, a literature too large to discuss here—and, strictly speaking, beside our present point.

home,” supplying *faux* kinship to its clients; its business model has emerging parallels in the north, among them, RentAFriend.com, whose services include parents for hire.⁶⁸ Similarly the explosion of peer-to-peer (P2P) lending, brokered by online firms, whose precursors are to be found in rotating credit groups across Africa and Islamic finance.⁶⁹ Or *Feastly*, “a p2p marketplace . . . offering authentic meals prepared and served in a cook’s home.”⁷⁰ It recalls African shebeens, past and present, where migrant laborers treat(ed) the living rooms of their owners as a place to eat, drink, and socialize around the figure of a female host—who fused the roles of mother, wife, and entrepreneur. And so on and on. In point of fact, platforming does more than merely reappropriate and exploit microentrepreneurial labor from the informal sector, making truly independent contracting increasingly difficult. Although it may stimulate enterprise, attracting new recruits into the economic practices that it “manages,” it costs producers, who are typically treated as independent contractors without the rights of employees, a rising percentage of their income.⁷¹ And it renders porous, even erases, the lines—legal, conceptual, material, ethical, social—between the formal and the informal.

To the degree, then, that informalization, and its platforming, are rapidly gaining ground in the north—where the sharing economy is given a positive cost-benefit gloss for “harnessing [the] excess capacity” of personal assets otherwise “idled”—Euro-America is coming ever more to resemble, and in some respects to overtake, the south, living its history, to cite Svetlana Alexievich in *Secondhand Time*.⁷² This,

68. See Elif Batuman, “A Theory of Relativity: Japan’s Rent-a-Family Phenomenon,” *New Yorker*, April 30, 2018, 50–61; also, for another example from the large journalistic literature on this phenomenon, see Roc Morin, “How to Hire Fake Friends and Family,” *Atlantic*, November 7, 2017, accessed February 13, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2017/11/paying-for-fake-friends-and-family/545060/>; see RentAFriend.com, “Rent Parents or Hire Parents,” accessed April 7, 2019, <http://blog.rentafriend.com/rent-parents-or-hire-parents/>. Like the Japanese firms in the family rental industry, RentAFriend stresses that it is not an escort or dating service.

69. See, e.g., Wikipedia, “Peer-to-Peer Lending,” accessed April 7, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peer-to-peer_lending; Shirley Ardener, “The Comparative Study of Rotating Credit Associations,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 94, no. 2 (1964): 201–29; Seyed Kazem Sadr, “The Optimum Size of Rotating Qard Hasan Savings and Credit Associations,” *ISRA International Journal of Islamic Finance* 9, no. 1 (2017): 15–26.

70. See *Feastly*, “About Us,” accessed July 8, 2019, <https://www.linkedin.com/company/feastly>.

71. Hence the current legal dispute over the status of Uber drivers in California, which recently passed a state law giving those drivers the status of employees. See, e.g., Jonathan Stempel, “Uber Is Sued over Resistance to California ‘Gig’ Employment Law,” *Reuters*, September 12, 2019, accessed December 2, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-uber-lawsuit-california/uber-is-sued-over-resistance-to-california-gig-employment-law-idUSKCN1VX1VE>.

72. Yochai Benkler, “Sharing Nicely: On Shareable Goods and the Emergence of Sharing as a Modality of Economic Production,” *Yale Law Journal* 114, no. 2 (2004): 273–358, 276, 357; Comaroff and Comaroff, *Theory from the South*; Svetlana Alexievich, *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*, trans. Bela Shayevich (New York: Random House, 2017).

however, leaves a critical question unanswered. The contradiction underlying the relationship between labor and capital, played out recursively over the past centuries, may be manifesting itself *structurally* in a reorganization of the global workforce, its demography, geography, temporality, materiality, and *pragmatically* in a redrawing of the lines between, and rearticulation of, what have conventionally been understood as the formal and informal economies. But how, precisely, is that contradiction making itself felt in the *experiential* and *political* fabric of everyday life in the present continuous?

VI

Almost everywhere, to return to our *ur*-narrative, public discourse, primed by the mythos of the post-World War II years, speaks as though a waged population remains the norm. Labor as the prime basis of social value, the source of human dignity, and the core of socio-material existence has lost little of its fetishized purpose. “Ironically, while the ‘age of work’ seems to have come to an end,” observe Cedarström and Fleming in *Dead Man Working*, a darkly provocative reflection on the *zeitgeist* of our times, “working has assumed a total presence—a ‘worker’s society’ in the worst sense of the term—where everyone finds themselves obsessed with it” (see above).⁷³ If anything, growing anxieties about its precariousness have heightened its psychic centrality: a compulsive preoccupation with employment drives mainstream political manifestos, visions of education, and criteria of self-worth.⁷⁴ Even the finance sector, where value is accumulated by means of ever greater abstraction—this by distancing itself as far as possible from manufacture and service, indeed from the commodity economy *tout court*—harks back to the language of labor. It refers to what it traffics in as “products,” as though they were physical objects yielded by honest toil, to its profits as “earnings,” and to itself as an “industry.”

This is hardly surprising: “Work [remains] the primary means by which individuals are integrated not only into the economic system, but also into the social, political, and familial modes of cooperation,” notes Kathi Weeks.⁷⁵ It is “a basic obligation of citizenship” and, ethically if not legally, something seen to be akin to a right. Statesmen everywhere speak in the promissory language of “bringing back

73. Carl Cedarström and Peter Fleming, *Dead Man Working* (Alresford: Zero, 2012). The quotation is taken from the publisher’s copy on the volume; see <http://www.zero-books.net/books/dead-man-working>. Both endorsements quoted on the website—by well-known academics Michael Hardt and Simon Critchley—speak of the book as “dark.” Although aimed at a general readership, it is published under the scholarly rubric of “culture, society and politics.”

74. See Beckett, “Post-Work.”

75. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 8.

jobs”; Donald Trump’s notorious fixation on reviving the largely defunct US coal industry is symptomatic of the nagging impasse between the idealization of blue-collar production and its cynical decommissioning under pressures of profitability.⁷⁶ For their part, voting publics respond by taking promises of job creation seriously. To be sure, whatever form it may assume, however it may metamorphose, the status of wage labor as the basis of species being endures with almost uncanny, sacral persistence. In the United States, remarks Derek Thompson, “industriousness has served as America’s unofficial religion since its founding. The sanctity and prominence of work lie at the heart of the country’s politics, economics, and social interactions,” even more so nowadays, a time of “rising workism.”⁷⁷ Lyman Stone, an economist, goes even further. He argues that workism is actually displacing “declining religiosity,” becoming not just a “dominant cultural value” but the “way people [now] seek external validation”—to the extent that it is contributing to falling birth rates, conducting, in turn, to a crisis in reproduction.⁷⁸ “Work,” quips critic A. O. Scott, “is the new sex.”⁷⁹

In Britain, too, argues Joanna Biggs, labor gives life enhanced meaning “when religion, party politics and community fall away.”⁸⁰ Also in Russia, Germany, and India, among many other places.⁸¹ “Decent jobs” for its citizenry is typically portrayed as a critical function of the state everywhere; hence the millennial prominence in government manifestos of putting “the people” back to work, despite

76. As of 2015, more than 65 percent (and rising) of the world’s coal production, according to a reputed commercial intelligence firm, has operated at a loss. See Peter Ker, “Two Thirds of World’s Coal Output Is Loss-Making, Wood Mackenzie Estimates,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 10, 2015, accessed March 14, 2019, <https://www.smh.com.au/business/companies/wood-mackenzie-estimates-that-65pc-of-world-coal-output-is-lossmaking-20151210-gljjx4.html>.

77. Thompson, “A World without Work.”

78. Anna Louie Sussman, “The End of Babies,” *New York Times International Edition*, November 20, 2019, 7.

79. A. O. Scott, “Cool Car Guys of a Particular Vintage,” *New York Times International Edition*, November 20, 2019, 14.

80. Joanna Biggs, *All Day Long: A Portrait of Britain at Work* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2015), 264. Public media reports temper this argument somewhat by recourse to survey statistics. For one, published in 2005, see Nic Paton, “Work Gives Meaning to Life for a Quarter of Britons,” *Management Issues*, November 15, 2005, accessed March 15, 2019, <https://www.management-issues.com/news/2765/work-gives-meaning-to-life-for-a-quarter-of-britons/>. We would, however, caution against taking those statistics at face value because the manner of their production is far from clear.

81. See, e.g., Anna Kuchma, “Russia to Fight Rising Unemployment,” *Russia Beyond*, February 19, 2015, accessed February 4, 2019, https://www.rbth.com/economics/2015/02/19/russia_to_fight_rising_unemployment_41509; M. G. Arun, “3 Years of Modi: Where Are the 10 Million Jobs per Year as Promised?” *India Today*, June 5, 2017, accessed February 4, 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/up-front/story/20170605-jobs-in-india-low-modi-government-growing-economy-986475-2017-05-26>; AFP, “Re-Elect Me and I’ll Eradicate Unemployment, Merkel Pledges,” *The Local*, July 3, 2017, accessed February 4, 2019, <https://www.thelocal.de/20170703/election-merkel-re-elect-me-and-ill-eradicate-unemployment>.

the repeated failure to do so.⁸² In his State of the Nation Address (SONA) to South Africa on February 7, 2019, President Cyril Ramaphosa intoned the word “jobs” 33 times in a 79-minute speech.⁸³ Every previous president, in every SONA since 1994, has done the same thing, if not with the same stress-by-repetition.

On the other side of the contradiction is the popular anxiety that “the end of work” is already at hand, never to be reversed. As early as 1995, economist Jeremy Rifkin argued, in a volume entitled *The End of Work*, that “worldwide unemployment would increase as information technology eliminated tens of millions of jobs.”⁸⁴ The book evoked some scholarly skepticism for its techno-determinism and its reliance on an overly reductionist conception of employment.⁸⁵ But, like Richard Sennett’s account of changes in work and career at the hands of corporate “reengineering”—and Ulrich Beck’s bleak “destandardization of work,” followed by his “[demise of] work society”—it resonated with a dawning American nightmare.⁸⁶ That nightmare, underscored by a recent McKinsey Global report predicting the loss of 800 million jobs to robotics alone by 2030,⁸⁷ has been fueled by a rush of books aimed at mass audiences,⁸⁸ most of them apocalyptic in tone.⁸⁹ It is epitomized

82. See Ferguson, *Give a Man a Fish*.

83. See *Sunday Times* (South Africa), “Hellish Train Ride Shows How Far Off Track We Are,” editorial, February 10, 2019, 16. For a transcript of the address, see *Mail & Guardian*, “25 Years of Democracy: Read President Ramaphosa’s SONA Address in Full,” February 7, 2019, accessed February 8, 2019, <https://mg.co.za/article/2019-02-07-25-years-of-democracy-read-president-ramaphosas-sona-address-in-full>.

84. Jeremy Rifkin, *The End of Work: The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era* (New York: G. Putnam’s Sons, 1995). The quoted phrase is from in the publisher’s advertising copy and is cited in a number of reviews and blogs written about the volume.

85. See, e.g., George Caffentzis, “The End of Work or the Renaissance of Slavery?,” in *Revolutionary Writing: Common Sense Essays in Post-Political Politics*, ed. Werner Bonefeld (New York: Autonomedia, 2001), 115–33. A version, with the subtitle “A Critique of Rifkin and Negri,” is online at <https://fadingtheaesthetic.files.wordpress.com/2013/05/george-caffentzis-the-end-of-work-or-the-rennalsance-of-slavery-common-sense-24.pdf>.

86. Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (New York: Norton, 1998), 49; Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, trans. Mark Ritter (London: Sage, 1992), and *Brave New World*.

87. McKinsey Global Institute, *A Future That Works: Automation, Employment, and Productivity*, January 2017, <https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/mckinsey/featured%20insights/Digital%20Disruption/Harnessing%20automation%20for%20a%20future%20that%20works/MGI-A-future-that-works-Executive-summary.ashx>. This report was widely cited in print and electronic media across the world in 2017.

88. See, e.g., Richard Baldwin, *The Globotics Upheaval: Globalization, Robotics, and the Future of Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); Martin Ford, *The Rise of Robots: Technology and the Threat of a Jobless Future* (New York: Basic Books, 2015); André Oppenheimer, *The Robots Are Coming! The Future of Jobs in the Age of Automation*, trans. Ezra E. Fitz (New York: Vintage, 2019).

89. Jill Lepore offers a witty, insightful review of these books; see Jill Lepore, “The Robot Caravan: Automation, A.I., and the Coming Invasion,” *New Yorker*, March 4, 2019, 20–24. Although she cites studies that seek to counter “robot hysteria,” Lepore notes that “even if the hype about robots is mostly unwarranted, the worry about jobs is real” (23). Among the anti-apocalyptic writings she mentions, the most notable are Oren Cass, *The Once and Future Worker: A Vision for the Renewal of Work in America* (New York: Encounter Books, 2018); and Robert J. Gordon, “Why Robots Will Not Decimate Human Jobs,” *LinkedIn*,

by a spreading Rust Belt, where the flight of industry, the technicization of what remains, and the eclipse of labor have bequeathed cityscapes dotted with boarded-up stores, derelict homes, and ghostly school buildings; cadavers, these, left behind by socioeconomic breakdown and national decline. Not that capital fails to find new possibilities in the detritus. As Matthew Soules has observed, it has turned decay into “zombie urbanism,” leveraging ruins, through financialization, into revenant assets.⁹⁰ Here, too, it follows some of the below-radar business practices of the south, where informal entrepreneurs transform ravaged infrastructure and real estate into vibrant mercantile centers—as do, for example, the cross-border traders who bring to life decommissioned buildings, devalued spaces, and deserted sidewalks in downtown Johannesburg, South Africa, making them into a bustling hub for transcontinental business; indeed, for low-end global commerce. Their takings, all of them in cash and amounting to billions of dollars, exceed those of the largest, highest-end shopping malls of Africa.⁹¹

As we would expect, the planetary geography of labor is more complicated than the “end of work” thesis suggests. Some economists speak of the “Luddite fallacy,” insisting, not without controversy, that new technologies tend to realign existing labor arrangements, often to positive effect, rather than merely displace them or destroy occupations.⁹² After all, many *do* still toil in the manufacturing and service sectors of both north and south, not all of them precariously. And, with ongoing shifts in the ecology of production, new jobs *are* created. The low official unemployment figures for most Euro-American nation-states—to be deconstructed in a moment—make that much plain, even if they do not speak to the nature of those jobs or the fact that a major proportion of them fall far short of yielding a living

November 22, 2016, accessed August 14, 2018, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/why-robots-decimate-human-jobs-bob-gordon>.

90. Matthew Soules, “Asset Urbanism: Ghosts, Zombies, and the Simultaneity of Amplified Growth and Decay” (paper presented at the 102nd ACSA [Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture] Annual Meeting, “Globalizing Architecture: Flows and Disruptions,” Miami Beach, FL, April 10–12, 2014), <https://www.acsa-arch.org/proceedings/Annual%20Meeting%20Proceedings/ACSA.AM.102/ACSA.AM.102.78.pdf>.

91. Tanya Zack Development Planners with Urban Works and Progressus Research and Development Consultancy, *Cross Border Shopping in Johannesburg’s Inner City* (Johannesburg: Johannesburg Inner City Partnership, October 2017), accessed July 15, 2019, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1tUa8PXswc4kSTzA6uUat7JH6rhb03o5/view>. See also Tanya Zack, “Johannesburg’s Inner City: The Dubai of Southern Africa, but All Below the Radar,” *Conversation*, November 5, 2017, accessed July 25, 2019, <https://theconversation.com/profiles/dr-tanya-zack-418889/articles>.

92. Tejvan Pettinger, “The Luddite Fallacy,” *Economics Help*, January 15, 2017, accessed July 1, 2019, <https://www.economicshelp.org/blog/6717/economics/the-luddite-fallacy/>; McKinsey Global Institute, *Jobs Lost, Jobs Gained: What the Future of Work Will Mean for Jobs, Skills, and Wages*, December 2017, accessed February 12, 2018, <https://www.mckinsey.com/~/media/mckinsey/featured%20insights/Future%20of%20Organizations/What%20the%20future%20of%20work%20will%20mean%20for%20jobs%20skills%20and%20wages/MGI-Jobs-Lost-Jobs-Gained-Report-December-6-2017.ashx>. This report followed the earlier McKinsey, *A Future*; see n. 87.

income. Yet this hardly accounts for, or vitiates, the social and existential dislocation—and the capricious trade-off of lives, careers, and futures—occasioned by the radical reorganization of work. Witness the felt effects across the world of casualization, outsourcing, and mechanization; of the polarization of employment markets within and between nations; of the reduced quality of so many waged jobs.

Hence Cedarström and Fleming's *Dead Man Working*. It evokes precisely the sort of fear-inducing zombification with which we began. In what Brynjolfsson and McAfee call the *Second Machine Age*, artificial intelligence and "brilliant" machines have changed the name of the game.⁹³ They have begun to invade even some of the most creative, most intuitive professions, from medical diagnostics through criminal detection to musical composition, formerly assumed to be reserved for humans. Some point to the fate of horses, once regarded as second only to *homo sapiens* in their indispensability to divers forms of material production.⁹⁴ No species, it seems, is immune from the quest at the core of the culture of capitalism: to free production from the costs of labor. Remember, here, those equisapiens of Boots Riley's nightmare, posthumans designed to be cheaper and more efficient even than robots.

All this underlines the fact that the compulsions behind the relentless effort to replace human workers with surrogates are not reducible to actuarial reason or cost-benefit alone. John Seabrook's account of the avid, expensive, as yet fruitless push to develop a smart machine to pick strawberries in the United States exemplifies the complex sociopolitical forces that intersect in what otherwise might be seen as a mechanical inevitability.⁹⁵ The urgency to perfect a robot picker, Seabrook explains, is above all the effect of a shortage not of labor per se, but of the *right* kind of labor. The world over, it is migrants—the abject, the discounted, the displaced, those accused of "stealing" the jobs of nationals—who do agricultural work, often under conditions of virtual enslavement; work so degraded that citizens, even jobless ones, will not do it. But, contrary to populist presumption, "advanced" industrial states, driven by other obsessions, have been ever more successful in curbing immigration in recent years, which has fueled the felt need for a technical solution to a self-inflicted sociopolitical problem. Meanwhile, despite vast capital investment, it is proving difficult to make "machine hands" replicate the speed, stamina, and discernment

93. Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee, *The Second Machine Age: Work, Progress, and Prosperity in a Time of Brilliant Technologies* (New York: Norton, 2014).

94. See Thompson, "A World without Work"; also Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee, "Will Humans Go the Way of Horses?" *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2015, accessed February 6, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2015-06-16/will-humans-go-way-horses>.

95. John Seabrook, "Machine Hands: Picking Strawberries Takes Speed, Stamina, and Skill. Can a Robot Do It?" *New Yorker*, April 15, 2019, 48–57.

of so-called low-skilled employees. Yet according to a union spokesman, rather than address poor wages and abusive treatment in the industry, its leaders “prefer to eliminate [pickers] altogether,” albeit at mounting cost. “Mental mechanization of labor has been going on for decades,” he added, making it plain that the workers themselves have been treated as robots *before* the fact, being subject to increasing demand with decreasing “regard for their human condition.”⁹⁶

But this simply underscores the question: How, at this historical moment, is the contradiction—pitting the ideological, normative centrality of work against the perception of its imminent end—reconciled in official discourse, public perception, and everyday practice? The answer lies in several things, of which we offer just a glimpse in closing here.

VII

The first is to be found *not* in its reconciliation at all, but in its *empirical* erasure at the behest of formal economics and state-speak; specifically, in their occulting of reality by recourse to statistical reason.⁹⁷ Put it this way: if, in a population, a significant percentage of those who lack jobs are made to disappear by discounting their very existence, the remaining proportion, those with jobs, will appear proportionately much larger. Under these conditions, there is no army of unemployed to worry about, nor does the end of work seem imminent. *Per contra*, full employment looks to lie well this side of the horizon of possibility and public policy—thus to sustain the dignity of labor, and the wage, as the mythic cornerstone of the good life.

In the United States, for example, the official jobless rate hovers below 4 percent, conjuring the illusion of an almost fully employed population. But this *only* takes into account those who are positioned to look for work and are actually doing so. Or are claiming to. It ignores entirely the employment-population ratio, which embraces *everyone* of working age. According to the International Labour Organization and World Bank, that ratio currently stands at 59 percent, which means that some 41 percent of adult Americans, their sociological profiles highly predictable, are *not* in waged jobs; the global ratio, also remarkably elevated at 58.32 percent, is little different, and the number for the European Union, at 54 percent, is even more bleak.⁹⁸ Likewise the United Kingdom, where unemployment is *very* much higher

96. *Ibid.*, 57.

97. This is despite the rising “popular distrust from left and right” of statistics “in the age of ‘post-truth.’” See, e.g., William Davies, “The End of Statistics?,” *Guardian*, January 19, 2017, 27.

98. All employment-population figures here come from the International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT database. See the World Bank, “Employment to Population Ratio, 15+, Total (%; Modeled ILO Estimate),” September 2019, accessed December 1, 2019, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/sl.emp.totl.sp.zs>; the discussion in this paragraph echoes coverage in the financial press in the United States

than the official count; its current employment-population ratio stands at 60 percent. Says economist David Blanchflower, “Economic measures are blind” to the very many who are radically “underemployed or have given up trying to find work.” Extraordinarily, 55 percent of *all* jobs created since 2008 are part-time.⁹⁹ “Non-standard” workers, he notes—those on flextime, part-time, or zero-hour contracts—make up 39 percent of the *entire* European Union workforce; in the United States, the proportion of people in “alternative work” also rose rapidly between 2005 and 2015, totaling 94 percent of all new jobs created during that period.¹⁰⁰ Observe in this regard that standard rates in Euro-America count *all* of these people as employed. They include *anyone* who does paid labor for an hour or more in a week, a fact that grossly inflates positive employment statistics. What is more, adds Blanchflower, in recent times wages have “fallen more than ever in recorded history”—registering, again, the significant gap between a job and a livelihood.¹⁰¹ If Investopedia’s facts are correct, an average wage earner in London needs 1.6 jobs to survive *minimally*. In New York that number is yet higher; striking teachers in Kansas recently reported needing three jobs to make ends meet. The self-employed, who boost the myth of “rosy employment figures,” earn even less than those in paid jobs.¹⁰² This is another case of hiding the predicament of contemporary labor, of its structural demography, in occult numeration that makes phenomena appear as they disappear, at once absent and present. Much the same story could be told of many other nation-states. In this respect, the *real* counts from the global north, whatever they actually may be, seem to be edging southward.

Another, closely related way of disappearing the contradiction is to redefine labor so broadly as to embrace *any* form of socially productive activity, be it waged or unwaged, formal or informal, licit or illicit. This is what the European Commission

during 2018. For one account, see Erik Sherman, “Sure, Unemployment Went Down—Because More People Left the Workforce,” *Forbes*, May 5, 2018, accessed January 21, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/eriksherman/2018/05/05/sure-unemployment-went-down-because-the-number-of-people-working-did/#1769e551408b>.

99. David G. Blanchflower, *Not Working: Where Have All the Good Jobs Gone?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019). The quoted phrases are taken from the prepublication synopsis of the argument of the book provided by Princeton University Press, accessed March 19, 2019, <https://press.princeton.edu/titles/13485.html>.

100. Lawrence F. Katz and Alan B. Krueger, “The Rise and Nature of Alternative Work Arrangements in the United States, 1995–2015,” *ILR Review* 72, no. 2 (2019): 382–416, 382. Katz and Krueger characterize alternative work as temporary and unsteady.

101. See Andrew Lilico and David Blanchflower, “Jobs Miracle or Low-Pay Disaster? Andrew Lilico and David Blanchflower Debate,” *The Spectator*, December 14, 2015, accessed March 17, 2019, <https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2015/12/jobs-miracle-or-low-pay-disaster-andrew-lilico-and-david-blanchflower-debate/>.

102. *Ibid.*

on the *Future of Work, Future of Society* does in recognizing unpaid exertions as de-serving of the dignity classically associated with wage labor.¹⁰³ “Traditional concepts of work,” it says—echoing, belatedly, feminist critiques of the seventies—“must be rethought to take in a much broader array of non-standard employment,” including “unpaid contributions to our societies.” Thus is the burgeoning informal economy—caring and sharing, the artisanal, the cultural, the illicit—assimilated to the “new normal” of the north as it has so long been in the south.¹⁰⁴ Thus, too, is the paradox annulled *conceptually* by including more or less anything in the category of value-producing enterprise—and asserting, thereby, the sustained ethico-theological centrality of work as the core of human being. For the unemployed, and/or those pushed into the informal sector, what afflicts them is taken to be the contingent misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time: Youngstown or Flint or the coal towns of Kentucky, the silent shipyards of Glasgow or the factory-shuttered cities of northern England. Or other sites from which jobs have migrated or been replaced by machines.

VIII

In sum, although it may be reconciled or rendered invisible by resort to the *faux* empirical and the misconceptual, the contradiction has not gone away either structurally or phenomenologically speaking. The present is less a moment of its transcendence than one of wrestling with its constant return. Wage labor remains at the ontological core of capitalism: of species being under its political theology; of its conception of time and value; of the unstable ratio of creation and destruction on which its expansion and financialization depends—even, Moishe Postone insisted, as wage work appears anachronistic, terminally endangered, at its historical “end,” giving way to ever more abstract forms of wealth accumulation *sans* persons. Or, we have offered instead, as it recedes, changes character, takes refuge in some other “economy,” formal or informal or in the murky, unmarked spaces between. Hence the mass anxiety that keeps reappearing in schizoid figurations of labor living and dead, present and absent, human and posthuman: in the zombie, a sentient specter that has lost its species being; in robots made to look like people and people made to act like robots; in mutant, multispecies workers of various kinds. Hence, too, more

103. European Commission, European Group on Ethics in Science and New Technologies, *Future of Work, Future of Society*, Opinion no. 30 (Brussels: Publications Office of the European Union, December 19, 2018), 7, 19, accessed January 27, 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/research_and_innovation/ege/ege_future-of-work_opinion_122018.pdf.

104. PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP, “The Sharing Economy,” Consumer Intelligence Series, May 2015, accessed March 16, 2019, https://www.pwc.fr/fr/assets/files/pdf/2015/05/pwc_etude_sharing_economy.pdf.

mundane, pragmatic modes of addressing that anxiety: such things as the perennial, populist call for new job creation; the increasing, if contested, campaign for basic income grants as a right of citizenship; and, most of all, the pursuit of a politics that might conceive of capitalism *after* labor. This in both senses: capitalism reflective and respectful of its species of value—yet reaching beyond it, toward a world productive of new forms of life and livelihood, of labor *after* capitalism.