

# “Social Labor” and the Marxist Critique of Work<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract:**

This paper argues that when it comes to thinking about work and labor, Marxism experiences a continued difficulty in holding theory and politics together without reliance on the concept of "social labor": a humanist ideological concept which mystifies the role of social relations in explaining work under capitalism. The evidence for this is collected through a reading of a number of important contributions within the Marxist sociology of work. At its conclusion, the paper turns back to Althusser and his critique of work and ideology in order to point towards the framework for an alternative critique of work that makes a conceptual move away from humanist ideas of alienation and social labor, towards materialist notions of interpellation and social relations.

**Keywords:** Louis Althusser; work; labor; theoretical anti-humanism; sociology; post-work.

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## Introduction

This paper argues that a particular difficulty persists within Marxist thought on the topic of work, in which it struggles to think a theory and politics of work together without a reliance on humanist ideology: a reliance often reflected in its dependence on the concept of “social labor.” This concept—a concept which gestures towards the innately collaborative qualities of human labor that lie at the basis of all human societies—not only provides the basis for the observation and diagnosis of the problematic (that work’s innately collaborative characteristics have been necessarily alienated by capitalism), but also offers the framework for a politics designed to address and correct this problem (if work’s

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collaborative characteristics can be re-organized and re-asserted by workers, a new society can be constructed). However, this concept of social labor is a problem insofar as it produces a theory and politics of work that tends towards a view of class struggle and social relations that is anchored in an ideology of the human subject. "Work" finds itself defined and observed in the collaborative interchange between human individuals: a definition which conditions the critique of capitalism as a force observable primarily in the subjective alienation of the human worker. Furthermore, this conditions any emerging politics, as the objective of class struggle is then interpreted as the quest for the negation of this alienated condition, its success observed first and foremost in subjective transformation rather than social change.

In my paper for the conference on "Thinking Althusser Politically", I developed Louis Althusser's theoretically anti-humanist critique of the supposedly "social" qualities and characteristics of human labor<sup>2</sup>, in order to analyze the contemporary current of "post-work" thought persisting in predominantly British social scientific circles.<sup>3</sup> My argument was that both the theoretical problematic and the political intervention made by this current of post-work thought were held together by humanist ideology and specifically by the concept of "social labor." I have developed this analysis in more detail elsewhere<sup>4</sup> and so this paper will focus on broadening out this analysis and tracking its genealogy through a reading of important contributions to the Marxist critique of work. The paper will therefore analyze the ways in which the concept of "social labor" provides the ideological pin that holds theory and politics together in four key contributions to the Marxist critique of work: E.P. Thompson's historical sociology<sup>5</sup>; Harry Braverman's labor process theory<sup>6</sup>; Michael Hardt's and

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2 Louis Althusser, "The Human Controversy" in *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings*, ed. François Matheron (London: Verso, 2003).

3 See Peter Fleming, *The Death of Homo Economicus: Work, Debt, and the Myth of Endless Accumulation* (London: Pluto Press, 2017); David Frayne, *The Refusal of Work: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Work* (London: Zed Books, 2015); Paul Mason, *PostCapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* (London: Allen Lane, 2015); Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and World Without Work* (London: Verso, 2015).

4 See my forthcoming essay, "Humanism and the sociology of post-work." *Economy and Society*, 50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03085147.2021.1938881>

5 E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1991).

6 Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974).

Antonio Negri's sociology of immaterial labor<sup>7</sup>; and André Gorz's post-work thought.<sup>8</sup> Though certainly not an exhaustive list, the legacy of these influential contributions continues to be lived in contemporary political sociologies of work. In each of these cases, this paper demonstrates how the concept of "social labor" both implicitly and explicitly allows these authors to hold a theory and politics of work together. The concept of social labor, in each instance, provides these authors with means by which to think the problem with work under capitalism and its potential political remedy, together. However, this reproduces a tendency within Marxist thought about work in which the nature of class struggle and its reflection in social relations is either mis-represented or mystified by this ideological concept.

At the close of this reading, the task then becomes one of thinking an alternative to the humanist concept of "social labor" that is able to hold a theory and politics of work together without submitting to these more humanist temptations. The paper concludes by suggesting a conceptual move away from social labor and alienation, towards a critique of work grounded in the concepts of social relation and interpellation.<sup>9</sup> In order to formulate an appropriate political intervention into the social relations of work today, a theoretical understanding of work and social subjectivity is required which moves its conceptual assumption away from the notion of pre-existing collaborative human relations and instead observes work as an overdetermined site of a "knot" of social relations from which contemporary subjectivity is interpellated into being. Placing primacy on the social relations of work in this way is the theoretical precondition for more targeted and appropriate political interventions that do not place their faith in the observation of subjective transformation, and instead turn their attention to material change in concrete social relations.

Before this, the paper will re-trace Althusser's critique of "social labor" found in his 1967 text "The Humanist Controversy." This text presents not only one of the more comprehensive definitions of the problem of "theoretical humanism" found in Althusser's work outside of

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7 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2001).

8 André Gorz, *Capitalism, Socialism, Ecology* trans. Martin Chalmers (London: Verso, 2012).

9 Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* trans. G. M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2014).

*For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, but also one of his deepest engagements with the topic of labor and work within Marxist theory. Althusser's argument in this piece was that work and labor acted as an allegory for the human subject within Marxist theory, where the material study of the value, exploitation and class struggle reflected in the concept of labor-power was substituted for an ideological discourse of labor as the social activity of human beings, characterized by an experience of alienation.

## "Social Labor"

The concept of social labor finds its origin at the intersection of historicist and humanist ideology, observed in the insistence on the historical tendency of human beings to collaborate in their labor as a "social" activity. Althusser pointed towards, for example, recent discoveries in the field of human paleontology which argued that the condition of human evolution was the existence of a human ancestor who "stood upright, so that its hands were free to fashion rudimentary tools under conditions which, it seems reasonable to suppose, were not 'individual' but social."<sup>10</sup> As Althusser continued, "we see straight away the interest that this discovery can hold *for historical materialism*," as it makes it possible to "bridge the gap' between present-day human societies and the animal origins of the human species, since they seem to show that the human species comprised, *from its beginnings*, creatures living 'together' and producing rudimentary tools."<sup>11</sup> Althusser identified discoveries such as these forming the basis of an emerging ideological operation in Marxist theory that "consists in giving Theoretical Humanism a new 'lease on life'": the conceptual basis of this operation was "labor...or the apparently more 'Marxist', but in fact equivalent, notion of 'social labor.'"<sup>12</sup>

The concept of social labor insists on two main points: first, that labor is the essential activity of the human subject and; second, that it is by virtue of this activity that this subject *enters into* relations with other subjects, making history as it does so. Althusser described its ideological schema in the following way: "Essence of Man = labor (or social labor) =

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10 Althusser, "The Humanist Controversy," 284.

11 Ibid (emphasis in the original).

12 Ibid, 286.

the creation of Man by Man = Man, Subject of History = History as a process whose Subject is Man (or human labor).”<sup>13</sup> This notion of social labor is located in the works of the young Marx<sup>14</sup>, who “defines this labor in terms of its *originary act*, the (Feuerbachian) externalization of the Essential Forces of the individual producer.”<sup>15</sup> In this way, the word "social" in this concept does not refer to material social relations, rather to the externalization of this essence in labor, in production and in history:

The adjective ‘social’ in the expression ‘social labor’...designates, in the *Manuscripts*, the effect or phenomenon or manifestation...of the *generic character* of Man contained in the *originary act* of externalization/alienation of the essence of Man, which is present [in] the worker’s labor.<sup>16</sup>

For the young Marx then, the concept of social labor was useful insofar as it facilitated his holding together of a theory and politics of labor under capitalism: that is, the definition of an initial problematic (labor under capitalism is alienated essence) and the formulation of a solution (revolution as the historical overcoming of this alienated condition, completed through labor itself). As Marx wrote, communism was “the *positive* transcendence of *private property as human self-estrangement*, and therefore as the real *appropriation* of the *human* essence by and for man; communism therefore as the complete return of man to himself as a *social* (i.e. human) being.”<sup>17</sup> The problem with this, of course, is that this schema unfolds not on the terrain of material social relations, but on the terrain of human essence and human subjectivity: “Everything that is ‘social’ designates, not the structure of social *conditions* and the *labor-process* or the process of the realization of value, but the externalization/alienation (via as many mediations as you like) of an originary essence, Man.”<sup>18</sup>

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13 Ibid

14 Karl Marx, *Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1981).

15 Althusser, “The Humanist Controversy,” 288.

16 Ibid

17 Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 90.

18 Althusser, “The Humanist Controversy,” 288.

At this point, Althusser continued the project he began in *For Marx*<sup>19</sup> and *Reading Capital*<sup>20</sup>, arguing that this concept of social labor represented an important site of Marx's epistemological break with the humanism and historicism of his early works. Althusser argued that in the process of this epistemological break, Marx "exploded" the concept of labor, breaking down the concept in order to capture an entirely different object than that which interested the classical political economists. As Althusser wrote,

We cannot but admit that Marx's whole critique of classical Political Economy consisted in exploding the concept of *labor* accepted by the Economists, in order to suppress and replace it with new concepts in which the *word* 'labor' figures, to be sure, but always in conjunction with other words that confer a distinctive meaning upon the new concept, a meaning that can no longer be confused with the ambiguous meaning of the simple *concept* of 'labor'.<sup>21</sup>

With this explosion, Althusser argued that the concept of "labor" on its own, at this point, ceases to any longer exist in Marxist theory. To speak of "labor", as a Marxist, is to speak only of ideology. Rather, "the concept of labor, when it 'explodes', breaks down into the following concepts: *labor-process*, the structure of the social conditions of the labor-process, labor-power (not labor), value of labor-power (not of labor), concrete labor, abstract labor, utilization of labor-power, quantity of labor, and so on."<sup>22</sup>

The explosion of the concept of labor was Marx's innovation, allowing him to reveal what really happens to the worker at work in the hitherto hidden abode of production. Instead of labor, Marx speaks of *labor-power* as the crystallization of labor as commodity, the value of which is reflected in the commodities it produces and the wages by which its exploitation is compensated.<sup>23</sup> Instead of labor, Marx speaks of the *labor-*

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19 Louis Althusser, *For Marx* trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1996).

20 Louis Althusser, "From *Capital* to Marx's Philosophy" and "The Object of *Capital*" in Althusser, Balibar, et al. *Reading Capital* (London: Verso, 2015).

21 Althusser, "The Humanist Controversy," 289.

22 Ibid, 289.

23 Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2013).

*process* as the definite procedure through which the commodity of labor-power is mobilized, the parameters of which reflect the ongoing struggle between workers and capitalists. Instead of labor, Marx speaks of *necessary* and *surplus labor*, with the expansion of the latter always the project of the capitalist, achieved through legislations and innovations aimed at extending the working day. Thus, in exploding this concept of labor, Marx brings to the fore the multitude of specific social relations contained within the experience so described as "labor" or "work," with the primacy of these social relations emphasized with each concept.

Crucially, this conceptual explosion by Marx was at one and the same time a *theoretically anti-humanist* operation. The explosion of the concept of labor in this way demands a radical break with the humanist conception of labor as descriptive of the interchange between human individuals and between humans and nature. In exploding the concept of labor and revealing the primacy of a multitude of specific social relations implicit in the "work" of capitalist society, Marx demonstrated that "the social relations of production do not bring *men alone* onto the stage, but the *agents* of the production process and the *material conditions* of the production process, in specific 'combinations'"<sup>24</sup>, displacing the theoretical image of "Man" in order to stress the primacy of social relations in explaining "work" in a capitalist society. In this way, "we should, in the strict sense, speak of Marx's theoretical *a*-humanism."<sup>25</sup>

The break with the concept of "social labor" was therefore a fundamental moment in Marx's ability to explain the social relations of production under capitalism. It was crucial to the displacement of the individual and the subject *in theory*, in order to bring out the primacy of social relations in describing what happens to the worker at work. In spite of Marx's victory against humanist ideology here, Althusser lamented that this theoretical struggle must be taken up again today "with no hope of seeing it end any time soon."<sup>26</sup> What Althusser noticed was that humanist ideology was being deployed with greater persistence in Marxist theory, with a view to better understanding work and labor under capitalism. However, this persistence had the effect of undermining Marx's discovery,

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24 Althusser, "The Object of *Capital*," 328.

25 Althusser, "The Humanist Controversy," 232.

26 *Ibid.*, 232–233.

of unexploding the concept of labor and thus invisibilizing the myriad social relations brought into relief by this very explosion. Crucially, Althusser argued that as well as a significant epistemological obstacle, the persistence of this concept within Marxist theory also presented a *political* problem: "Political experience (for lack of other kinds: but politics is an excellent teacher in this respect) teaches that it is not possible to make the slightest concession to ideology."<sup>27</sup> The task, then, was to "track down to its last refuge the ideological argument that sustains a kind of reasoning which others...hasten to transform into a spiritualist Plea for Marxist Humanism."<sup>28</sup> In the context of Marxist theories of work and labor, the paper moves to this task next.

## Theory, Politics and "Social Labor" in Marxist Critiques of Work

The consideration and critique of work within Marxist theory is persistently haunted by the concept of social labor that Marx took significant steps to dispense with. Crucially, the persistence of this concept is particularly evident where Marxism tries to hold theory and politics together in its thinking about work. The concept of social labor is a particularly useful—if, of course, obstructive—ideological bridge between the theoretical analysis of the problem of work under capitalism and the necessary political intervention required to correct this problem. The problem with this concept is that it forces Marxism to think a theory and politics of work on the terrain of human subjectivity, observing its application in subjective changes to the human individual and their labor. This diverts its theoretical attention away from material social relations and, in turn, removes these relations from the crosshairs of political intervention. In this way, the analysis forwarded in this paper adds to a wealth of existing contributions to Marxist thought, which have all acknowledged a particular difficulty within Marxism itself in holding

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 297.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid



theory and politics together in the context of a critique of work and labor.<sup>29</sup>

In contributing to this effort, the paper moves through a reading of four important contributions to the Marxist critique of work: E.P. Thompson's historical sociology; Harry Braverman's labor-process theory; Michael Hardt's and Antonio Negri's sociology of immaterial labor; and André Gorz's post-work theory. The concept of social labor appears differentially across all of these examples and produces different effects in each. In some of these examples, the concept is explicitly deployed: in others it "lurks behind the theoretical scenes" of the critique of work.<sup>30</sup> But in each example, it is precisely at the point where theory and politics are held together that this concept emerges and does its work. Though crucial for the functionality of these discourses, where the concept of social labor emerges it reproduces particular shortcomings and oversights by moving this critique away from the field of social relations and towards the human subject.

### 1. "Experience," labor and class

The theory and politics in E.P. Thompson's historical sociology of work are held together, implicitly, by the persistence of this concept of social labor. It is evident in the first instance, in the definition of labor and class in Thompson's work. Thompson described both labor and class as the unfolding of subjective *experience* and the expression of historical social relationships that exist between concrete individuals, between "men as they live their own history."<sup>31</sup> As Thompson (1991) wrote,

Class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their

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29 See Étienne Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy before and after Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Frédéric Lordon, *Willing Slaves of Capital: Spinoza and Marx on Desire* (London: Verso, 2014); Jason Read, *The Politics of Transindividuality* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2016) and *The Double Shift: Spinoza and Marx on the Politics and Ideology of Work* (London: Verso, forthcoming); Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011) and "Utopian therapy: Work, nonwork, and the political imagination," in *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army* ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2016), 243–265.

30 Althusser, "The Humanist Controversy," 261.

31 Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 10.

interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs.<sup>32</sup>

For Thompson, these common experiences were found *par excellence* in the forms of "social" collaboration, cooperation and kinship that emerged between human laborers. Thompson described, for example, the "common occupational and social tensions" and the "long traditions of the urban artisans and tradesmen" that characterized the social relationships between workers in the long run-up to the Industrial Revolution.<sup>33</sup> With these early statements, Thompson described an existing co-operation between "the self-educated journeyman...the printer, the shopkeeper, the engraver or the young attorney," that indicated a social character to labor in England, held together by a sharing of common historical and subjective experiences.<sup>34</sup> Problematically, it is this imprecise definition of social class as existing in the subjective "experiences" of concrete individuals that guides Thompson's analysis and leads it into problems.

First, it is the establishment of this basis of social labor that allowed Thompson to think through the unique intervention of Jacobinism and the ideologies of the French Revolution. Jacobinism was a powerful political idea in England precisely because it was able to capture the essence of this existing shared experience between these workers. According to Thompson, "it precipitated a new agitation, and certainly this agitation took root among working people, shaped by new experiences, in the growing manufacturing districts."<sup>35</sup> The political orientation of Jacobinism as an ideology – one that stressed collaboration and involvement between every citizen, "based on the deliberate belief that every man was capable of reason and of a growth in his abilities"—mapped onto the social experience of labor and class experienced by workers in England that prioritized precisely the same attributes.<sup>36</sup> It was for this reason that Jacobinism was a success and why socialism, in

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32 Ibid, 8–9.

33 Ibid, 23, 27.

34 Ibid 23.

35 Ibid, 27.

36 Ibid, 201.

“[shifting] emphasis from political to economic rights,” succeeded only in reinforcing “distinctions of class and status.”<sup>37</sup>

Socialist ideology was not the primary cause for the fall of Jacobinism and the failure of any revolution it promised: for this, Thompson looked to the Industrial Revolution. According to Thompson, the Industrial Revolution introduced “a profound alienation between classes in Britain,” which undid many of the shared social relationships that had previously existed between workers of different kinds and saw “working people thrust into a state of *apartheid* whose effects...can still be felt to this day.”<sup>38</sup> The defining intervention made by the Industrial Revolution, for Thompson, was precisely its interruption of social labor and the previously-existing social relationships that it had reflected (an interruption evident in the defeat of Jacobinism as ideology). For Thompson, this was evident in the ways in which the struggles of workers that “provoked the most intensity of feeling were very often ones in which such values as traditional customs, ‘justice’, ‘independence’, security or family-economy were at stake.”<sup>39</sup> Exploitation emerged for Thompson precisely at the point where social labor was interrupted: “as old customs were eroded, and the old paternalism was set aside, the exploitative relationship emerged supreme.”<sup>40</sup> In this way, “the process of industrialization must, in any conceivable social context, entail suffering and the destruction of older and valued ways of life.”<sup>41</sup> The establishment from the outset of a theory of social labor, emanating from the collaborative experience of individual workers, provided Thompson with the ground from which to explain the rise of Jacobinism as a politics, but also from which to pronounce the precise crime of capitalism and its industrial intervention, resulting in the defeat of this politics.

However, it is precisely because of the fact that labor and class are located in the realm of subjective experience and not in ideology *per se* that Thompson is able to articulate the working-class politics that emerges and develops throughout the Industrial Revolution. It is because the collaborative characteristics of human labor exist in the subjective

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37 Ibid

38 Ibid, 195.

39 Ibid, 222.

40 Ibid, 223.

41 Ibid

experiences of these workers that new political ideologies—in particular, those of Chartism and Luddism—are able to emerge and take shape. It is in this way that Thompson argued that the industrial working class that would emerge “was not the spontaneous generation of the factory system,” but was the result of a social laborer pushing back against the imposition of a new industrial regime, of “the free-born Englishman...the inheritor of Bunyan, of remembered village rights, of notions of equality before the law, of craft traditions.”<sup>42</sup> The existing social relationships between individuals, emanating from their subjective experience of labor as a social activity, provides the theoretical ground from which to observe the emergence of working-class politics and its development.

By virtue of his reliance on this concept of social labor, there is never any burden on Thompson to explain the precise conjuncture into which Jacobinism as an ideology intervenes. Thompson’s historical sociology begins with an imprecise “social” relationship between laborers, based on shared traditions, culture and *experiences*<sup>43</sup>, which Jacobinism adequately reflects, and which industrial capitalism effectively subsumes and alienates. The social situation that industrial capitalism inherits and subsumes appears in Thompson’s work to have always-already existed. The concept of social labor sees this oversight forgiven in Thompson’s work, as social relations need only be interpreted in terms of the subjective experience of collaboration between individual workers. It is this subjective *experience* of class, conditioned at all times by the pre-existing “social” connections between laborers, that provides Thompson with the window through which to observe the subsequent resistance of workers to the impositions of an emerging industrial capitalism. It produces a humanist theory and politics of labor, where the *experience* of co-operation and alienation between these laborers constitutes their class condition and that the political intervention *par excellence* of the working class was the subjective *articulation* of this experience through ideologies like Jacobinism, Luddism and Chartism.<sup>44</sup> The notion of a pre-existing “social” relationship

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42 Ibid 213.

43 Salar Mohandasi, “Class Consciousness or Class Composition?” *Science and Society*, 17(1), 72-97. <https://doi.org/10.1521/isis.2013.77.1.72>

44 Stuart Middleton, “The concept of ‘experience’ and the making of the English working class, 1924-1963.” *Modern Intellectual History*, 13(1), 179-208. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244314000596>

between workers – defined by their inter-subjective *experience* of class – is a restatement of the ideological concept of social labor and, as is evident, provides the conceptual grounding through which Thompson thinks theory and politics together in his historical sociology of work. Problematically, it resolves itself in an imprecise understanding of both class struggle and of the social relations of work reflected in this struggle, which are at all times mediated by the experience of the working subject and its mirror-image in politics.

## 2. De-skilling and the labor-process

The concept of social labor is explicitly deployed in Harry Braverman's labor-process theory, particularly in the articulation of the theory of *de-skilling*. Braverman's problematic—of a labor-process that continually de-skills human laborers in order to facilitate their continued exploitation—relies on a concept of social labor from its outset, providing the normative theoretical ground from which to observe this problem. De-skilling is observed in the historical separation of human workers from the collaborative and therefore "social" characteristics of their activity, with the notion of social labor used by Braverman as the conceptual standpoint from which to view this historical process. It is also through this concept that Braverman could hold this theory of deskilling together with a proposed political intervention, where the objective of class struggle is reformulated as the struggle to reclaim autonomy over "skill" and the traditions embedded within it. Problematically, in beginning his inquiry with the notion of social labor, the theory of de-skilling is grounded in the observation of a historical and subjective separation of workers from the autonomous and deliberate engagement in work as a "social" activity, as opposed to the material social relations that describe work under capitalism.

Braverman's reliance on the concept of social labor is evident first and foremost in his definition of labor and the labor-process. The primary quality of human labor, for Braverman, was its conceptual and deliberate quality: "Human work is conscious and purposive, whilst the work of

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other animals is instinctual."<sup>45</sup> Human labor's essential quality is located in the link that exists between the ability of the human brain to conceive of an idea and of the human hand to execute that idea. This specifically human activity, grounded in human consciousness, is responsible for the creation not only of humanity as subject, but of human societies themselves: "Labor that transcends mere instinctual activity is thus the force which created humankind and the force by which humankind created the world as we know it."<sup>46</sup> In this way, Braverman argued that labor is an inherently "social" activity:

Each individual of the human species cannot alone 'produce in accordance with the standard of every species' and invent standards unknown to any animal, but the species as a whole finds it possible to do this, in part through the social division of labor. Thus the social division of labor is apparently inherent in the species character of human labor as soon as it becomes *social labor*, that is, labor carried on in and through society.<sup>47</sup>

For Braverman, de-skilling began with the intervention of the capitalist into this process. De-skilling found its root in the division, not only of labor, but of the *individual*, where the unity of conception and execution at the core of the human's deliberative act of labor was interrupted and separated: "While the social division of labor divides *society*, the detailed division of labor divides *humans*," which Braverman described as "a crime against the person and against humanity."<sup>48</sup>

Theoretically, this poses a particular problem for Braverman, observed in the counterposition of "social labor" with its alienated capitalist form. Braverman in fact argued that this very counterposition was the starting-point for scientific management itself, which launched "not from the human point of view but from the capitalist point of view" of the labor-process.<sup>49</sup> It is only from this "capitalist" point of view that it becomes both necessary and possible to separate the unity of conception

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45 Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, 46.

46 Ibid, 50.

47 Ibid, 72.

48 Ibid, 73.

49 Ibid, 86.

and execution found in human labor. Braverman argued that this amounts to a *dehumanization* of labor and of the labor-process:

This dehumanization of the labor process, in which workers are reduced almost to the level of labor in its animal form, while purposeless and unthinkable in the case of the self-organized and self-motivated *social labor* of a community of producers, becomes crucial for the management of purchased labor.<sup>50</sup>

"Management" and the control of the labor-process was therefore positioned by Braverman as precisely the management of this process of dehumanization. Scientific management functions by maintaining this process of dehumanization, "not interested in the person of the worker, but in the worker as he or she is used in office, factory, warehouse, store, or transport processes...the human being is here regarded as a mechanism articulated by hinges, ball-and-socket joints."<sup>51</sup> Machinery and the development of technology furthers this separation and intensifies the dehumanization of the worker, confining them to "a blind round of servile duties in which the machine appears as the embodiment of science and the worker as little or nothing."<sup>52</sup> Though "absolutely incomprehensible from the human point of view," the continued separation of the capacity for conception and execution at the core of human labor becomes the necessary project of capitalist management of the labor-process.<sup>53</sup>

Crucially, the history of de-skilling told by Braverman through the concept of social labor is reflected in the problem of monopoly capitalism at which he arrived towards the end of the text. For Braverman, monopoly capitalism—and the forms of work in the service-sectors, in clerical and managerial work and in teaching and education that characterized this particular arrangement of the labor-process—was the reflection *par excellence* of this historical process of de-skilling. Braverman observed in the emergence of monopoly capitalism the most developed alienation of human workers from the "social" qualities of their labor, facilitated by new

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50 Ibid, 113 (emphasis added).

51 Ibid, 179.

52 Ibid, 194–195.

53 Ibid, 205–206.

technologies and machineries that accelerate this process ever further. For the worker of monopoly capitalism, the task is:

No longer adaptation to the slow round of seasonal labor in an immediately natural environment, but rather adaptation to a speedy and intricate social machinery which is not adjusted to social humanity in general, let alone the individual, but dictates the rounds of production, consumption, survival, and amusement.<sup>54</sup>

Problematically, the grounding of this analysis in the concept of social labor (and its alienation) is productive of a political recommendation emblematic of a vulgar "economistic-humanism," in which the historical task of the proletariat becomes the re-discovery of the skill crystallized in these technologies and their putting to use towards more progressive ends.<sup>55</sup> As Braverman wrote, "the worker can regain mastery over the collective and socialized production only by assuming the scientific, design, and operational prerogatives of modern engineering."<sup>56</sup> Such a politics, like the worst examples of today's accelerationism, tends to overlook the social relations contained in these machineries and treats them as neutral tools to simply be directed by a newly conscious working subject.

Evident in Braverman's historical analysis of de-skilling is a tendency towards the disappearance of social relations from his account, reflected in an analysis of monopoly capitalism that is observed primarily in the heightened alienation of human individuals from the "social" characteristics of their labor. It is for this reason that Michael Burawoy, in his critique of Braverman, argued that he in fact "mourns the eclipse of the bourgeois individual" as it disappears under capitalism and crafts a "functionalist" politics based on its rediscovery.<sup>57</sup> Braverman's theoretical humanism facilitated his forgetting of the social relations contained in technology and accelerated productive development, producing an unjustified optimism in Braverman based on the political re-direction of

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54 Ibid, 287.

55 Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 36.

56 Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, 444–445.

57 Michael Burawoy, *The Politics of Production: Factory Regimes under Capitalism and Socialism* (London: Verso, 1985), 56, 58.



modern engineering by a more conscious proletariat towards the creation of a more progressive labor-process.

### 3. The sociology of immaterial labor

For Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, work under contemporary capitalism was characterized by the presence of "immaterial labor." A decided shift away from the production of material, tangible commodities within defined territorial boundaries (such as the factory), towards the immaterial production of knowledge, communication and emotion across the edifice of the "factory-society" defined capitalism in post-modernity.<sup>58</sup> Certainly, this represented a new and problematic form of domination, but the crisis of value and measurability implicated in this shift towards the immaterial represented a revolutionary opportunity for the new proletariat. The functionality of this discourse was secured, as will be demonstrated, by the presence and persistence of the concept of social labor. This concept is the precise one that allowed for Hardt and Negri to privilege immaterial labor as the precursor to a crisis of value and as a subsequent site of revolution: a privileging that necessarily obfuscated important social relations from view.

In what Hardt and Negri described as a "sociology of immaterial labor," they pointed towards a changing landscape of work under contemporary capitalism, based primarily on the production of services rather than physical commodities.<sup>59</sup> Hardt and Negri defined this type of work as 'immaterial labor', in that it "produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication."<sup>60</sup> The work that they described here included "a wide range of activities from health care, education, and finance to transportation, entertainment, and advertising. The jobs for the most part are highly mobile and involve flexible skills."<sup>61</sup> There are two main features of immaterial labor. First, there is the immaterial labor at the center of the burgeoning communications and information-technology sectors, the concrete act of

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58 Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 247.

59 Ibid, 289.

60 Ibid, 290.

61 Ibid, 285.

which involves the "manipulation of symbols and information."<sup>62</sup> Second, immaterial labor is found in the production of emotions or affects, common in customer-focused services, observed concretely in the production of "a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion."<sup>63</sup>

In order to articulate the importance of the immaterial, Hardt and Negri needed the concept of social labor. Immaterial labor was important for Hardt and Negri because it was productive of *relations* between individuals at numerous stages: be these relations facilitated through the production of communication and knowledge within the digital economy; or affective relations through the production of services dedicated to the delivery of emotional labor. In these ways, precisely through the reproduction of relations based on communication, knowledge and affect, contemporary capitalism was reproducing the conditions of *life itself*, a phenomenon that Hardt and Negri sought to capture through the concept of social labor:

In postmodernity the social wealth accumulated is increasingly immaterial; it involves social relations, communication systems, information, and affective networks. Correspondingly, *social labor* is increasingly more immaterial; it simultaneously produces and reproduces directly all aspects of social life. As the proletariat is becoming the universal figure of labor, the object of proletarian labor is becoming equally universal. *Social labor* produces life itself.<sup>64</sup>

Precisely through the immaterial nature of social labor, Hardt and Negri surmised that today, "we participate in a more radical and profound commonality than has ever been experienced in the history of capitalism."<sup>65</sup> It is precisely here that the revolutionary opportunity within this new way of working presents itself.

The revolutionary capacity of the new proletariat is contained in the production of a "general intellect", made up of the communicative and

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62 Ibid, 292.

63 Ibid, 292–293.

64 Ibid, 258 (emphasis added).

65 Ibid, 302.

affective relations immanent to immaterial labor: “General intellect is a collective, social intelligence created by accumulated knowledges, techniques, and know-how.”<sup>66</sup> The revolutionary opportunity was to be grasped here, in the capacity of the new proletariat to take control of these relations of communication and affect, “managed by the multitude, organized by the multitude, directed by the multitude – absolute democracy in action.”<sup>67</sup> Problematically, the initial framing of this direction through the concept of “social labor” sees this political directionality reflected in a humanist politics of *subjective transformation*. This means not simply the refusal of work, but rather:

What we need is to create a new social body, which is a project that goes well beyond refusal...we need also to construct a new mode of life and above all a new community. This project leads not toward the naked life of *homo tantum*, but toward *homohomo*, humanity squared, enriched by the collective intelligence and love of the community.<sup>68</sup>

For Hardt and Negri, “postmodernization or informatization today marks a new mode of becoming human” as immaterial social labor fulfils its function of human subjective production.<sup>69</sup> In this way, it is “the constitution of new bodies, outside of exploitation” that emerges as the “fundamental basis of the new mode of production.”<sup>70</sup> For Hardt and Negri, what was at stake here was nothing less than the “recognition of the new human condition” thrown into being by the communicative and affective relations of immaterial labor.<sup>71</sup>

In holding theory and politics together through the concept of social labor, Hardt and Negri reproduced a theoretical humanism in their analysis. George Caffentzis confirms this view, arguing that “though it looks like the machines are eliminating the humans in this period of capitalism...a new ‘humanism’ arises from these antihumanist Marxists

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66 Ibid, 364.

67 Ibid, 410.

68 Ibid, 204.

69 Ibid, 289.

70 Ibid, 410.

71 Ibid, 291.

claiming the renewed indispensable importance of knowledge in humans."<sup>72</sup> This humanism (among other ideologies) necessarily obfuscates certain social relations from view, allowing Hardt and Negri to observe unique characteristics in immaterial labor which undermine capitalism's ability to measure, value and discipline this labor: characteristics that cannot be justified when this labor is placed in the context of broader social relations. The concept of social labor permits Hardt and Negri to privilege immaterial labor as both prompting a crisis of value and measurability under capitalism and providing the launch pad for revolutionary intervention. But as Caffentzis argues, this produces an impoverished view of the social relations of work which, when analyzed closely, do not confirm the historical privilege placed on this type of work (for example, contemporary capitalism does not appear to struggle too much to find ways to quantify, measure and discipline various types of "immaterial" labor within contemporary labor-processes).<sup>73</sup> It is precisely humanist ideology – found in the apparently "social" nature of immaterial labor – that provides this privilege and not the social relations themselves: a problem which goes undisturbed by the arrangement of their analysis around the concept of social labor.

#### 4. The crisis of work

The concept of social labor was equally important to André Gorz's diagnosis of a "crisis of work" with the advent of the "post-industrial" society. For Gorz the initial identification of the "social" characteristics of human labor allowed him to pronounce the significance of the alienation that defines the work of post-industrial society. Politically, the task of the "neo-proletariat" was to create a new space in which the social characteristics of labor could be recaptured and autonomously controlled: a space that must, according to Gorz, exist outside of "work" as it was known.<sup>74</sup>

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72 George Caffentzis, "A Critique of 'Cognitive Capitalism'" in *In Letters of Blood and Fire: Work, Machines, and the Crisis of Capitalism* ed. G. Caffentzis (Oakland: PM Press, 2013), 111.

73 See Phoebe V. Moore, *The Quantified Self in Precarity: Work, Technology and What Counts* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

74 Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class: An Essay on Post-Industrial Socialism*, (London: Pluto Press, 1983), 70.

For Gorz, the concept of social labor was particularly important in defining work as both a social and a political activity. For Gorz, “‘Work’ must therefore be understood, as in Hegel, as the activity by which the human being externalizes his being...as ‘sensuous-practical activity’, as ‘appropriative shaping of one’s own objective world.’”<sup>75</sup> In this sense, human labor is defined as the reflection of human subjectivity in objective social relations between individuals, and as the subject produces these objective relations in co-operation with others, they acquire “a sense of him- or herself as an autonomous subject possessing practical freedom.”<sup>76</sup> The problem facing Gorz, in the context of an emerging “post-industrial” society that was characterized by de-territorialized, highly mechanized and increasingly immaterial forms of production, was whether work, even in its alienated form under capitalism, could any longer retain any of these “social” qualities. As Gorz wrote:

The question, however, is to what extent this conception of work, handed down to us essentially by the skilled industrial workers of the nineteenth century (workers who were still close to artisan production, and had a complete grasp of manufacturing *procedures* and the *products* to be made), can apply to the largely de-materialized, pre-determined, specialized work which is the predominant form in today’s macro-social space – a form of activity which has no purchase or influence either on the way it is performed or on the final purpose it is to serve, and is commonly referred to simply as ‘work.’<sup>77</sup>

The answer to this question, for Gorz, was that it could not. As Gorz wrote, “instead of being the worker’s mode of insertion *into a system of universal cooperation*, work is now the mode of subordination to the machinery of universal domination.”<sup>78</sup> In an argument similar to that of Braverman, Gorz argued that it was the separation of the worker from its capacity for autonomous thought and decision-making inherent to the act

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75 Gorz, *Capitalism, Sociology, Ecology*, 55.

76 Ibid

77 Ibid, 55–56.

78 Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class*, 71.

of labor, which characterized this heightened form of alienation. For Gorz this lack of subjective autonomy was reflected in the evanescence of the social power of human labor, which inaugurated a political problem:

In the first place, the worker's labor no longer involves any power. A class whose social activity yields no power does not have the means to take power, nor does it feel called upon to do so. In the second place work is no longer the worker's own activity. In the immense majority of cases, whether in the factory or the office, work is now a passive, pre-programmed activity which has been totally subordinated by the working of a big machinery, leaving no room for personal initiative.<sup>79</sup>

The heightened alienation of the worker from the "social power" of their activity – incubated in their ability to autonomously direct this work – posed a political problem for the proletariat as revolutionary subject. In post-industrial society, the proletariat becomes “no more than a vague area made up of constantly changing individuals whose main aim is not to seize power in order to build a new world, but to regain power over their own lives.”<sup>80</sup> In this way, this neo-proletariat was politically unequipped to confront the conditions of contemporary capitalism, fraught as they were, and thus could not emerge as a revolutionary subject: “The crisis of the industrial system heralds no new world. Nothing in it is indicative of a redeeming transformation...the society disintegrating before our eyes heralds no new order.”<sup>81</sup>

This characterizes what Gorz identified as a "crisis of work." As a consequence of these developments, this proletariat found no social characteristics at all in the work that it did and therefore no route towards a revolutionary political intervention. Work was in "crisis" for Gorz insofar as it became an activity saturated of all social and political potentialities, with the subjective category of "worker" or "proletarian" suffering a similar fate. Thus, Gorz argued that the political intervention of the proletariat must be launched from an alternative site, one that exists

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 75.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid

outside of the sphere of "work" as defined under contemporary capitalism. This crisis formed the essence of Gorz's "post-work" thought and in order to think through the both the implications of this crisis and the potential political remedy to it, Gorz relied once more on the concept of "social labor."

Gorz's post-work politics turned on the struggle to locate and create a space outside of "work" in which the social characteristics of human labor could flourish and therefore become *powerful* once more. As Gorz wrote, "there is no social space in which 'true work'...can deploy itself in such a way to *produce society* and set its stamp upon it. *It is this space we have to create.*"<sup>82</sup> For Gorz, this had to be pursued *outside* of "work", outside of the traditional political arena of the industrial proletariat, as "the desire for liberation *in* work presupposes a practical experience of autonomy, but the workers are objectively and subjectively denied this by work which deforms and mutilates their sensuous-practical faculties."<sup>83</sup> The name that Gorz gave to this project of locating a new space in which both the "social" characteristics of human labor could be relocated, was a "politics of time":

The development of free activities which are no longer *work* (in the sense this term has come to assume) obviously cannot be produced simply by reducing working hours. It requires a *politics of time* which embraces the reshaping of the urban and natural environment, cultural politics, education and training, and reshapes the social services and public amenities in such a way as to create more scope for self-managed activities, mutual aid, voluntary co-operation and production for one's own use.<sup>84</sup>

It is clear that the concept of "social labor" looms large in the political project offered by Gorz, crucial for holding the theory and politics of work together in Gorz's thinking. The concept of social labor provided Gorz with his initial definition of work as a human activity, emanating from its distinction from "work" in its waged capitalist form. It is precisely

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82 Gorz, *Capitalism, Sociology, Ecology*, 57.

83 *Ibid*, 58.

84 *Ibid*, 61.

because of the "social" characteristics of human labor that Gorz refused "to extend the notion of 'work' to autonomous activities and work-for-oneself," as work under capitalism was defined by its *lack* of "social" qualities.<sup>85</sup> In the same breath, the political intervention offered by Gorz to remedy this situation turned on the celebration of the "social" qualities of human labor and the struggle to locate these qualities in forms of activity that escaped the capitalist wage-labor relation. It is only through this concept of "social labor" that the simultaneous critique and celebration of "work" can be held together at the core of Gorz's politics. It is the only way that the demand of the proletariat "to liberate themselves *from* work as it exists and find *in* work as great a potential for self-determination as possible" makes sense.<sup>86</sup>

The problem with this formulation is that, in relying on this concept of social labor in order to construct a post-work vision in this way, Gorz produced a view of the space "outside" of work as in some way devoid of class struggle and class antagonism, as a neutral space in which the naturally collaborative qualities of human labor go on undisturbed. This undermines the political potentialities that Gorz filled such a space with, for if the space outside of work is devoid of class antagonism or class struggle, then it is devoid of the very motor of social change that such a politics requires. As discussed elsewhere, this is a problem reproduced in contemporary post-work thought too, which tends too often to attempt to develop a post-work society as one devoid of class antagonism and therefore evacuated of the very motor that would bring about progressive social change.<sup>87</sup> As Frederick Pitts and Ana Dinerstein have argued, "nowhere in the popular imaginary of post-work or post-capitalist society does class struggle feature, when it is only by means of this that a post-capitalist society can be accessed at all."<sup>88</sup> The persistence of the concept of social labor in the critique of work can be found at the origin of this oversight, which has persisted into political sociologies of work today.

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85 Ibid, 60–61.

86 Ibid, 64.

87 See my forthcoming essay, "Humanism and the sociology of post-work." *Economy and Society*, 50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03085147.2021.1938881>

88 F. H. Pitts and A. C. Dinerstein, "Postcapitalism, Basic Income and the End of Work: A Critique and Alternative." *Bath Papers in International Development and Wellbeing*, 55: 4. <https://purehost.bath.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/202187863/bpd55.pdf>



In all of these instances, and in often different ways, the ideological concept of social labor has been shown to remain a persistent symptom of the difficulty experienced by Marxism in holding theory and politics together in the context of the critique of work. When it comes to the critique of work and labor, Marxist theory has struggled to hold this critique together with a political intervention without relying on an ideological concept which, in one way or another, contributes to the mystification of the social relations of work and, in so doing, of the class struggle reflected in those relations. It therefore becomes necessary to consider a conceptual direction for Marxism that can facilitate its thinking of theory and politics together within a critique of work, without falling for the temptations of a theoretical humanism. In other words, is the concept of social labor immovable within the Marxist critique of work? Or is it feasible to substitute this for other concepts that are capable of displacing the subject from the center of enquiry, in order to centralize the role of social relations? It is to this final question that the paper turns in its conclusion.

#### From Alienation to Interpellation/From Social Labor to Social Relations

In the spirit of "thinking Althusser politically", the conclusion of this paper argues that Althusser provides important concepts that go some way to answering these questions and provide a theoretical basis on which to reorient a political sociology of work for Marxism. There are a number of existing contributions to Marxist theory that have raised this problem in relation to the critique of work, relying on concepts such as "transindividuality" or social reproduction as a way of holding theory, politics and subjectivity together in a critique of work that avoids humanist ideology.<sup>89</sup> This paper reconstructs the steps towards such a project by revisiting the critique of work found in Althusser's writings on ideology, in order to assess the usefulness of the concepts of *interpellation* and *social relation* for the re-orientation of a political sociology of work. As Balibar has argued, "the critique of ideology is the necessary precondition for a

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<sup>89</sup> See note 29 above.

knowledge of social being as development of production."<sup>90</sup> Additionally, this critique also emerges as the precondition for the crafting of an appropriate political intervention, at the level of social relations as opposed to subjectivity.

The initial step to be made in the reconstruction of any Althusserian critique of work is the foundation of a political sociology in an epistemological shift away from the "experience" of individual workers, towards a theoretical and political *preparation* for the encounter with this experience, grounded in an analysis of material social relations. As Althusser wrote, "one cannot dispense with going to the field and listening carefully to the workers—but neither can one dispense with *preparing* for this encounter...It is a question of *theoretical* and *political* preparation."<sup>91</sup> This task of theoretical preparation interested others like Mario Tronti, who wrote that "we can no longer, at this point, reduce our relations with the working class to personal conversations with the individual worker," but that the "work of analytically reconstructing the theoretical foundations of class struggle" must take primacy in the preparation for the encounter with these workers.<sup>92</sup> For Althusser, the concept most appropriate for this task of preparation was *ideology*. For Althusser, the Marxist critique of ideology was useful insofar as it permitted an analysis of subjectivity which was absolutely grounded in the material social relations that *interpellate* it into being. As Althusser wrote, "[the worker] is *the site* where complex ideologies *confront each other*, down to his very body, ideologies whose antagonism is 'naturally' concealed from him."<sup>93</sup> Through the concepts of ideology and interpellation, it is possible to engage in the theoretical and political preparation necessary for the encounter with the individual experiences of concrete workers, in a way that positions these experiences firmly within the boundaries of the social relations and class antagonisms that bring them into being. This preparation protects the sociologist from grounding themselves epistemologically in the experience of individual workers, but nonetheless allows them to maintain an interest in and contact with that experience,

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90 Étienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx* (London: Verso, 2017), 35–36.

91 Louis Althusser, *What is to Be Done?* (London: Polity, 2020), 3.

92 Mario Tronti, "Letter to Raniero Panzieri: January 1963" in *The Weapon of Organization: Mario Tronti's Political Revolution in Marxism* ed. A. Anastasi (Brooklyn: Common Notions, 2020), 80.

93 Althusser, *What is to Be Done?*, 13.

based on the now-evident fact that “workers can *know more about the things than they think they do*, but also, for this case too presents itself, can *know less about things than they think they do*.”<sup>94</sup> It is the analysis of ideology —that begins with the social relations from which it emerges—that permits the sociologist to *prepare* to make this distinction and decide between “listening” and “intervention.”<sup>95</sup>

Althusser pointed towards a critique of work based on these principles in his text *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*. By using the example of the observed changes to the labor-process in Europe’s “post-industrial” workplaces of the late twentieth century, Althusser argued that in order to adequately understand the “knot of class relations” that constituted this conjuncture, the reproduction of capitalism must be viewed not as a process of the alienation of social labor, but one of *interpellation through social relations*<sup>96</sup>. In order to understand the nature of work under capitalism —and, consequently, capitalism itself—Althusser felt it necessary to make a theoretical shift that displaced the individual and the subject from the center of enquiry and instead observe class struggle and the social relations of work reflected in that struggle as the primary locus of investigation, from which an analysis of subjectivity can then take place. This theoretical displacement allowed Althusser to see work as the site of multiple struggles: the “struggle against exploitation (wages, production rates, unemployment), [the] struggle against the impostures of the bourgeois ideology of work, [and the] struggle against repression.”<sup>97</sup> Rather than alienated from the “social” characteristics of their labor, the working subject is interpellated into being at the points of encounter between these various struggles, conditioned first and foremost by the social relations of production (that is, work).

Importantly, this theoretical critique finds itself reflected in Althusser’s thinking of the political intervention into this conjuncture. Althusser described how the political intervention against these conditions culminates in the efforts of organized labor: “Trade union activists waging the class struggle...have to fight this ideology step by step, taking up the

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94 Ibid, 14.

95 M. A. Macciocchi, *Letters from inside the Italian Communist Party to Louis Althusser* (London: NLB, 1973).

96 Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 45.

97 Ibid, 43.

same combat day after day to root this mystification out of their own consciousness (no easy task) and their comrades.”<sup>98</sup> In the critique of work dictated by the concept of social labor, politics is incubated in the fight against alienation, which is a subjective process *par excellence*. However, in Althusser’s formulation, politics is incubated in the fight against ideology, which is not a subjective process, but one of theoretical and political preparation for intervention into a given conjuncture of social relations (from which that ideology necessarily emerges). It is only by virtue of theoretical preparation, culminating in an understanding of work as an encounter between “the three *always interlinked* forms of the economic class struggle in production” described above, that the militant can prepare to intervene politically, targeting the meeting points of this encounter and disrupting its functionality.<sup>99</sup> As Althusser described, what is evident in the workplace “is an *economic* class struggle, but also, from the outset and simultaneously, an *ideological* class struggle, and thus a class struggle that has, consciously or not, *political import*.”<sup>100</sup>

What is evident in the project started by Althusser here is a critique of work that consists of a shift in the way that theory and politics is held together. Althusser’s inquiry begins with an epistemological move, away from the assumption of labor as a collaborative experience between concrete individuals, towards the labor-process as an overdetermined site of a complex knot of social relations and antagonisms, which conditions these subjective experiences. This allowed Althusser to formulate a view of politics then not as the subjective struggle against alienation, but as an act of theoretical and political preparation—facilitated through the Marxist critique of ideology—for the encounter with the subject and for appropriate intervention into the social relations responsible for interpellating this subject into being (and, of course, for exploiting the labor-power of this subject in the first instance).

In this way, Althusser’s formulation of a critique of work emanating from a conceptual shift from alienation and social labor towards interpellation and social relations, gestures towards the foundation of a Marxist political sociology of work that not only escapes the temptations

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98 Ibid

99 Ibid

100 Ibid, 45.

of theoretical humanism, but actively critiques them. Though imperfect, Althusser's critique indicates that it is possible for Marxism to think theory and politics together in the context of a critique of work that is able to dispense with the concept of social labor and thus with the humanist ideologies attached to it. In so doing, the social relations of work are immediately brought into relief, and allow for the theoretical and political preparation for the encounter with working subjectivity as a product of these relations.

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